

Improving College English Education : with Special Reference to Kyushu University

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<https://doi.org/10.15017/1355862>

出版情報 : 英語英文学論叢. 44, pp.137-149, 1994-02. 九州大学英語英文学研究会
バージョン :
権利関係 :

Improving College English Education

— With Special Reference to Kyushu University —¹⁾

Yubun Suzuki

1. Introduction

Our aim in this article is to show the present circumstances and problems of the college general English education in Japan and to propose better ways of teaching English. We begin with how students in senior and junior high schools tackle with English, thenceforth shifting our topic to university-level English education. It would not be an exaggeration to remark that Japanese pre-university students study English only to pass the paper entrance examinations of their target universities. They attain some proficiency in a rather academic and stiff version of English without being aware of the significance of English as indispensable media for international communication and as the system involving the profound ideas and cultures of English-speaking world. Thus, they tend to lose their interest in English as soon as they succeed in passing through the gates of universities. As for the college-level English education, we concentrate on Kyushu University: its English curriculum is more or less the same as those found in the general education of most other Japanese universities. The main thesis of this paper is that we should have more conversational courses (as well as intensive reading courses) and well-qualified teachers. We will also refer to the drastic change of curriculum Kyushu University

1) This paper is based on the presentation I made in the English section of the joint seminar between Chungnam National University in Korea and Kyushu University held at the former university on October 12, 1993 under the main title "The Reorientation of Foreign Language Education". I am grateful to all those involved in this joint seminar. It was a great experience for me to read a paper on English education especially because my research field is not English education.

will soon experience.

2. How Pre-University Students Study English

Our students in senior and junior high schools and their parents are so much concerned about English education mainly because English is compulsory in almost all college and senior high school entrance examinations. They can never enter a 'good school' without carefully preparing for English tests. This means that what kind of English they want to pursue depends crucially upon the trend of college entrance examinations. Unfortunately, college entrance examinations are mostly given on a pencil & paper basis. Therefore, it is quite natural that students concentrate on building up abstract vocabulary and phrases and try to achieve an intensive reading of complicated English materials. They usually start English outside schools when they are in elementary schools, though junior high schools are the first official place to begin English. This might be fruitful if their parents were trying to expose them to English in consideration of the best age for second language acquisition (often assumed to be 8-11 years of age). Their children, in reality, just fling themselves into grammar-translation exercise a few years in advance. This is a kind of language hell under the name of early English education.

This state of student English leads to two consequences. First, students are not eager to study English any more once they manage to overcome the college entrance competitions. Second, they are next to utterly unable to speak English in actual situations. We will confirm these points in the next section by describing the English education at Kyushu University as a representative of college English education in Japan.

3. College English Curriculum

Our Kyushu University is quite typical in English curriculum among Japanese universities. English is compulsory to our juniors and sophomores. They are supposed to take 8 English courses if they choose

it as their first foreign language. Most of them choose English as their 1st foreign language for the good reason that they have already exposed themselves to English for at least 6 years in junior and senior high schools to reach the conclusion that English is the best choice to finish required language courses with the least effort: they have to take as many as 8 courses for 1st foreign language while they only have to take 5-8 courses for 2nd foreign language. In a sense, they are acting according to economic principles even if they are not involved in companies yet. I am much disappointed that the majority of our students do not understand that universities are places where we can most easily devote ourselves to our ideals. This results from the fact that our students lose their enthusiasm once they are liberated from disgusting preparation for college entrance examinations of English.

Among the 8 English courses, there are two conversational ones: one by a native speaker and the other in an LL (language laboratory) classroom. Both of them are far from successful. In the former course, there are too many (often as many as 60) students for a native instructor to provide each student with sufficient opportunity to speak with him/her. In the latter course, teachers are not always good at operating the audio-visual machines or offering the basics of English pronunciation and intonation. Thus, college English education have failed to improve the present situation where our students are quite hopelessly poor at English daily conversation.

Solutions of these problems are twofold. First, we can never welcome competent and arduous students without any innovation of the English education in junior and senior high schools. For this matter, we have to improve our own college entrance examinations so that students do not have to waste their time in the acquisition of tactics to tackle with the unduly complicated and abstract English sentences never used for daily conversation. This problem, however, is hard to solve and beyond the scope of this short article, since this encompasses the education or the society as a whole. It would be wise to put it aside and limit ourselves to the other way of solution to be proposed immediately.

The second solution is the progress of ways of teaching on the part of college English teachers. We have to do something to get our students to recover their interest and to be geared for international communication. We will now elaborate on the second solution to the two problems presented in the end of the last section.

4. What Can College English Teachers Do to Attract Students ?

We now discuss what college English teachers can do to solve the first problem that our students lose their enthusiasm. Most Japanese college students complain that English courses require so much time and energy whereas they are horrible tortures in which they can not find anything interesting and worth serious pursuit. The questionnaire we recently obtained from our students is full of remarks of a similar kind. Following are some of the actual complaints by our students (translated):

- a) Our English class is just an extension of high school classes.
- b) I was shocked to find that college English is not different at all from the English necessary for entrance examinations.
- c) We have done a lot of reading and writing in senior high schools. We want something different.
- d) I'm fed up with memorizing the translation of textbooks.
- e) Classes are so monotonous. I've lost my enthusiasm to enter the department of English literature.
- f) Teachers do everything. Students do nothing.
- g) We want to know the cultures behind languages.
- h) Teachers do not make good use of LL machines.

We can never deny that every college English teacher is not making an effort to render their classes attractive to our students. They are inclined to consider that their main obligation is an academic research instead of education. They choose as their class materials textbooks that are somehow related to their field of study, ignoring the interests on the part

of their students. This state of affairs is not desirable in classes of general English. What is worse, they have had no training as an English teacher. No teacher's certificate is necessary for college teachers, unlike those of junior and senior high schools. They have not gone through hard experiences criticized by their seniors. They are evaluated as a researcher but not as a teacher when they are hired. Thus, they can lead a comfortable life as a researcher without brushing up their English teaching skills. Some teachers have taught completely in the same monotonous way just like a Buddhism prayer for decades.

What should we do in order to encourage our students, most of whom have already judged English as the biggest source of their unhappiness? First, we have to give up using our classes for our academic purposes. Class materials, the speed of reading/speaking, the kind of assignment, evaluation measures and so forth ought to be adequately and carefully chosen taking into account the motivation on the part of students.

Second, we have to have our students achieve the profound understanding of the ideas and cultures of the world hidden in the written materials. We can never persuade our students to study English harder without showing what wonderful world they can learn through English. If they learn how deep we can get below the superficial sentences, they would be ashamed of their ignorance and would not insist that they have read English too much to go on any further in universities. We need various knowledge of literature, politics, etymology, philosophy etc. Sometimes, it might be necessary to make a serious digression on the subject dealt with in materials.

Third, we have to give our students a chance to participate in class activities. We should not make a nonstop speech without listening to our students. The signboard 'one-way only' should be limited to traffic regulations.

Fourth, we have to keep up with new development of educational machines. Usually, our students are far younger than we are. They know more about audio-visual machines and personal computers than we do. They are most likely to despise us and come to dislike English if we behave

awkward in front of these machines and they think we are not kind enough to learn how to use these machines for the sake of them.

Last, but not the least, we have to be sensitive to what types of classes our students want us to organize. They are conversational classes. We have to have more such courses. This point, a significant thesis of the present article, is also the solution to the second problem that our students are inert when it comes to daily English conversation.

5. More Conversational Courses

Now we turn to the solution to the second problem that our students are hopelessly poor at daily English conversation. This is closely related to the first problem in that English conversation courses are very attractive to our students. In fact, in the recent questionnaire obtained from Kyushu University students, the most conspicuous claim is the drastic change of English curriculum from reading-translation to daily conversation. We can never activate our English classes a single step without respecting this demand. At present, two out of eight courses are intended for conversational classes, one by a native speaker and the other in LL (language laboratory) classrooms. What is really going on in these courses, however, are not necessarily conversational. They are often only devoted to listening comprehension, short writing, or even (rapid) reading. The fact is that our students are not required very much to speak English to convey what they have in mind.

In my opinion, we have to have more courses entitled 'conversation'. At least half of the 8 courses should be conversational classes. We are not claiming, however, that college English education should be solely devoted to conversation: the same emphasis should be placed on international communication as on intensive reading. Both are indispensable without doubt in college English curriculum.

One might object that colleges are the places for academism and therefore students have to learn academic reading of texts by great writers. Objections along this line, however, insinuate us that teachers are reluctant

to change their easy and economical way of teaching. They want to organize every class in the same manner merely translating texts without requiring students' active participation. They must fully realize that the day has already passed when we do not come across actual situations of international verbal communication and the only thing we have to do about English is to decode 'inscriptive' English sentences. We go abroad for sightseeing or for study or on business. We have to acquire intercultural sincerity based on international understanding.

One might still object that students will not be able to speak English fluently with no more than 4 courses (i.e. one class meeting per week) and that it is better to use the 4 courses for more fruitful kind of training such as intensive reading and writing rather than throwing them away into a wastebasket through childish and easygoing 'plays' named conversation. It is true students who really need to speak English will not depend on their universities but rather go to English conversation schools or listen to radio English programs. But we must not give up conversational courses. I believe it is not too late to try to show our university students the basics of English conversation including pronunciation and intonation so that they might not be too afraid of speaking in English. 4 courses is far from sufficient but necessary. I hope such conversational courses will render our students aware of the importance of international communication in the present complicated world. Courses of this kind require a great deal of energy if we are to accomplish a great advancement. They can not be childish and easygoing as our opponents criticize. They will turn out to be still more effective if we get rid of a Japanese tradition where a lot of junior high school teachers, unfamiliar with the basics of English pronunciation and ashamed to read English sentences in the presence of their students or to manage their classes in English, escape into a grammar-translation method, which makes Japanese students find it needless to speak in English.

6. Curriculum Innovation in Japan

Now we might make a digression to mention the curriculum innovation among Japanese universities. Generally speaking, private universities are willing to make a drastic change to secure students in case of the serious decrease of students in the near future.

Some university has developed a large-scale program for studying English abroad. Most of the students of this university can take part in the program and obtain academic units. This type of innovation is so much costly but worth pursuing.

There are also attempts to divide 90-minute class meetings into two 45-minute classes thereby providing students with English training every day or to make paired classes so that students are exposed to the same material twice a week.²⁾

Computers are often used for conversational simulations between students and computers. This will mitigate teachers' labor and give students opportunities to practice English communication at the same time.

Now we have to mention the curriculum innovation to be carried out for next academic year (1994) at Kyushu University. Unfortunately, we are not allowed to do such tremendous revolutions as we have seen just now: we have 50 to 60 students in a single classroom. This is also one of the reasons why classes by a native speaker is not effective very much at Kyushu University. Our innovation next academic year is primarily intended for making classes of small size. Only one out of 8 courses will be a small one with 25 to 30 students on the average. This is the best we can do now. We have no other choice but to put off an introduction of more daily conversational courses. The situation might be similar among other national universities. When I was young I had an impression that there were far fewer students in national universities than in private universities. On

2) The latter way can be easily introduced, at least partially, without changing the whole curriculum at all. Those who happen to be in charge of the same class can make a paired class by using the same material.

the contrary, these days, we have more students in our Kyushu University classes than in private universities around it. Financial conditions of national universities are hopeless because of the budget reduction policy imposed on education by the Japanese government. Thus, each of us should brush up our own teaching method without waiting for financial support.

7. How to Organize Conversational Courses

The increase of conversational courses alone would not be effective unless well-qualified teachers organize classes appropriately. In this section, we will make specific proposals for good organization of conversational courses.

7. 1. Vocabulary Building

The very first thing that I myself would like to do in this kind of conversational courses is the daily conversation vocabulary building with the aid of an illustrated dictionary like *Oxford Photo Dictionary* or *Oxford Picture Dictionary*. Our students know a lot of abstract words like *exploitation* and *confiscate* but are at a loss for words when they want to refer to such common things as *rice cooker* and *corkscrew*. We can not advance any further unless we begin with daily basic words, with which our students are not necessarily familiar. Grammars can be mastered in a systematic and economical fashion through generalization. But vocabulary can not be conquered without building up one by one. Students should make every endeavor along this line so that they might not be at a loss for words, a monotonous but indispensable task to enrich our communication. The two dictionaries mentioned earlier are useful also in this respect. They list words according to various subclasses of situations like weather, clothes, furniture, stationery, etc. This will be of a great help when we try to learn words somehow in a principled way. We have to add that these dictionaries are wonderful also because students can make direct connection between

English and things without the mediation of Japanese. 3)

7. 2. Pronunciation and Intonation

I would next like to give some basics of English pronunciation to our students. Someone argues, however, that we should not emphasize pronunciation since we can make successful conversation without speaking fluently like a native speaker. I admit that we need not speak like a native speaker and it would be a waste of time to train our students until they can handle with English just like a native speaker. Yet, I feel uneasy to hear someone say that English with a Japanese accent should be accepted as an authorized version of English and Japanese people should speak 'Japanese English' without hesitation. It is more meaningful than is usually assumed, however, to try to master the basics of English pronunciation and intonation. We had better make our students realize the differences among languages in terms of pronunciation and intonation. This is the basis for further understanding of linguistic and cultural differences among peoples. We hope our students will eliminate their prejudice that they themselves and things around them are the standard in the world. Most Japanese students suppose that Japanese *hiragana* like *a, i, u, e, o, ka, ki, ku, ke, ko* is a universal unit of sound (i.e. a phoneme). They do not know that *ka*, for example, consists of one consonant followed by one vowel. For the lack of this knowledge, they are inclined to pronounce *put* like *putto*. They seem to take it for granted subconsciously that [t] (as well as other consonants) must always be followed by some vowel. This is also related to the syllabic difference between English and Japanese. English *put* is a one-syllable word while its Japanese *hiraganazation put · to* is a two-syllable word.

There are a lot other weaknesses in pronunciation our students must

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- 3) In a sense, to be competent in a foreign language means the direct conversation without the intervention of a mother tongue between the foreign language and ideas. This is one of the biggest reasons why a traditional grammar-translation method is attacked fiercely by the proponents of conversational education.

overcome. For example, they can not link two words. They say *Japan is* with a clear sound break at the word boundary instead of *Japan-is* merging [n] and [i] into [ni]. This is due to the difference between the two languages in terms of the presence of glottal stop, to which we can attribute the impression that Japanese is clear-cut while English is blurred. These weaknesses are too numerous to cover here: aspiration of the plosive consonants at the head of words, distinction between [r] and [ɹ], clear [ɪ] and dark [ɪ], the use of schwa for unaccented vowels, and so forth. What we can observe from all of these is that our students cling to Japanese standards when they try to speak English. It is necessary to break one's standards (and, in a sense, try to speak like a native speaker). This would lead to the objective points of view in looking at aspects of foreign cultures.

Our students are not aware of the significance of intonations, either. I often hear our students reading English sentences with a flat intonation like a voice produced by old-fashioned computers. They seem to be assuming that a flat intonation is the most normal and unmarked. This, again, is due to their arrogance where they consider their Japanese rather flat intonation as standard. We have to tell them that the basic intonation of English, unlike Japanese, is not so flat. They are also not careful of semantic distinctions by means of intonational variation, although they are often seen even in Japanese.

7. 3. Anything Else in English

We hope our students will become competent in English through conversational courses. In order to make successful communication, we have to understand what other people say and clearly know what we want to say. In order to understand what other people say, we have to have various array of knowledge. Thus, we are surprised to hear the opinion that students ought to be concentrated on English itself and nothing else. It is utterly impossible to teach or study English itself exclusively. Every conversation is done through intention to convey some message to others. Conversation does not exist by itself. Thus, it is of a great sorrow if our

students merely repeat tapes or texts without any intention to convey any ideas. In a sense, to teach English is to teach philosophy, science, politics or whatever others. When I used *A Brief History of Time* as a textbook, for example, I taught cosmology through English rather than English through cosmology. If we do not put an emphasis on cosmology, we are saying to our students that the content of the textbook does not count. This equals saying that content is not important in conversation. Therefore, we have to be very careful when we choose materials. We should not choose textbooks which we have nothing special to talk about enthusiastically.

7. 4. Well-Qualified Teachers

We must have well-qualified teachers who can organize their courses in the ways indicated in foregoing subsections. Yet, however loud we cry for ideals as we have done in the foregoing, we can not substitute idealistic teachers for the present staff in Japan. There is nothing for it but to improve ourselves according to our own guidelines.

We are, however, often confronted with overreactions. Some teachers and non-teachers claim that we have to invent some regulations to force a pressure on us. One of them is that all the courses use the some original textbooks carefully compiled for specific purposes. In fact, there are several colleges following this method. This, however, will deprive teachers of chances, hence ability, to improve class organization in their own ways. Another claim is that teachers should be evaluated by means of some evaluation process. They have to resign when their students and/or fellow teachers judge them inappropriate as college English teachers. This will definitely be an incentive to improve our teaching technique. Yet, this, again, can not be accepted as long as it is so strict. We are expected to spend our energy both for academic research and education. It is natural that professional English teachers in language schools appear to be far more skillful than we do. Thus, it seems to be unfair to force university teachers to resign unless they are allowed to concentrate on education. It goes without saying, however, that we have to try our best and know how

our students evaluate us so that we might not have such cruel regulations. We might also think of hiring college language teachers solely intended for education.

8. Final Remark

We have seen various aspects of English education in a rather naive fashion with an emphasis on conversational courses. I hope this paper will encourage English teachers including myself into a serious consideration of better conversational English education at college-level.