

WHAT MAKES YOU SO SPECIAL?

A survey on the development of English skills among Japanese teachers of English

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We can safely assume that any Japanese English teacher who participates in English online forums, attends English-based language conferences, and any such person who publishes in English based media is both proficient, and has a high degree of interest in, English. But how did they get that way? Why do some Japanese develop proficiency while others never get past the level of false beginner?

Between mid-2006 and late 2007 the author surveyed a total of 88 such Japanese English teachers to see if there was any common factor as to how, when and why they developed such a degree of competency in English. The survey was self-made and designed with numerous question-types in the hope that patterns indicating why or how these proficient English speakers became skilled. Respondents were recruited at academic conferences, through language associations and their related media, and online interactive forums—all English-based and all in Japan. More than half (51) were completed as email attachments, the rest as hard copy. The survey itself can be seen at the end of the bottom of this article. The results of the survey are presented below with brief interpretations and discussions of some of the more significant items provided. Detailed statistical analysis of the results has not yet been performed, thus the raw data presented below is at a preliminary stage. Commentary based upon this raw data should be noted with this in mind.

The survey consisted of a) two preliminary questions and b) eleven content questions. These are presented and also briefly discussed in order

below. The number on the right represents the number of respondents for each response.

a) Preliminary questions-

1. Age group of respondents:

Under age 30: 8

Aged 30-39: 49

Aged 40-49: 25

Aged 50 or older: 16

2. Current teaching position or status:

non-teachers (translators, journalists etc.) 15

university 17

high school 13

private 8

juku (cram school) 9,

junior college or vocational school 16,

junior high school 10,

elementary school 7,

others 3

(*some respondents hold dual positions so some responses were duplicated).

The responses to these two preliminary questions seem to indicate a reasonably wide and balanced sample range in terms of age and teaching environment.

b) Content questions-

1. Special exposure to English before junior high school:

Yes 27

No 57.

If yes, what? Most common responses: Cram school (juku) 11, conversation school 8.

Commentary: Only five respondents noted experience abroad, and only three noted English-speaking friends and/or associates. It is notable that almost 70% of respondents did not have any special exposure to English during their formative, childhood years.

2.Special exposure during junior or senior high school:

Yes: 36

No: 49.

If yes what: Most common responses- juku: 13, conversation school: 13, foreign travel and/or experiences abroad: 11.

Commentary: A majority of respondents still note having no special exposure to English through senior high school. We can assume that these respondents had participated in standardized English education curriculum up to that point and did not have any environmental or experiential advantage in the development of their English skills.

3.Ranking of influences in the development of English skills (based on a Likert scale of 1 [little or none] to 5 [extreme], with not applicable [NA] also listed as an option).

All responses below are given in averages based on a 5.0 maximum.

Grammar-based lessons at school: 4:1 (NA for 1 respondent)

Communication-based lessons at school: 1.8 (NA: 35)

Eikaiwa (Conversation school): 2.2 (NA: 50)

Foreign friends, colleagues, and associates: 4.2 (NA: 9)

Peer study and interaction in Japan: 1.7 (NA: 18)

Foreign travel: 3.4 (NA: 10)

Reading (for interest/pleasure): 4.3 (NA: 0)

Listening (for interest/pleasure) 4.1 (NA: 1)

Study/living abroad: 3.9 (NA: 31)

Special professional training: 3.8 (NA: 32)

Commentary: The relatively low ranking of both communication-based lessons and Eikaiwa school lessons is notable here. Peer interaction also scored low. It is notable that the responses with the highest average tend to be solo study endeavors. Would these respondents have developed even better English skills if they had utilized peers and more interactive settings better? Perhaps these responses reflect not so much the utility of communicative lessons but a lack of access to them. Or perhaps they are simply not as important to English skill development as teachers might normally assume.

4.Ranking of factors in development of skills (*16 of 82 respondents failed to complete this question correctly. Their responses were subsequently eliminated).

Overall ranking: 1. Intrinsic interest in English. 2. Hard work. 3. Self-stimulation 4. Natural skill/ability 5. Preparation for tests, licenses etc. 6. Stimulation from teachers. 7. Stimulation from non-teachers.

Commentary: It is notable that the highest

rankings reflect self-motivation as opposed to outside stimulus. This suggests that learner autonomy is effective in skill development.

5.Greatest factors in initially developing an interest in English- top three only (*10 surveys were spoiled by non-compliance with the 'top three' stipulation).

Number of appearances among 'top three':

a.importance of entrance exams: 28

b.general interest in wider world/knowledge expansion: 64

c.specific hobby or cultural interest: 59

d.necessity in daily life:6

e.natural affinity for languages: 65

f.desire to make foreign friends: 14

Commentary: According to these responses, necessity was not the mother of invention. Intrinsic, rather than instrumental, goals seem to provide the motivation. However, it must be remembered that the question refers only to an initial interest in English.

6.Greatest factors in any sudden increase in English skills- top three. (8 responses eliminated)

a.study/living abroad: 49

b.necessity for work: 45

c.preparation for exams: 10

d.personal relationships: 56

e.travel/cultural interests: 40

f.Other (Eikaiwa school: 8, juku 10, results of continuous or concentrated effort 12)

Commentary: The low number of responses for exam preparation is noteworthy. According to these responses, immediate necessity does seem to be the primary catalyst. Perhaps we can conclude that the initial interest is intrinsic but the greatest spurs to growth are provided by practical, instrumental realities.

7.Rating skills compared to other Japanese people at different points in time:

a.at age 12: 11 better than most, 62 same as most, 9 below average

b.at age 16: 57 better than most, 19 same as most, 5 below average

c.at age 19: 59 better than most, 21 same as most, 2 below average

d.at age 25: 78 better than most, 4 same as most, 1 below average.

Commentary: The greatest increase in the sense of being better than others at English occurred between ages 12 and 16 (generally junior high school age). Perhaps this was when the initial interest was piqued as people tend to like and further explore that which they are good at.

8.Experiences before Japanese university graduation (multiple responses were possible):

Study at Eikaiwa (Conversation) school in Japan: 20

Study abroad: 32

English-language contacts in Japan: 35
English-language contacts abroad: 25

Commentary: Most notable here is the fact that a slight majority (44) of the respondents indicated none of the listed experiences. Therefore, it seems that a lack of such experiences does not seem to be a great barrier in the development of English skills. Perhaps motivated learners find ways of improving regardless of their environment.

9.Efficacy of self-study techniques (choices from: X= of little or no value, 0= of some use, += quite useful/valuable, NA= not applicable/never tried).

X is calibrated as -1, and +as 1 below, 0 and NA as 0. Multiple responses were acceptable.

- a.Reading authentic English: 76
- b.Studying from an English language self-study or textbook: 8
- c.Keeping notebooks of useful words/phrases: 26
- d.Use Japanese-language study guides to English: 67
- e.Listening to English (radio, videos etc.):48
- f.Studying from a dictionary: 30
- g.Translation practice:32
- h.Other (most common: talking to oneself, reading aloud) : 18

Commentary: Two responses are salient here. Reading authentic materials has been long and widely touted as invaluable in developing second language skills and its efficacy seems to be confirmed here. The use of Japanese-based guides, especially when compared to the very low rating given to English-language guides and textbooks, is also noteworthy.

10.Effect of formalized grammar study:

- a.very little effect: 2
- b.some effect, neither a lot nor a little: 28
- c.a large effect: 34
- d.profound effect:16

Commentary: Virtually all respondents confirmed the importance of formalized grammar study. The two exceptions had both spent several years abroad as children and thus may have bypassed the need for formalized grammar study. However, given formalized grammar's traditionally large role in standardized English curriculum in Japan we may have expected a higher number of respondents saying that it had a profound effect. Perhaps formalized grammar was just one factor in the skills development of those who already had discovered an affinity and interest in English, and who seem to have used self-study to advance themselves.

11.Percentage of junior and senior high classes using grammar-translation methodology:

- a.Under 30%: 2
- b.30-50%: 17
- c.50-70%: 22
- d.over 70%: 45

Commentary: Age may be a factor in this response. Currently, more and more schools

are adopting non-grammar-translation methodologies. There may also be some confusion in the respondents' minds as to what exactly constitutes a grammar-translation lesson. Nonetheless, the number here may be lower than is often supposed by many who believe the standardized English curriculum in Japanese schools to be little but grammar-translation methodology.

Caveats:

It is recognized that this is a limited and potentially flawed study in many respects. The usual caveats regarding surveys must apply:

- 1)Some questions or choices may not have been clear, included overlapping responses or failed to list a meaningful option
- 2)Intricate statistical analysis and correlations across categories has not been performed.
- 3)This survey relies on the subjective interpretations of the respondents, and even though it refers to their own experiences this does not guarantee one-hundred percent accuracy.
- 4)Some interpretations have been suggested from the data collected but at this point it would not be appropriate to frame these as conclusions, since the survey is only a preliminary stage.

Corroboration of the suggestions and interpretations made above from further research is needed. Nonetheless, it is hoped that several of the preliminary findings mentioned here are of immediate significance. Many appear to have methodological implications that may be useful for materials makers, curriculum planners, and everyday lesson planning by teachers. As a preliminary study it is hoped that these findings may serve as a starting point that may lead to more in-depth research as to why certain Japanese learners of English end up succeeding while others fail to improve.

Thank you for completing this questionnaire. Our goal is simple- to see if there is any pattern as to why and how Japanese and Korean teachers have developed excellent skills in English. Please don't be modest and feel free to add any extra information as you wish.

Yours, Mike Guest, Miyazaki University, Japan

Preliminary information:

- a. Your age group Under 30 30 to 39 40 to 49 50 or+
- b. Your current status or position (i.e., teacher at elementary school, part-time junior college English teacher etc.)
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Questions:

1. Did you have any special exposure to English before entering junior high school? Yes No (if yes, what kind?)

2. Did you have any special exposure to English during junior or senior high school?
 Yes No (if yes, what kind?)

3. Rank each of the following in terms of their effect on the development of your English skills, from 1 (none) to 5 (extreme). N/A (not applicable) is also acceptable.

- Grammar-based lessons at school Foreign travel
 Communicative lessons at school Reading (for interest/pleasure)
 English Conversation school Listening (for interest/pleasure)
 Foreign friends, colleagues and associates Foreign study/living abroad
 Peer study and interaction Special professional training

4. What would you say has been the balance between each of the following in the development of your English skills? Write as a percentage:

- a. % Hard Work % Natural Skill
b. % Stimulated by teachers % Self-stimulated % Stimulated by non-teachers
c. % Intrinsic interest % For tests/licenses etc.

5. What were the greatest factors in your initially developing an interest in English? Rank the top 3 in order:

- importance on entrance exams necessity in daily life
 interest in wider world (to expand knowledge) natural affinity for languages
 specific hobby or cultural interest desire to make foreign friends

6. What would you say were the greatest factors in any sudden increase in your English skills? Choose the top 3 for you.

- Study/living abroad
 Necessity for work
 Preparation for exams
 Personal relationships
 Travel/Cultural interests
 Other (explain)

7. How would you rate your English skills in comparison to other Japanese people

At age 12 ___ better than most ___ same as most ___ below average

At age 16 ___ better than most ___ same as most ___ below average

At age 19 ___ better than most ___ same as most ___ below average

At age 25 ___ better than most ___ same as most ___ below average

8. Which of the following experiences did you have before university or college graduation?

___ Studying at an English conversation school in Japan/Korea

___ Studying English abroad

___ English-language contacts in Japan/Korea

___ English-language contacts abroad

9. Which self- study techniques have you found most useful in the development of your English skills?

X= not at all/never tried 0= of some use += quite useful/valuable

___ Reading authentic English ___ Listening to English (radio, videos etc.)

___ Studying from an English-based self-study textbook ___ Using a dictionary

___ Keeping notebooks of useful words, phrases ___ Translation practice

___ Using Japanese/Korean-language based English guides ___ Other (explain)

10. To what extent has formalized grammar study aided in the development of your English skills?

___ very little

___ some, neither little nor large

___ it's had a large effect

___ it's had a profound effect

11. About what percentage of your junior and senior high school English studies consisted of "grammar-translation" practice?

___ Under 30%

___ 30 to 50%

___ 50 to 70%

___ 70 to 100%