

Milestones of a Life in Teaching

Michihiro Hirai

Having worked as a computer hardware design engineer for a major manufacturing company for about 33 years and then having taught technical English for close to 20 years, I consider myself a sort of amphibian. Meanwhile, being a native speaker of Japanese, I have been struggling with English since junior high school and am thus indeed a life-long learner of English. From this background, I have developed a three-dimensional perspective of English, having the learner, user, and teacher axes. In me, these three aspects of language have been evolving in a symbiotic manner by intricately influencing each other. To help you better understand what I mean, I would like to share my story with you.

Upon graduating from the faculty of engineering of a national university in 1965, I joined Hitachi, Ltd., starting my first career as a mainframe design engineer. The demanding work at the factory drained me of energy day after day, night after night. Then came a turning point seven years later: I was sent to the University of Pennsylvania (UP) by the company to further my study of computer science for one year. I took full advantage of this opportunity also to improve my English skills, by deliberately staying away from the Japanese language and people.

Several years later, this study abroad experience served as a door opener in my career. As luck had it, I was assigned to a computer export project in 1976, which then kept me exposed to an on-the-job English-speaking environment for more than 20 years. While attending meetings and conferences and making frequent overseas business trips, I paid attention to how English is used in real-life situations and collected useful phrases. While reading magazine articles and manuals, I picked up snappy expressions and

committed them to memory. While translating papers or proofing translations done by colleagues as well as translation agencies, I compiled typical mistakes into a database. I have indeed been a heavy-duty user of English and at the same time a diligent learner of English.

Meanwhile I married a Polish girl who happened to be teaching English in her alma mater. So, English was a natural choice of language for our daily communication, which has allowed me to keep and further enhance my language skills, as I have often needed to explain to her in English what's going on in this country. I certainly owe her immense credit for it.

When I turned 49, I felt like I had hit a “ceiling” as an engineer in a huge organization and harbored the idea of making a career switch. At the same time, to be taken seriously in the language teaching community in the future, I began to work hard on getting as many English qualifications as possible. Further, I made my desire known to the management and luckily, several years later, was given the chance of running a language school inside the company. Whereas I had taught technical English to my fellow engineers while I was still working at the factory, this transfer marked the official launch of my teaching career. After spending four years there, I was fortunate enough to be hired by a private university as a non-tenured (tokunin) professor of English for Specific Purposes (ESP). By that time, I had amassed 30 top-grade qualifications in English, which, combined with the Master of Science in Engineering (MSE) degree I had earned at the UP, turned out to be a major help in landing this challenging job.

While teaching at this university and subsequently at other universities and companies, I have been making a point of bringing some added value, i.e., as much practical usefulness as possible into my classes by capitalizing on my dual background. My decades-long effort of compiling weaknesses of Japanese learners of practical

English (as touched on earlier) has thus borne fruit, not only in teaching ESP courses but also in publishing several self-study books on topics such as presentations, meetings, and reading comprehension. Incidentally, teaching and writing have come hand in hand to me: the teaching experience has provided some valuable input to book writing, while I have also developed a few courses using the books I wrote. Furthermore, the number of English qualifications I have collected seems to have been lending some credibility – at least among Japanese learners of English – to what I do.

To write self-study books that will be accepted by as wide an audience as possible in a shrinking publication market, it is crucial to stand out in competition by bringing something new and valuable. One way of accomplishing this, especially in language education, is to compile as many real-life examples (both mistakes and models) as possible, boil them down to a condensed set of common archetypes, and then present the crystalized knowledge in an easy to comprehend format. This process is similar to the way value is created through condensation (purification) in physics and chemistry. In fact, most advance materials used in industry are the fruit of condensation.

During the course of teaching practice, I have come to realize one of my weaknesses: I tend to focus unconsciously on high-level students, not paying due attention to how low- or average-level students are struggling, which comes partly from my lack of formal training as a language teacher. I have also noticed non-trivial changes in language teaching in recent years, such as a general deterioration in the academic ability and diligence of young students, a proliferation of digital/cyber platforms and tools for language learning, and an advent of new teaching theories and methods such as scaffolding and active learning. We as language teachers need to adapt to such changes and trends.

In sum, the three actions associated with language, namely, learn, use, and teach, have been constructively intertwined in me over the past 60+ years. My life-long efforts of compilation and condensation (as a learner) have helped me to hone my English skills (as a user) in real-life work situations, and this experience as an engineer has turned out to be a valuable asset in teaching ESP and publishing study materials in ESP (as a teacher). A message for future teachers of ESP? Nurture some expertise in the subject field, preferably by getting some experience in an actual job setting, on top of or apart from language teaching.

Michihiro Hirai's Biography

Michihiro Hirai graduated from the Faculty of Engineering, the University of Tokyo in 1965 and received a Master of Science degree from the University of Pennsylvania in 1972. He worked as a mainframe computer design engineer for Hitachi, Ltd. for 33 years and as Director, the Hitachi Institute of Foreign Languages for 4 years. He taught technical English at the Faculty of Science, Kanagawa University from 2003 to 2017, the Faculty of Science and Engineering, Waseda University from 2009 to 2012, and the Open University of Japan from 2011 to 2013 and has also been teaching technical English at a Japanese manufacturing company since 2007. In addition, he served as a consultant to the Eiken Foundation of Japan etc. for more than 10 years, while also working as a freelance JE/EJ translator for 43 years on a part-time basis.

He is a certified Professional Engineer in IT and holds a Japanese record of the most (50) top grades in English tests (certified by NIPPON-1.NET at <http://www.nippon-1.net/>). His publications include 『速く正確に読む IT エンジニアの英語』, 『エンジニアのための英文超克服テキスト』, 『エンジニアのための英語

プレゼンテーション超克服テキスト』, and 『はじめての STEP BULATS』 (translation of *Essential BULATS*). His research interests include materials writing and testing.