

English and a 92-year-old Student

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My oldest student is a 92-year-old man, who I'll call Mr. Heiwa. When I first met him in 2018, I conducted an extended interview with him about how he had learned English.

Mr. Heiwa was born in Tokyo in 1929. He started studying English in middle school during the Second World War. However, the study of the language was soon forbidden because it was the language of the enemy. Most Japanese English teachers were drafted into the military, and many of them were called to the front lines and killed in battle. When his young English teacher received his draft card, he played the violin for his students at the end of his last class. Sadly, he was killed in battle three months later. So, Mr. Heiwa had no one to teach him English, and he could no longer study the language.

Mr. Heiwa was 16 years old when the Second World War ended in 1945. When the country came under American occupation, the Japanese were suddenly asked to change their attitude towards the learning of English. So, he started studying the language again during high school. However, since most of the country's English teachers had been killed in during the war, there were no longer enough with the proper skills. So instead, students were taught English by teachers of other subjects such as mathematics and music, who in many cases were not good at foreign language teaching.

Like most Japanese students of that period, Mr. Heiwa was taught English by unqualified teachers with the primary goal of passing university entrance exams. He studied it as if English were an ordinary school subject to be tested instead of a social activity. Mr. Heiwa came to believe that English was something to be read aloud in the classroom if he was called on, and that it was not something to be used outside the classroom in the real world. His English teachers never told him that English could be used as a medium of communication. In other words, he was never asked to use English to interact with foreigners in everyday life. While he was

in college, teachers continued emphasizing grammar and translation instead of speaking and listening.

After he told me how he had learned English, I asked him why he wanted to study English again. He told me that it was because the Olympic Games would be held in Tokyo in 2020, and he wanted to help visitors from abroad who would visit old neighborhoods in Tokyo like his. He was old enough to know the history and culture of the area where he lived, and he wanted to be able to share his knowledge with these tourists.

When I started teaching Mr. Heiwa, I suggested that he could only learn to speak English if he got hours and hours of exposure to real communicative situations. He could become a good user of English only through practice and study outside the classroom.

I started by teaching Mr. Heiwa some basic principles that tour guides use when interacting with foreigners in English. These tips cover how to help a visitor from abroad, how to meet or decline a visitor's request, and how to avoid taboo subjects.

Then I asked Mr. Heiwa to join an educational organization whose members serve as ambassadors to visitors from abroad by telling them about Japanese culture and customs. This organization would give him an opportunity to interact with foreigners in English. He soon became the leader of the organization's calligraphy club, drawing on his experience as a calligraphy teacher when he was young.

Through the organization's activities, Mr. Heiwa met visitors from abroad at hotels in the downtown area of Tokyo. He taught them how to write their names in Chinese characters. He also explained the meaning of the characters used. Through such activities, he was able to develop his ability to communicate in English.

After the calligraphy class, Mr. Heiwa went out with the visitors to show them around to help them learn about the area and its history. This provided him with the chance to use English whenever he gave a tour. And the reinforcement helped him retain what he had learned and honed his ability to express himself.

As we get older, our nerve cells die day by day, and our memory begins to fail if we don't use our brains. In short, if you don't use it, you lose it. I think the study of spoken English slowed

down Mr. Heiwa's aging process.

Unfortunately, at the beginning of the pandemic, an 81-year-old student in our class died from the coronavirus on April 23, 2020. Mr. Heiwa was so shocked that he stopped participating in the educational organization's activities. I think there were two main reasons. First, the coronavirus terrified him so much that he was afraid to go out and meet people. In addition, the pandemic made international travel so difficult that there were almost no visitors from abroad, and he no longer had the opportunity to interact with foreigners in English.

For a while, I lost touch with Mr. Heiwa, but one day his daughter called to let me know that he was in the hospital and was about to have a cancer operation even though he was 92 years old. Three days later, she called me again to say that the surgery had been a success. Mr. Heiwa was back at home recovering and listening to NHK English radio programs every morning. I hope to see him again soon.