

From Learning to Acquiring in English Education

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To foster fluency in English abilities
it's necessary not to learn them but to acquire them.

Key word: extensive reading, learning, acquiring, monitoring

The problem we have in English education

‘Even if you learn English for many years, it would be difficult for you to speak, read, listen, or write in English fluently.’

If you hear the above statement, what would you feel or think? Now Japanese students usually begin to study or learn English after they enter junior high school. (Some elementary schools have already started to introduce English lessons systematically, although the number of lessons per school year is not large.) They continue to learn it also at senior high school and many after entering universities. A lot of Japanese including so-called well-informed ones complain that they can't use English fluently even after learning English so many years. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology is trying to improve the situation by lowering the age when students begin to learn English. Elementary schools should incorporate English classes into their school curriculum more systematically and frequently. They think the younger the better it is to begin and learn English. In a sense that's true. We Japanese like other countries' people begin to speak our mother tongue fluently at a very early age. By the way can we think it for granted that if we lower the age when we begin to learn English it's possible or it gets easier to master the language? Of course the point here is it's up to the teaching method employed at the school level. Here I'd like to get back to the statement I wrote at the beginning of this essay. If we apply the same teaching methods used at junior or senior high school level, the difficulties in mastering English we are facing now will not improve. Before considering the necessity to

low the beginning age, I think we need to change the teaching method or at least to add some other activities to the method we have long been using in many schools.

What' s the solution?

What kinds of activities or practices do we need or add to the present English education? I propose using some amount of time, we need to unlearn the learning method we employ, teachers make students use, or students are forced to use to pass entrance examinations. Learners of English today in Japan usually try to remember Japanese meanings of English words and phrases, understand English grammar, and try to interpret English passages checking unknown words or places with the help of dictionaries. When we read English texts, we cannot get along without dictionaries. I mean we need to get the stubborn habits we learned through English learning off from our mind.

Learning and acquiring

Let's go back to the title of this short essay again. It's important to distinguish 'learning' and 'acquiring'. We have two types of learning, that is, intentional learning and incidental learning. In English education teachers usually compel students to learn intentionally. We tell students to try to remember meanings of words which appear in text, sentence structures, or English grammar. Students use the knowledge of grammar and use dictionaries (especially English-Japanese dictionaries) a lot on the way. They will get skills, to a certain degree, to read, write, speak, or listen to English. When they challenge themselves to new English materials, they try to make use of all the knowledge and skills they have learned so far. But even with them students' capabilities to engage themselves in English are limited. As a learner of English as a second language, it seems that we probably could not do without learning intentionally.

The significance of acquiring

In addition to learning intentionally, however, what we lack most and need most is learning incidentally. Learning intentionally can be called 'acquiring'. By the way it is well known that Stephen Krashen warned learners of English of

‘monitoring’. Grammatical correctness nourishes a sense of monitoring. Whenever you encounter English, monitoring function in your mind begins to work and forces you to analyze and check its English expressions and to try to translate them into Japanese. Naturally monitoring blocks fluency. Take an example of reading English. After many years of English learning, not so many students can read English fluently. Grab any kind of books written in authentic English and try to read them if you want to confirm this. You will come across a lot of English word the meaning of which you don’t know and you surely lose interest in continuing to read the books. The solution to this problem is whether you introduce incidental learning or acquiring into your learning process. Acquiring can be a breakthrough. To materialize acquiring we need to immerse ourselves in far more English. The effects of acquiring cannot be seen so soon. But only through accumulations by acquiring activities can we take off the debacles of intentional learning and monitoring. That’s when the fluency comes into sight. What we need now is acquiring activities.

Extensive reading

My concern of study these several years is extensive reading. Unconsciously stored knowledge and skills accumulate gradually in our mind as we practice extensive reading. There will come the time when the knowledge and skills acquired in such a way blossom into useful ones. If you refer to a dictionary every time you encounter an unknown word, you’ll lose track of the story or flow of the writing and lose interest in it. This has something to do with so called short term memory. If you want to enjoy a book, you need to read it above a certain speed without consulting a dictionary so often. Dictionary use will block the flow of the book you are reading. In my opinion extensive reading activity, although it may seem to be tenuous and time-consuming, is the very effective method of acquiring fluent English usage eventually. So in English education teachers should set aside some time for acquiring English or extensive reading to order to improve the situation of English education, make students fluent readers of English, and ensure them practical English. Only then can they realize English is useful, practical and fun.

Suggested readings for 'extensive reading'

General introduction to extensive reading

- Richard R. Day and Julian Bamford (1998) *Extensive Reading in the Second Language Classroom*, Cambridge University Press
- 小澤信治(2002) *Extensive Reading を取り入れた英語の授業* 筑波大学附属坂戸高等学校紀要第 40 集
- Stephen D. Krashen(2003) *Explorations in Language Acquisition and Use*, Heinemann
- Stephen D. Krashen(2004) *The Power of Reading: Insights from the Research(2nd Edition)*, Heinemann
- Christine Nuttall(2005) *Teaching Reading Skills in a foreign language(New Edition)*, Macmillan
- Jeremy Harmer (2007) *The Practice of English Language Teaching (4th edition)*, Pearson Longman
- Stephen D. Krashen(2011) *Free Voluntary Reading, Libraries Unlimited*

Empirical evidence of usefulness of extensive reading

- Fay H. Shin & Stephen D. Krashen(2008) *Summer Reading Program and Evidence*, Pearson Education
- 小澤信治(2008) 「生徒の英語力の向上に及ぼす多読の効果についての実証的な研究」 筑波大学附属坂戸高等学校研究紀要第 46 集

How to practice extensive reading (in classroom)

- Julian Bamford & Richard R. Day (2004) *Extensive Reading Activities for Teaching Language*, Cambridge University Press
- Janice L. Pilgreen(2000) *The SSR Handbook: How to Organize and Manage a Sustained Silent Reading Program*, Heinemann
- 酒井邦秀・神田みなみ(2005) 「教室で読む英語 100万語－多読授業のすすめ」大修館書店
- Nancie Atwell(2007) *The Reading Zone*, Scholastic
- 小澤信治(2010) 高等学校における英語の多読活動の実態調査及び効果的な実施法についての研究 筑波大学附属坂戸高等学校研究紀要第 48 集

- Richard R. Day et al. (2011) Bringing extensive reading into the classroom, Oxford University Press

The possibility that manifest instruction can be an obstacle to English reading comprehension

- 小澤信治(2011) 代名詞指示語の明示的指導が英文読解に及ぼす影響についての研究 筑波大学附属坂戸高等学校紀要第 49 集