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Factors influencing English in Japan

Mary Ann Regala Gutierrez

In the past eight years I have lived in Japan, there have been a variety of classes from academic to conversation classes for all levels, subjects, and ages. The most interesting change throughout this time is the transition of motivation among parents who want their young children to learn English. What is the main purpose of learning English if it is already in the later stages of the school curriculum or the presence of English in the college entrance examinations? More importantly, are outside factors beyond the students' abilities strong influencers over motivations to learning English?

According to observations over the years, parents had expressed that when they learned English in junior high school, they were not so interested or that they did not have much exposure with foreigners to use English. The main motivation that they would like their children to learn English when they are very young is to 1) become used to foreigners, and 2) to enjoy English. The attitude of a parent is crucial to a student's perspective on how they perceive and work with certain subjects. Therefore, parents subconsciously have a strong influence over a student's motivation towards using English. Kormos, Kiddle and Csizer have said,

The relatively strong link between parental encouragement and knowledge orientation in the secondary school and university student population also reveals that parents' active support in language learning is instrumental in forming their views on the role of English

as a means of gaining knowledge about the world. (Kormos, Kiddle, & Csizer, 2011).

For example, there was a kindergartner who once told me he was learning English to help his mother with business in the future. In another case, a parent had asked their first grader to tell her what she had learned in class because she absolutely could not speak English and did not know how to ask me what we had done. In both cases, the students had parents who encouraged their children, but in turn, wanted to help their parents because they felt there was a sense of purpose to learning English in their own life.

English, like other things, is a living thing and always evolving through the environment around it. The main purpose of English in Japan, from what I have seen so far, is for tourism (traveling outside of Japan), examinations (college entrance exam), and business (industries that do foreign business). Does this have anything to do with children who go to eikaiwa (English conversation schools), junior high students who are introduced to English through the curriculum and college students who studied English for their entrance exams? From the quote above, actually, there is no common link at all because each function is different at certain stages of a student's life. Looking at the differing functions, it is easily confusing to understand what type of role English has in Japanese society. The puzzling part is that in each of these functions, communication within society is not emphasized. So, does English necessarily have a function outside of these boundaries and if it does, how is

this communicated towards students? There is a mixed message. Some parents want children to learn because they did not enjoy English, others had to learn through compulsory studies and college students have to take required classes. In addition to this, especially within the past several years, there is more exposure to English through movies, music, and advertisements through television and major shopping areas. When looking at this from this perspective, it is from a passive stance and not actively using it in everyday life. The actual time when a student uses English is in school, entrance exams, or the occasional foreigner who asks for help, but nothing beyond that unless a school does an exchange letter program or some activity that takes English outside of its usual school context.

One major question is how do we try to bridge the gap between using English as a communication tool and for examinations? Of course, there is no clear answer, but an important thing is to change the perspective of how English is perceived as a whole. How can the outside factors help? What are these outside factors? These are things like parental perspectives, students' perspectives of how they' ll use the language, government policies, and community involvement. In some other countries, there is an emphasis on the L2 identity itself along with parents encouraging using the L2. In other words, English is seen in a positive light in which it does not take away from the student' s identity but adds to it.

Interestingly, in Chile and in Hungary, the link between the ought-to L2 self and parental encouragement is considerably

stronger than in the North-Asian countries investigated in similar students...in China and Japan, there are additional factors outside the family that exert an influence on Ought-to L2 self such as educational requirements (primarily exams) and pressures to compete with peers. (Kormos, Kiddle, & Csizer, 2011).

From this point of view, English in Japan is seen as a competitive tool rather than as a skill used for communication. Conteh (2008) said that there is an importance for positive relationships between the home and school for a child' s learning. In order for a student to view learning as beneficial, a student should be able to see that the subject, in this case English, is supported by the parents and also the community, especially the student' s classmates and teachers. However, with the outside pressures for exams and competition, students do not see learning English with an attitude of expressing themselves, but as a tool to get something other than mastering the language. By creating pressure, it almost discourages communication itself.

In society, how much power does a parent have if the curriculum is set by the government? Can there be a compromise? The general attitude is that parents have influence over the home and teachers have influence over schools. The children are the common factor and how much authority do teachers and parents have over what is taught? Conteh again explains that in education, children should have some power over their education and this empowers their parents in society (2008). This is an example

from British society, but how is this applicable in other countries and their societies? I think this lies in the attitude of what the role of teacher is and the evolvement of communication language teaching. Are we aiming that teachers are transmitters of knowledge rather than developers of learner independence? In an article about communication in the classroom, Littlewood (2014) says that one of the strategies that teachers make take towards the future of communicative language teaching (CLT) is to “... choose ideas and techniques from the universal transnational pool that has been built up over the years and evaluate them, not in relation to any notion of CLT,” (p. 354). If learners have more independence, they should have more freedom to use English outside of examinations and school, but in another environment that’s both educational and enlightening. In our school, we have a speech contest in the university and in some cities, nurseries already teach basic English to introduce vocabulary and intonation to preschoolers. In the nursery in Chiba that I am currently teaching in, the staff are being trained to take English exams in order to integrate English vocabulary into their daily routine. The teachers sometimes reinforce what I have taught and practice it so that by the next week, the children are confident in answering. I think steps like these help in what Wang (2007) explains as our teaching roles as transmitters of knowledge are transitioning into a “holistic development of competence” (Littlewood, 2014:352).

In the future, we as a society are changing into doing more service industries, so finding a greater use for English in ordinary, everyday life

might become usual in Japanese society. In the future, the purpose of English will change again. How can this impact society and the teaching of English itself? This may mean there are more opportunities for using English in connection with daily life in the near future and our role as teachers may transform in the process. I think that this might mean that we will have to look at teaching English as an expression of feelings and thinking, adding another layer of perspectives and dimension to the function of English in Japanese society. “By teaching L2 emotional expression, linguistically and socioculturally, we may help our students to be able to use their L2 as tools for thinking and emoting” (Swain, 2013). I hope that someday that English will be able to be seen as more than as a subject or as a tool of communication, but as a part of sharing cultural identities like when I first learned about Japanese culture through a translated version of a children’s version of a traditional folktale.

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