

The LLL SIG Newsletter

Why I Should Develop My English Personality

Tadashi Ishida

Several years after graduating from college, I began to work as a director of a non-profit organization for international student exchange programs.

I visited several American high schools and found out why I should develop my English personality.

Unlike Japanese schools, teachers often tried to establish a feeling of equality with their students. I observed an American history class where creative thinking and reasoning were emphasized.

Such things never happened in my Japanese history class where memorization and rote learning were emphasized.

Students were encouraged to ask questions and to challenge the statements made by the teacher or a classmate. The teacher told me that students often got opportunities to practice discussion, debate and public speaking. He continued that expressing opinion was as important as getting a right answer. He also told me that one of the aims of education was to help students to learn to express themselves well.

Here I learned that I should expend a lot of effort trying to explain myself and my ideas when I tried to communicate with Americans. I realized that I should develop my English personality to some extent in order to learn to use English.

Now, let me discuss some Japanese social factors which made it difficult for me to develop my English personality. These social factors are part of the society which I am born into.

Japan is a homogeneous, vertical society where the emphasis is on loyalty to

higher-ups whether they are in a school or company. This means people have great respect towards authority of all kinds including teachers.

Since Japan is such a homogeneous society, Japanese do not feel such a need to try to understand each other. Rather, they try to avoid conflict or uncomfortable social situations. In other words, they value harmony and respect for others in interpersonal relations.

Because of this consideration for the feelings of others, what people say is determined by whom they are talking to. Considerations may include their relative ages and positions in society or the workplace, and the situation.

There is a feeling that silence is golden and a person who speaks too much may be mistrusted. It is felt that a person should not show off his talents. They value self-restraint, indirectness and modesty. Therefore, listening politely to others is more emphasized than self-expression in Japanese society.

Schools are the mirror of society. There are few courses in communication or public speaking.

Now, I think that the things mentioned above sum up very well the factors which inhibited me from developing English personality when I tried to communicate with Americans.