

The LLL SIG Newsletter

How I studied English in Japanese schools

Tadashi Ishida

As I am one of the older learners of English, maybe you might be interested to know how I studied English in the Japanese education system. I hope this article will help you when you teach English to older learners.

In short, I was a victim of the way English used to be taught in schools.

During the Second World War, the study of English was de-emphasized because it was the language of an enemy nation. Therefore, many English teachers received draft cards and were killed in battle.

But after the war, the Japanese people were suddenly asked to change their attitudes towards the learning of English because Japan was under the American occupation. Since there were not enough qualified English teachers available, many unqualified teachers were asked to take upon themselves the task of teaching English. There were even math teachers among them.

Thus, in many cases, I was taught English by teachers who were not comfortable with the language.

Furthermore, I was taught English under the exam-oriented Japanese education system. I studied English as if it were an ordinary school subject to be tested instead of a social activity. I was trained by my school experiences to feel that learning was only worthwhile if it was assigned, tested and approved by a teacher.

Teachers were given great respect in Japanese society and expressing disagreement with them was felt to be impolite. Passiveness on the part of students was emphasized in Japanese education. Although teachers asked

their students questions, the students rarely asked the teachers a question.

I devoted my energy to doing what I thought my teachers wanted me to do rather than to learning English. Therefore, instead of seeing English as something I could and must learn by myself with the help of the teacher, I saw it as something that was the teacher's job to teach me.

I came to feel that English was something to be read aloud in the classroom if I was called on, and that it was not something to be used outside the classroom in the real world. My teachers never told me that English should be a medium of communication. In other words, I was not required to use English to satisfy my needs in the real world.

Teachers emphasized grammar and translation instead of speaking and listening. This method led me to think of speaking English as a matter of memorization, and translation of words.

In fact, I used this grammar translation method when I tried to practice speaking English with the other members of the English Speaking Society (ESS) in college. I translated sentences from Japanese to English in order to communicate with the other members. Naturally I got very tired.

I gradually noticed that this grammar translation method did not allow for creativity in using English. Simply translating sentences from Japanese to English did not help me very much to learn how to use English, nor did memorizing.