

Life Story of a Japanese Language Learner

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This is a life story of learning a second language of a Japanese student who is currently studying in the university, Indiana University of Pennsylvania. The first thing that I was interested in about him was that his English does not sound like the typical Japanese English in terms of pronunciation especially. Many Japanese students, who even study in the university in the United States, are worried about their English pronunciation, which is affected by their first language Japanese, and they try to get rid of their Japanese English pronunciation while they study in the United States. However, the Japanese student's story that I am going to write about told me that his English pronunciation style was already just as it is now even before he came to the United States to study. I, who am an investigator of second language learning life story here, assumed that there must be some secrets about his English learning history or experiences. That is why I started to interview him about his second language learning experiences. Through the interview to him, I found out that he was trying to learn English for himself, not at school, in his styles, and also that he was originally interested in sounds or pronunciations since he was a young child. That is why he focused on pronouncing English, not like other Japanese who speak what is called "Japanese English", but like an English native speaker even though he may not have been aware of the fact that he was focusing on pronunciation at that time. This is the life story of his second language learning.

I am Yasuhiro Maruyama from Japan, and I am twenty three years old now. I was born and raised in Japan. My first language is Japanese, and my parents also speak Japanese as their first language. In Japan, even though some people can speak English very fluently, most of the Japanese speak only Japanese because it is an only official language there. However, I study International Studies here at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, and I speak and understand English as my second language, without many problems now. What I am going to talk about

here is my life story that shows how I have learned and have been learning English as my foreign or second language.

I encountered English when I was a very young child at the age of about five or six years old. I liked to watch the TV programs on “NHK” which was a Japanese national TV program and had a lot of English educational programs for kids. I liked to watch those programs on TV and to imitate some English words that the people on the programs said.

I started to study English as a subject when I got into junior high school in Japan when I was twelve years old as other Japanese students did. At that time, or when I had to study English as a subject in my whole life, I did not like the subject called English honestly. That was because what my Japanese teachers of English taught me were all grammar rules and vocabularies which seemed not practical at all to me at that time and which I had to memorize. Those Japanese teachers taught us, the students, English, in Japanese. I had the English classes where those Japanese teachers taught four or five days a week, and each English class had fifty minutes duration. I had many quizzes and exams in those classes where I had to read long English texts and answer some questions below the texts. Those quizzes and exams did not have the communicative part at all, such as listening and speaking.

However, there was an American teacher of English in my junior high school. I liked him and his class very much. He came in those English classes sometimes which were taught by a Japanese teacher of English, about once in three classes. When he came in the classes, he taught us how to pronounce English words and sentences. He assisted the Japanese teacher of English, rather than leading his own classes. He usually stood behind the classroom and assisted the Japanese teacher when the Japanese teacher needed his help or asked him to do something, such as reading textbooks in English, pronouncing English words and sentences, and/or talking about American culture to the students in the class. Even in those English classes where an American teacher of English attended sometimes, I did not have opportunities to use English or

talk to the American teacher in English. However, I would often go to his room to see and talk to him with my Japanese friends outside of the English classes after the classes, especially during the break time between a class and another class. I think it was when I was in the third year in junior high school at the age of about fourteen years old. He also came in my classroom to have lunch with us sometimes. I really enjoyed having lunch and also talking with him in English. Even though I had been studying English for just three years by that time, I think that I could understand what the American teacher said because he used pretty easy English words and phrases, such as “How are you?”, since he was an English teacher. People often say that the Japanese educational system does not focus on communicative part of English, such as speaking and listening, but I could understand what the American teacher of English talked about, and he also understood what I said. At that time, I did not try or did not think about improving my English skills. It was a natural thing for me to use English for a communication tool to talk with him in English because there was an English speaker in my class. I think that I probably saw him as one of my friends or an older brother, and that is why I could enjoy talking with him.

The American teacher of English had an opportunity to lead his own class just once, in my memory. That was a special class for the students in the class to learn his culture, American culture. He talked about his American culture in my class all in English. Even though he spoke all in English in the class, I think that the students, including me, could understand him a little because he used easy words and sentences so that we could understand what he was talking about. At that time when I was a junior high school student, I did not think about improving my English skills at all. To me, English classes were just grammatical things and reading textbooks, which did not seem to be practical or communicative at all to me at that time, and that is why I did not like the subject of English. However, talking with my American teacher of English outside of the class was totally different from taking English classes to me, and that is why I just enjoyed talking with him in English, not really focusing on studying English itself in class.

After he left my junior high school, there was a new American or Canadian teacher coming to my junior high school to teach English, but I do not remember very well where she was from. I do not remember her well because I did not talk with her like with my favorite American teacher.

Most of the Japanese students usually study for exams to get into better high schools or better universities in Japan; however, I never thought in that way at that time even though I had to study English for high school entrance exams later. That is why I did not focus on improving my English skills or getting better grades on the exams. I just enjoyed talking with my American teacher of English, and just the language was English, not Japanese. I had fun talking with him in English even though I hated the subject of English at that time.

However, there was a Japanese teacher of English who had an interesting style of teaching English when I was in the first and second year in the junior high school. He focused on English pronunciation in the very funny way. He exaggerated the different pronunciations between English and Japanese, saying like “ummmmm” when he pronounced “I am.” I wonder if this style of his teaching made me interested in English pronunciation. Even though I liked his teaching style of English pronunciation, I do not think that I learned how to pronounce English in his classes. I would rather say that Japanese teachers of English never taught us how to pronounce English in class. That is why I do not think that I learned anything about English pronunciation from him in his class, and I just found his teaching style of pronunciation very unique and interesting.

I never liked the subject of English. I liked social studies much better than English; however, I think that that may be because I did not have any goals, such as studying in the university in the United States, at that time. If I had some goals related to English, I may have learned English, even the subject of English, more seriously because I actually liked some of my English classes, depending on who taught the classes. That I did not have any purposes or

reasons to study English may be why I was just taking those English classes rather than enjoying them or focusing on improving my English skills through the classes.

However, my purpose to study English changed later because I had to study English as a subject to get into a better high school. I was finally in the stage where I had to study English as a subject seriously even though I still did not like English. The reason why I chose the high school was that I wanted to study abroad when I was a junior high school student, and I thought that I needed to study Japanese things first, such as Japanese history and about the Japanese language. That is because people would see me as the Japanese or Japan if I go abroad, and I will have to be able to answer the questions about Japan that they would ask to me. So that I could answer those questions, I thought that I needed to know about Japan and Japanese culture. When I was a high school student, I used to think that teachers in good universities could teach the students a lot of things, knowledge, and information, about Japan. That is why I wanted to study at a better high school to get into the better university. That is the main reason why I chose to go to the high school. I needed to study very hard for the exam to get into the high school because it was said to be the best high school in my prefecture and very competitive. I did not go to cram schools that some of my friends went to, and that is why I studied hard by myself. I read a grammar book, which was a very thick book of hundreds of pages, to study English grammatical rules, and English grammar was very complicated for me at that time. I had to learn about how to read English sentences correctly and how to write English sentences by using correct grammar for the exams to get into the high school. I did not have to improve my communicative competences, such as speaking and listening skills, to get into the high school because there was no speaking, listening, or even interview part in the exams for the high school.

Fortunately, I got into the high school which I wanted to go to right after junior high school. However, the education in the high school was not what I expected. The teachers in the

high school focused on how many students could get into better universities. However, that was not a free style school at all and those teachers just gave us a lot of assignments. I had to study everything as my teachers told me to do, and that is why I did not like any subjects when I was a high school student. That is why, I guess, I did not focus on studying English either at that time. I did not go to cram school when I had to study hard in the high school because I did not have to study at other places than high school, and that was a good point of the high school.

I think that I had an American teacher of English in the high school just like in my junior high school. We, students, went to her room to take English conversation tests where she asked us questions in English, and we also asked questions to her in English. The American teacher of English did not lead her own class, and it seemed like she and Japanese teachers of English helped each other in English classes, like in the English classes in my junior high school. However, I had to use English more in the English classes in the high school than when I was a junior high school. I think I had to do some speech in English in those English classes, and I also watched movies sometimes. I had that kind of a class about once a week, sixty five minutes duration each. The class was held mainly by the American teacher of English, and the Japanese teacher of English sometimes helped her, translating what she said from English to Japanese, or translating what the students said to the American teacher, translating from Japanese to English.

The English classes were mainly taught by Japanese teachers of English, and those English classes did not have any factors of English for communications. There were three types of classes in my high school; one is the lecture of vocabularies and grammar, the other is reading, and also writing. In the vocabulary and grammar classes, I just learned and had a lecture about the English vocabularies and English grammar just as I did in English classes in junior high school. In the reading classes, I just read the texts and read them out. I also had the writing classes sometimes. In the writing classes, I had to compose sentences in English.

Basically I had to translate the sentences written in Japanese into English sentences. Sometimes, I had to write something like an essay, which was long to me at that time, in those writing classes. I had to write about the topics which my English teachers decided. Even though the teachers taught me how to read some words or how to pronounce them, the main focus was not on how to pronounce well. Usually there were some Japanese sentences and I had to translate them from Japanese to English. That was difficult for me. Even though I tried to be interested in the classes, I could not. I think that I just sat in the classes and listened to the lectures.

The English exams in the high school were especially difficult. I had to read very long stories, which were as long as about eleven pages, and I had about one hour to finish the exam. In the writing exams, I had topics and I had to compose sentences about the topics in English. Those exams were very hard for me, and I remember that I could not get good grades on the exams.

The least thing that I did not like about the high school happened when I said that I wanted to study in the university in the United States to my teacher in the high school. I told my teacher that I wanted to study abroad after high school, not going to any university in Japan, when I was in the first year in high school. However, the teacher just told me that the high school was for the students to get into national universities in Japan, and so that my idea of getting into the university abroad was not good. That is why I lost my passion to study, and I also lost the purpose to study English. People usually study when they have some goals or purposes, they try to get closer to their goals by studying. However, they cannot study any more when they lose their purposes or goals just as my teacher told me not to think about studying abroad, which was my goal and purpose at that time. At that time when my teacher told me to give up my goal of studying abroad in the university in the United States, I just said okay to him because I think that I somewhat understood why he said that to me. That is because my grades of the English exams in the high school were terribly low, and my teacher of course knew that,

so now I think that he thought that it must have been impossible for me to study in the United States because I could not even do well in the exams in the high school in Japan. I think that I spent my three years in the high school without doing anything special because I did not find anything particular to do or focus on after my purpose and goal of my life at that time were denied.

Even so, I tried to keep my passion high enough so that I could study. I decided to study to take exams to get into the two universities in Japan. The students in my high school had to decide which university exams in Japan we wanted to take by the end of the second year in high school, and I decided to take universities in Japan after I was told to do so by my teacher. I found those better universities in Japan, such as the International Christian University and Tsukuba University, where I could study in the university in the United States as an exchange student after I got into the university in Japan. That is because I wanted to study in Columbia University which is famous for the major of international studies. Students could take the classes in English in the International Christian University. Even though I was not a Christian, taking classes all in English was interesting and attracting to me at that time because I wanted to study abroad later in some part of my life. Tsukuba University, which had the major of international relations even though it was a public university because public universities in Japan do not usually have the major of international relations. They were the universities that I wanted to go to. I chose the major of international relations because I wanted to be a diplomat or work for an international organization like United Nations, and I also liked social studies since when I was a junior high school student. After I decided to take the exams of the Japanese universities, I started to study all the subjects that I had to study, not just English. I did not go to any cram school this time either, and I was studying everything at school and by myself at home.

Before I graduated from high school, I took the exams of the two universities, and I

received the results from the universities later. Unfortunately, I did not pass the entrance exams in those two universities. After I knew that I failed those two universities in Japan, I decided to go to university in the United States, not indirectly from the university in Japan, but directly for myself. I stayed in Japan for one and half a year to study English by myself and prepare for the tests to get into universities in the United States, such as SAT and TOEFL. SAT is a kind of exam to get into universities in the United States. Both of American students and international students have to take it to get into universities in the United States, and that is why especially English part of it was very hard for me. TOEFL is the English proficiency test that international students have to take to get into universities in the United States. I also studied American culture and history in order not to be so culture-shocked and to get used to the United States quickly when I came to the United States.

I think that my English skills, such as grammar and vocabularies, in junior high school was pretty good because I could know and understand grammar and vocabularies that I learned in junior high school. However, my English skills did not improve during the time when I was a high school student. I could not learn how to communicate, such as listening, speaking, and so on, in English, and that is why I thought that I did not have English skills which were good enough to study abroad, and that is why I started to study English hard by myself, in all of the four skills such as listening, speaking, writing, and reading. I focused especially on the former three parts of listening, speaking, and writing because they were not really focused on in the English educational system in Japan.

However, I first tried to improve my reading skills. I read English books for that, and I tried to know all the meanings of the words in the texts in reading those English books by looking up for the words that I did not know in the dictionary every time I encountered those words; however, that was hard for me because it took me a long time and energy to do so. I gave up using the dictionary every time I encountered those difficult words that I did not know.

Instead of doing that, I decided to read easier books and tried to guess the meanings of the texts without using a dictionary. I remember that the first English book that I read was for American elementary school students. I think that this way worked for me well because I could read those easy books without using a dictionary because I could guess the meanings of the texts from the contexts that I was reading. I changed the difficulty levels of those books from easy ones to difficult ones gradually. I think that I could come to enjoy reading English books gradually in this way.

As for improving my writing skills, I did not get good grades on my writing exams in high school because I could only compose easy and short sentences even though I think that my classmates got good grades on those exams. That is why I needed to improve my writing skills somehow; however, that was very hard for me. What I tried to do was to keep a diary in English every day, but I always used a dictionary to find words that I wanted to write but I did not know. I could compose some easy sentences at that time, but that was not like academic essays which consist of two or three pages. Even though I thought that I had to write those kinds of long and difficult academic styles of essays in university in the United States, that was still very difficult to do for me at that time. I do not think that my writing skills did not become good enough by the time when I came to the United States and studied in my first college in Seattle.

About listening skills, I thought that it must have been good if I kept listening to something in English like every day. I bought a CD that had radio programs in English in a book store and tried to listen to it every day. At first, I did not understand what the people said in the CD at all. I could not even get the words even though I think that I could catch a few easy words, such as “apple”. However, I do not think that I could get the whole meanings of what people in the CD talked about at all. Even so, I did not come up with any other good ideas than listening to CD in English to improve my listening skills. That is why I just kept listening to the CD every day. I think that my listening skills improved a little better through listening to the CD

even though that was not good enough yet. I think that I was getting to be ready for studying at university in the United States in part of my listening skills.

About speaking, I read out the books and articles of English news papers that I bought in book stores. I remember that I focused on pronunciation when I read out those articles. I focused not on understanding meaning of the texts at first but on how to read out the texts fluently. I tried to get used to the pronunciation styles of English because how to pronounce words between English and Japanese are very different, and that is why I tried to learn how to use and move my mouth to pronounce like an English native speaker. Even though I did not have any English speaking friends around me at that time, I learned to pronounce correctly and like an English native speaker by reading written on the dictionary or my English textbooks. I started to learn how to read those phonetic sounds when I was a junior high school student and also when I studied for English exams to get into high school. I did not learn how to read those phonetic sounds in my English classes at school, but I learned that for myself because I thought that English was one of the communication tools, and that is why it was meaningless to me if I did not know how to pronounce words correctly even though I knew the meaning of the words. I wanted to use English not for passing the exams but for something more practical, such as communicating with people. After I learned how to read those phonetic sounds, I checked them every time I encountered the words that I did not know how to pronounce. I continued to do that after I graduated from high school, too. To read phonetic sounds and pronounce words correctly was not difficult for me because I could see some pictures of mouth that showed how to move our mouth or our tongue when we wanted to pronounce particular words based on the phonetic sounds. I also watched movies in English and checked out how people pronounce words that I was not sure how to pronounce. If I found a word which I was not sure about how to pronounce and I found the word on a movie or something, I tried to focus on knowing how to pronounce the word correctly and imitated the pronunciation to remember how to pronounce it correctly or

like an English native speaker.

There is something called “Japanese English.” That is a kind of the features of English which the Japanese speak, especially their funny pronunciation styles of English. I think that the Japanese English comes from using Roman Alphabets to show how to pronounce English words. Roman Alphabets, which are called “romaji” in Japanese, affects the English pronunciation of the Japanese a lot. I think that the dictionary that I used in junior high school showed how to pronounce English words in katakana, in which they changed the romaji. The katakana which were used in the dictionary showed how to pronounce words in the same way as the romaji. There were no phonetic sounds in my dictionary which I used when I was a junior high school student, and that is why I do not think that the other students could read phonetic sounds of English words like me. That way of using romaji or katakana in pronouncing English words make English, which the Japanese speak, sound very similar to the language Japanese itself. This is why the Japanese usually sound like Japanese English when they speak or read out English. The Japanese first tend to learn how to read the romaji in elementary school, and they learn English words later, sometimes using romaji or katakana which is pretty similar to romaji pronunciation styles to pronounce words, just like the dictionary that I used in junior high school. As the first language, Japanese, influence Japanese students’ English in terms of pronunciation. However, I was interested in how to pronounce English words like an English native speaker at that time. Probably I had been interested in English pronunciation since I was a child when I liked to imitate English programs on TV. That is why I took the other way from other Japanese friends of mine, learning how to read phonetic sounds.

I also liked to imitate the former President Kennedy’s speech in English. When I was a high school student, I liked Kennedy who was the president in the United States around 1960s. I watched his speech once, and I took the video of the program of his speech and imitated some of what he said in English many times like every day. I kept watching the video of his speech

because he used such nice words in the speech. I think that I liked to imitate something very much because I had imitated a lot of things like animations since I was a young child. At that time when I was watching Kennedy's speech, I already knew how to pronounce English words like a native speaker, not like the Japanese, because I learned how to pronounce English for myself. However, I think that I learned more about how to pronounce English like an English native speaker through imitating Kennedy in his speech. Even though he did not say "I play the guitar" in his speech, I applied his pronunciations of English, such as how to pronounce "r" and "l", to other words or sentences of English that I learned at school or I knew. That is why I got to be used to pronouncing English words much more than before. The program where Kennedy's speech was had Japanese subtitles and I knew what he was talking about in his speech from the subtitles. For me, Japanese subtitles and his pronunciation of English were perfect ways to learn English. I watched his speech and imitated it over and over even after I graduated from high school, and now I think that that is one of the process to learn something, especially a language.

Then I went to Seattle, I had many things to do at first; however, I had a Japanese agency, which I called "international student help center", to talk to. They helped Japanese students with many things, such as problems of apartments, schools, and so on. That is why I was not very panicked even at the early times when I came to Seattle because I could talk with them about my problems.

When I arrived at Seattle at the age of about twenty years old, my English skills may not have been good enough to study in the university in the United States. I especially had many problems with the real English in the United States because I had never taken any special English education before coming here, just the English classes, such as reading and grammar lectures, in junior high school and high school in Japan. Even though I thought that my listening skills were already good when I was studying English after high school, it was not good enough

to listen to and understand lectures in English; however, I think that my pronunciation of English was already good enough and understandable so that other people could understand what I was saying at that time.

I also started to go to Seattle Community College, which was a two year's college and which was for the students who were going to transfer to a four year college. At first, I took ESL courses for three quarters, which were about nine months. When I entered the college, I got into the level four class of the ESL courses out of the six levels. Japanese students who came to the United States after their high school usually got into the level four in my college. The ESL course was my first communicative English classes which I took for the first time in my life. My teachers in those ESL classes were almost all English native speakers even though one of my teachers was originally from Korea. However, even she came to the United States when she was very young, so I think that she can also be considered as an English native speaker. The ESL classes in the college were very different from the classes that I had ever taken in Japan. In Japan, we, students, do not really have to speak in classes; however, I had to speak something in those ESL classes. In addition, my teachers were English native speakers and my classmates were international students from various countries, such as Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Russia and Turkey. That is why I had to speak English all the time to communicate with them in the classes. For me, communicating with my classmates in English was interesting even though there were misunderstandings between my international students friends and me because English was not a first language for both of us.

In my second semester, I started to take regular classes with those ESL classes in the college because I was at the level four then and students who were in the level four out of six levels could take regular classes in the community college. I think that I was taking some ESL classes and one regular class constantly. At that time, I did not have any exact majors because most of the students in the community college prepared to transfer to a four year university and

they did not decide their exact major in the community college yet. However, I decided to take political science as my major because I came to the United States to study the major, and that is why I was taking the classes as my regular classes. ESL classes that I had been taking so far were not very difficult for me, but those regular classes, which were for American students and which did not usually have many international students, were very hard for me because American students tended to speak very fast to me. Even though I tried to understand what my professors and my classmates in those regular classes were talking about, that was still tough for me.

I am not sure if my English skills improved while I was studying in Seattle; however, I tried to keep a diary and read some articles or newspapers written in English aloud every night in order to improve my English skills. Those things were what I was doing when I was in Japan before coming here to improve my English skills. I hope that doing those things helped my English skills improve better.

Then I came to Indiana University of Pennsylvania in the major of political science as a transfer student. I do not take any ESL classes here, just regular classes with American students. I do not have many classes with international students here, but most of the classes are similar to the ones in my previous college in Seattle. I do not think that I have many problems with English here because I overcame those English hardship when I was in Seattle. However, there are many difficult words, such as technical terms in my major, political science. Also, I have some problems with my ethnic background as well. That is because I have my background as Japanese, so when I have to talk about American history or American politics, something related to the United States, I feel that I have some disadvantage in my background because I learned about Japan, not about the United States, before I came to the United States. That is why I have some difficulties in studying in and for my classes, especially when I listen to my professors in my classes, when I study for exams, when I talk about or discuss my major issues

with my classmates, and so on. I do not think that those difficulties come from my English skills because I think that I already speak good English now. I have those difficulties because of my major, which has many difficult words, and also my background.

About my English use in the United States, when I was in Seattle, I spoke Japanese with my Japanese friends a lot, about fifty or sixty percent because there were many Japanese students who were studying at my college in Seattle. However, now I speak Japanese about thirty percent because there are not many Japanese students here at the university. I know that some Japanese students try to speak English even with their Japanese friends. I also sometimes tried to speak only English with my Japanese friends here; however, I ended up giving up doing so. I do not force myself to speak English with the Japanese students here any more now because it is difficult to continue. Also, that is because I do not have to be an English expert, and that is why I do not have to speak English all the time if I consider this activity uncomfortable. I want to be an expert in my major, political science, not in English. That was also my original goal to know about political science here in the United States, and I did not come here to the United States to know about English or to be an expert in English. I am satisfied with what I do and what I think here now.

I still have problems with my ethnical background when I talk with my American friends. I think that my English skills are good enough for me to talk with them; however, when the topics which we talk about are something about American society or culture, such as American movie and American music, I have no idea what I can talk in those topics. That is because I was raised around the society and culture of Japanese and surrounded by Japanese movie, Japanese music, and so on. That is why I feel some difficulties even when I talk with my friends, depending on the topics which we talk about. I think that language learning always comes with learning the culture or the history of the community in the language, and that is why I think that I need to learn those culture-related things about the United States more than the

language English itself now.

I think that my English will still keep improving while I stay here because I still have about ten months left here. However, just as I said before, my interest shifted from English itself to my major field, political science. That is why I want to learn more about political science, rather than improving my English skills.

I am going to graduate from the university here this December. After I graduate from here, I think that I will work for a little in the United States or in Japan to earn some money and also experiences of working. After I work somewhere for about a year, I want to go to graduate school to study more about political science.

I hope that I went through my participant's second language, English, learning experiences in this life story. Even though I had some difficult parts in understanding what he was talking about specifically, I tried to make them clear by asking him some questions sometimes. While I was interviewing him, he kept saying that he did not like English classes in his schools. That is why he decided to study English for himself while he was in the schools and after he graduated from his high school. He focused on English pronunciation by reading the texts aloud and imitating a speech of the President Kennedy in English. That is because he considered English as a communication tool and thought Japanese English pronunciation could not be considered as a tool that English native speakers could understand. He still keeps learning English in his style, and he says that it is effective for him to improve his English skills. He says that he will keep learning English in this way even after he graduate from the university here. However, he also says that he will not focus on learning just English because his original and current goal is to learn more about his major field, political science. Rather than saying that being an expert in English is the goal of learning English, he thinks that the ability to communicate in English may be used as a media in achieving another goal. He hopes that he will improve his knowledge about political science rather than English itself now.