

PARADOX LOST: WAYS TO IMPROVE STUDENTS' CONFIDENCE IN LEARNING ENGLISH

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Abstract

Many Japanese students encounter paradoxical situations in learning English. The more they learn by studying English textbooks, the more they may lose confidence in using English. Along with their loss of confidence, many come to hate English. Such negative spirals, however, are avoidable. Ideally, the more students learn to use English appropriately, the more their confidence should grow. This paper considers the reasons why Japanese students frequently lose confidence when learning from English textbooks. Typically, they may be afraid of making errors in writing but are even more afraid of making mistakes in speaking. Errors and odd expressions in English usage are too commonly found in English textbooks and in hospital English brochures in Japan. For example, one actual Japanese hospital brochure advises medical staff to ask an English-speaking patient, "What's wrong with you?" What is wrong here is the suggestion of such a negative expression. How can Japanese or other language speakers learn to use appropriate English with some degree of success and satisfaction? In this paper, several ways to improve students' confidence in learning and using English are suggested along with examples.

1 Introduction

English education in Japan often fails to improve students' English because, according to Yamada (2005), the system does not acknowledge the widespread belief of many students that they simply do not need English. At the root of the problem is a paradox: the official dream of "internationalization (globalization), bilingual, and native speakers" remains at odds with the reality of a general lack of motivation to learn English (Yamada, 2005). The Japanese government has been devising strategies and goals for English education in successive waves of high-minded efforts at reform since the end of the Second World War, but the unpleasant reality remains that Japanese students of virtually all ages still struggle to acquire the most basic English abilities in writing, reading, listening, and speaking.

Shimizu (2010) describes this paradoxical situation of English learning in Japan: "In 1945, after Japan's defeat, and with the American occupation, the practical value of English increased and English became extremely popular once more. English words became a familiar sight. They appeared on street signs, and many Japanese competed to learn the language" (Shimizu, 2010, p. 10). In contemporary Japan, however, despite decades of effort on the part of teachers and students, as Shimizu (2010) notes, it is still fairly common to find English signs in public spaces and streets, written with grammatical errors that border on the comic. Consider, for example, a prefectural park sign with questionable grammar (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. A prefectural park sign: “Kind to people”

The sign says, “Kind to people” in a gesture meant to convey a heartwarming message. Grammatically, of course it should have said, “Be kind to people” or “Be kind to one another.” While the grammatical omission of “Be” may be relatively harmless and might even have an innocent charm, the error nonetheless suggests that something else is missing on the part of those who wrote and approved the sign.

Consider another example. On the roadways of Japan, trucks may be seen with English phrases painted on the side or back surfaces. (See Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. English phrase on a truck on a Japanese roadway

The English phrase on the truck in Fig. 2 says, “Carry the excitement and dreams.” As long as we do not know what the truck is carrying, the English phrase seems innocuous enough, even vaguely uplifting. Once we see, however, that the Japanese-language sign on the lower right-side says “Danger” in large yellow characters because the truck is transporting a heavy load of gasoline, our response to the cheerfully optimistic phrase may suddenly change to deep unease about worst-case possibilities—for example, if the truck were ever involved in a roadway accident.

The example in Fig. 2, of course, involves English used for design purposes, with unintended effects in this case. By contrast, daily communication does not require “perfect English” in speaking or writing. Nevertheless, if the chosen English is not sufficiently clear or not sensitive to immediate context, serious problems may arise, particularly in the real-life interactions that occur in such places as hospitals, as will be considered later in this paper. Failures of communicative clarity in English are common in the foreign-language classroom in Japan, particularly when instruction focuses on grammatical correctness. Too often, for the sake of preparing for grammar-based entrance exams, Japanese students are tasked with reading and listening to excessively “refined” nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century English prose that is elevated far above the level of discourse found in daily life. Unsurprisingly, repeated exposure to such high-level English confuses and intimidates many students, demotivating them from learning English beyond such instrumental purposes as

passing entrance exams. To ameliorate such problems, this paper examines several alternative ways to encourage students to learn English with confidence and sense of progress. The purpose of this paper is to suggest educational methods that support students' self-efficacy in English language acquisition.

1.1 The edges of innocence and ignorance

Practically speaking, for most Japanese living their lives in Japan, there is no urgent need to learn any foreign language, including English, which means that motivation for language learning tends to be low. Out of curiosity, Japanese students sometimes innocently use inappropriate English acquired from textbooks and brochures published in Japan that include outdated or ill-advised English expressions and phrases. Unsurprisingly, many students fail to acquire good judgment of what is appropriate or not to say in English, even if, as many Japanese students do, they continuously study English for eight years starting in late elementary school. When students use inappropriate English phrases, some of their utterances are unintentionally laughable.

Unfortunately, innocently chosen but unclear English may cause serious problems in social interactions. For example, consider what might happen when a Japanese doctor or nurse uses a carelessly worded English phrase from a bilingual textbook or brochure to ask an English patient, "What's wrong with you today?" (See Fig. 3.) While grammatically correct, the question is sociolinguistically inappropriate because it has a blunt, almost accusatory tone that may strike an English speaker as unfriendly, as if to imply that the patient has a series of psychological disorders or moral failings. (The Japanese version of the same question does not carry such negative connotations.)

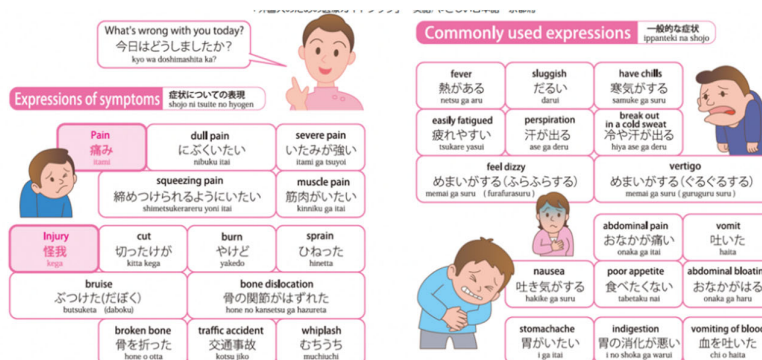


Fig. 3. Medical guidebook for foreigners

The brochure in Fig. 3 is the bilingual "Medical Guidebook for Foreigners" [*Gaikokujin no Tameno Gaidobukku*] published by Kyoto Prefecture. It is generally quite helpful in providing medical phrases in both easy English and easy Japanese. If an English patient is, as it were, "patient" enough to understand the English educational background of many Japanese (as most foreign language teachers should), the patient might infer that the intended purpose of the question "What's wrong with you today?" is an opening gambit on the order of "How are you feeling?", "What's the matter?", and "How may I help you?" rather than an implied question of one's personal integrity. The patient could then continue the dialogue with the doctor or nurse without giving the question any more thought. On the other hand, what could happen if the patient has recently arrived in Japan and does not understand the English educational background of most Japanese people? The patient might take offense at such a question as, "What's wrong with you today?" and the dialogue could spiral downward. The unintended outcomes of this sociolinguistically clumsy question might be needless misunderstanding, hurt feelings, a breakdown in communication, and a waste of time for all involved.

1.2 Acquiring the sense of judgment

What can English teachers in Japan do to help students understand what English expressions are appropriate and what are not? One way is to search for and collect such improper phrases to use in a discussion class. If students discuss what is wrong with such improper phrases, they might be able to acquire an ability to judge what is helpful and what is not helpful to use in English communication, and gradually they might also obtain a sense of judgment by themselves in the learning process. If, for example, students create an English game called “What’s wrong in the phrase?” supported with drawn pictures, they might start to attend better to problematic grammar and usage (and possibly enjoy doing so) without having such matters pointed out by their instructors.

1.3 Visual activities

No one’s speech is perfect, but most of us would like to make ourselves clearly understood in such situations as the hospital dialogue mentioned earlier. We might wonder how is it possible to avoid such misunderstandings not only in the hospital but in any number of other situations. As Fig. 3 shows, certain physical conditions can be illustrated with pictures, and such visual communication supports a successful medical dialogue. If medical professionals create human body shape stamps as shown in Fig. 4, they can ask any patients, “Where does it hurt now?” By eliminating the potentially uncomfortable “you” in the question and changing the referent to a less personal “it” which patients mark anywhere they feel pain, both the medical professional and the patient can communicate without much language. Both partners in the medical dialogue do not have to use perfect English to communicate. Medical professionals need to identify the locations in the patient’s body where pain or discomfort is felt, rather than determine a sense of “wrongness.” To this end, visual images can be used to avoid miscommunications that make the patient uncomfortable when such verbal issues lead to maladaptive ontological dichotomies, or, a bit more simply, to paradoxes of inappropriately chosen words.

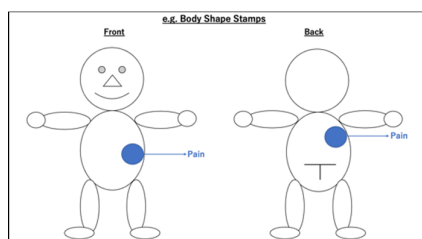


Fig. 4. Body shape stamps

Japanese students are generally good at drawing pictures. They like to doodle in their textbooks and on handouts teachers give them in class. They can draw cartoons to show what they want to say visually, providing extralinguistic support for successful communication.

2 Not “refined” but “readable”

Speaking or writing in “perfect English,” even if it can be imagined in theory, is seldom possible in practice and for that reason is not desirable to aim for. If it were nonetheless somehow possible, what would “perfect English” mean? Many Japanese students suffer linguistic paralysis out of fear that they cannot speak or write “perfect English.” In fact, though, they do not know what “perfect English” is, even while they say they want to speak or write in “perfect English.” Paradoxically they get lost in learning *about* English in a vain effort to track down the ever elusive “perfect English” which does not exist anyway, rather than focus on learning to *use* English for simple and clear communication.

Making matters worse for English learners, Japan is home to many self-appointed authorities who might be called “Masters of English.” (This is a made-up term by the author of this paper.) It refers to English education experts—nearly always native Japanese—who style themselves as exemplary models of advanced English skills. A rough equivalent of “Master of English” in Japanese is *Eigo-tsu* (English expert), which appears in Saito (2017). Masters of English tend to create “English myths” or “English legends” based on the purported superiority of Meiji-era English, (i.e., late nineteenth-century English prose or similarly grand and elevated styles). The effect, if not the purpose, is to confuse students about the value of clear communicative English.

(As a historical side note, the Meiji era—1868 to 1912—was the beginning of modern Japan, when the country rapidly modernized by acquiring advanced technology and by importing and imitating social models and fashions from Europe and North America. The period also saw the rise of the Japanese Empire.)

Returning to the main discussion, the aforementioned Masters of English typically require Japanese students to scrutinize the grammar of outdated English texts and prove their own “mastery” by translating such texts that they may not even understand into Japanese. Masters of English tend to believe that written Victorian English (or similar prose in a rich and smoky style from an imagined “golden age”) is qualitatively better than contemporary English and is somehow “good” for students because it challenges them to strive beyond the limits of English in their own time.

Moreover, Masters of English tend to prefer having students translate difficult foreign texts into Japanese, in keeping with the language-learning approach known as the grammar-translation method that was favored in Meiji-era Japan. Communication in that time was almost entirely one-way, from the foreign language into Japanese, in order to gain foreign knowledge while discouraging communication by ordinary Japanese with the world outside. Meiji-era language instruction *about* English may have served the nation’s purposes in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when Japan was trying to catch up rapidly with the rest of the world. In the contemporary world with a globally interconnected economy in the twenty-first century, however, Japanese people need to be able to engage in two-way communication with people in other countries, making knowledge of how to *use* English the new prime directive.

While high-level English is certainly suitable for advanced EAP literature courses, few sensible educators would argue that Victorian English and Meiji-era language-learning methods are appropriate for general EFL students who are already struggling to learn to read, write, listen, and speak English as it is used in the modern world. Nevertheless, the influence of “Masters of English” persists, as considered in the next section.

2.1 A misguided idea of using nineteenth-century English in modern English learning

A notable Master of English, Saito (2017), still asks students to make a close study of nineteenth-century texts—for example, the writing of the Scottish writer Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881). Carlyle wrote fine English prose before and during the Victorian era, and his works are perfectly suitable reading for advanced EFL students majoring in literature and philosophy. Having general students of English dissect and translate English written in a grand nineteenth-century style, however, is another matter. Masters of English nevertheless generally endorse such efforts, as shown in the following prose sample that Saito (2017) praises and uses himself to test students’ reading ability. The passage comes from the opening of Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus*:

Considering our present advanced state of culture, and how the Torch of Science has now been brandished and borne about, with more or less effect, for five-thousand

years and upwards; how, in these times especially, not only the Torch still burns, and perhaps more fiercely than ever, but innumerable Rush-lights, and Sulphur-matches, kindled thereat, are also glancing in every direction, so that not the smallest cranny or doghole in Nature or Art can remain unilluminated, — it might strike the reflective mind with some surprise that hitherto little or nothing of a fundamental character, whether in the way of Philosophy or History, has been written on the subject of Clothes. (Saito, 2017, p. 5)

Saito (2017) allows students to consult a Japanese translation he provides if they “frown” while reading the first two or three lines. (Nevertheless, the Japanese translation may also “wrinkle our eyebrows,” to use one of Saito’s curious and probably self-coined phrases.) He considers himself a special type of reader, an *Eigo-tsu* (English expert), who can peruse complex English prose without difficulty. His aim, evidently, is to duplicate himself by producing students who can perform the same feat themselves.

Among several problems here, Saito (2017) provides no context before or after the Carlyle passage and gives no explanation that the text was written in 1831, a few years prior to the beginning of the Victorian era. Saito (2017) does not even provide vocabulary notes, forcing students to guess the meanings of such metaphorically-used terms as “Torch of Science” and “Rush-lights,” which are not likely to be part of students’ prior knowledge and experience. Saito (2017) also fails to translate the Latin title of *Sartor Resartus*, which means “The Tailor Re-tailored,” potentially useful information when considering that the passage ends with a mention of clothes. Possibly even worse, Saito (2017) does not clarify his purpose in citing the passage, which is simply presented in isolation. Students may be tasked with answering questions about English grammar found in the passage, but mercifully their comprehension is not tested. The passage might provide an occasion for discussing whether nineteenth-century English is suitable for developing communication skills in contemporary English, but such a discussion would likely not get very far.

2.2 A false idea of using Meiji-era English in communication

Another problem with Saito (2017) is that he openly admires Meiji-era “Masters of English,” claiming that “there used to be *Eigo-tsu* [Masters of English] in Japan” (Saito, 2017, p. i). Notably, he uses the past tense, “used to be,” as if to imply that there are no longer such “Masters of English” in Japan today (with himself, possibly, as an exception). Praising Meiji-era English for promoting learning *about* English, however, does not necessarily improve students’ skills for learning to *use* English. Instead, students would be more likely to feel a loss of confidence by having to confront texts composed in the distant past of “pre-war English” (i.e., English before the historical dividing line of the Second World War) that are held up as models of “refined” English prose. Nevertheless, consider another prose sample which Saito (2017) presents as admirably “refined,” though this time he offers some context. He considers it a test of who can comprehend such dense prose at a glance. Here the prose selection is from *Bushido, the Soul of Japan* by Inazo Nitobe (1862-1933), a Meiji-era Japanese writer whom Saito (2017) admires as a great “Master of English”:

The discipline of fortitude on the one hand, inculcating endurance without a groan, and the teaching of politeness on the other, requiring us not to mar the pleasure or serenity of another by expressions of our own sorrow or pain, combined to engender a stoical turn of mind, and eventually to confirm it into a national trait of apparent stoicism. I say apparent stoicism, because I do not believe that true stoicism can ever become the characteristic of a whole nation, and also because some of our national manners and customs may seem to a foreign observer hard-hearted. Yet we are really as susceptible to tender emotion as any race under the sky. (Saito, 2017, p. 6)

This stately, elegant prose is certainly suited to expressing the complex thinking that it

develops. The question, though, is whether general students of EFL in Japan should have to struggle with such high levels of English discourse, especially if all they are asked to do with it is take a grammar test or translate it into Japanese.

There is another question about this passage in relation to its author. According to Saito (2017), the British writer H. G. Wells (Herbert George Wells, 1866-1946) criticized Nitobe's *Bushido* for inconsistencies in its discussion of supposedly "stoical" Japanese traits. Nitobe responded to Wells, saying, "I thank Mr. Wells for his enlightening interpretation, since I wrote the book when I was young" (Saito, 2017, p. 23). Nitobe's response seems half-hearted, offering considerable deference to Wells. We might wonder, if Nitobe were a true "Master of English," why would he not defend his writing by rebutting Wells's criticism?

This anecdote shows how even Japanese Masters of English may fall short in communication skills, despite the fact that they can read and write sophisticated English at a high level of proficiency. Saito (2017) admired Nitobe's muted response to Wells, calling it "satisfying." However, what might students say about Nitobe (and about Saito, for that matter) if it were possible to speak forthrightly? Instead of being forced to read Meiji-era prose and merely translate it into Japanese, students might be better served if they were allowed to develop their own opinions by considering whether such prose content and style are appropriate for their growth in critical thinking and English communication. Such freedom might promote the interest of learning to use English rather than merely learning about it. Ideally, instructors could give students more freedom to choose what is helpful for their English learning and bypass the usual default mode in which instructors select all the readings and activities and expect students to conform to time-worn practices of learning that have not served most students well.

3 The variety of tests in Japan

Currently the most common way to measure Japanese students' levels of English skills is through exams available in Japan, such international standardized tests as TOEIC and TOEFL, and a commonly used local test, *Eiken*, an English proficiency exam produced by the Eiken Foundation of Japan. It is self-evident that such tests measure students' test-taking skills. Whether such tests provide an accurate picture of students' true abilities in English is another question. The answer may depend, in part, on which tests students choose to take. Sugawara (2011) analyzes the major standardized English tests and the confusion surrounding them in Japan, saying, "There seems misunderstanding is going on that English communication ability can be measured by obtaining high scores by English tests" (Sugawara, 2011, p. 6). Many Japanese people hold an almost obsessive conviction that such tests somehow "give" them English abilities, as if by magic, as long as they keep studying for the tests.

The problem is the old paradox: Such students are studying about English instead of using English in daily life. In addition, they study for the test alone most of the time. Thus, they are not communicating while they are studying for the tests. As Shirai (2011) contends, the ways that students learn depends on the ways that instructors teach (Shirai, 2011, p. 9). Shirai also suggests that, not surprisingly, students' motivation rises if their experiences of learning are positive (Shirai, 2011, p. 20). Indeed, if students do not have positive feelings toward using English, they will never be able to acquire true English abilities simply by taking tests repeatedly.

3.1 Turning tests into games

Few people want to take tests, but there are times when doing so is unavoidable. A change of attitude toward tests may be possible by turning some language learning activities into games. For example, "fill-in the blank" English tests can be practiced by a luggage activity that originated as a party game called Mad Libs. Virtually any readings or stories can be turned

into Mad Libs games. In a Mad Lib, students are asked to supply examples of various parts of speech, the more imaginative and wilder the better. Then the words are put into a previously chosen text, in the blanks for the student-generated words. If an “improper” word goes into a blank part of the text, the sentence can be quite laughable for students. By playing such games, students gradually acquire guessing abilities to choose the right words or phrases in English communication. (They also get a considerable grammar review of the parts of speech.) Instead of being shamed by their mistakes, they are happy to make mistakes in rounds of games like Mad Libs because they know or can infer the “right” answers and already have the ability to judge what is suitable. If students do not feel shame at making mistakes, they may come to understand the power of mistakes to teach valuable lessons that “correct” answers less commonly provide. Even better, the students’ choices and actions can develop into self-efficacy, i.e., the confidence to make steady self-improvements. Such positive feedback and thinking are likely to contribute to better attitudes toward learning to use English for real communication.

4 Laughing English

For many students, one of the best ways to learn English is to lose oneself, often to the point of laughter, in reading books that are accessible, entertaining, and supported by good visuals, as well as by watching or listening to films or talk shows which students have a voice in choosing. Moreover, a good way to measure students’ growth in English ability could simply be whether they can laugh in English. Laughter means that students comprehend at a fairly high level and have obtained abilities to understand the content of English activities.

For example, in an English reading class at the nursing college where the author works, students produced “Nurse, nurse!” joke posters for Halloween by adopting phrases for physical conditions in the medical textbook. There were twenty-five groups of four (it was a large class) and each group had to choose one Halloween character such as a vampire or a ghost. Altogether, twenty-five character posters were produced. Each character goes to a hospital or clinic to ask a nurse what to do for each physical condition. All students were smiling and laughing in groups that had created fantastic posters and responded with life and humor to the characters’ physical problems. Of course, the students did not use the phrase mentioned earlier in this paper, “What’s wrong with you?” Instead, they wrote “How may I help you?” Consequently, as their teacher I feel optimistic about these students’ increasingly positive attitudes toward learning to use English. Moreover, I feel confident that it would be safe for me to visit a hospital or clinic where those students might work as nurses one day.

In conclusion, students can increase their motivation to learn to use English for real communication; they can also lower or eliminate their socially conditioned anxieties about making mistakes in English. They can do all this, often at the same time, by losing themselves in activities that they have some power to choose, activities that are inherently enjoyable, sociable, interactive, even fun. In short, effective language learning involves organizing student activities so that students learn English as a byproduct of doing something else. In a paradox that turns back on itself, this may be the final meaning of “paradox lost”: We are seeing the decline of old models of language learning like grammar-translation that served an earlier time and have persisted in Japan through cultural lag. At the same time, we welcome the rise of new models that support the interaction and engagement of learners in a world that, more than ever, needs people who can communicate clearly and connect effectively for the greater good of all.

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