

# Unconventional Devices To Motivate Japanese Students To Learn to Communicate in English: Is the Left Brain Always Right?

Minoura Eisei

## I. Introduction: Failure of the Japanese to Learn to Communicate in English.

The most basic problem that the Japanese people face is that, after studying English for six years at junior school and senior school, almost none of them can communicate in English. What is worse and surprising is that those who major in English at universities also have trouble in communicating in English.

Despite the efforts of the Board of Education (Mombusho) to alter the curriculum and introduce more Assistant English Teachers (AETs) to raise the communicative ability of the Japanese, there seems to have been little effect.

## II. Why Did the Japanese Fail?

The main reasons are:

- (1) Various enjoyable, amusing, interesting and fun activities were never thought to belong in the classroom traditionally and were never used effectively enough by teachers—except for special occasions when, for example, AETs would visit the school or when teachers had nothing further to teach at the end of the last term before graduation.
- (2) There has been too much emphasis on gaining factual knowledge only to pass the university entrance examination.

## III. The Present Situation of Japanese Students of English As a Consequence

Most Japanese students are not motivated to learn English, much less to use English as a means of communication. It is only those elite students who are good at learning in the conventional way—i. e., who can memorize things easily and reproduce their knowledge on examination papers to get good marks—who succeed in school. Even so these elite students,

sad to say, are far from being able to communicate in English.

#### IV. What Is Wrong with the Traditional Way of Teaching English?

Makoto Shichida Ed. D., a professor of the school of Education at Newport University, Japan, writes:

English language learning methods in Japan until recently were all left brain learning methods: from junior high school on, English language learning methods were all left brain learning methods. Regardless of whether one studies for six years or ten years, one does not become able to speak English using left brain learning methods. (1)

Japanese students do not acquire an adequate knowledge of English in school because traditional teaching methods are inappropriate. When input is made consciously, output is also made consciously. The result is that they speak English selfconsciously, and can never catch up to the speed of natural spoken English. (2)

Dr. Betty Edwards, a professor in the Art Department at California State University, writes:

...most of our educational system has been designed to cultivate the verbal, rational, on-time left hemisphere, while half of the brain of every student is virtually neglected.

...

Even today, though educators are increasingly concerned with the importance of intuitive and creative thought, school systems in general are still structured in the left- hemisphere mode. (3)

In short, what these two educators are saying is that because the traditional educational system has been putting an enormous emphasis on left brain learning methods, while the other half of the brain has been neglected, we need to develop right brain learning and strive to teach students in a balanced way so that both left and right hemispheres of the brain are utilized. We need to develop not just the left or right hemisphere but the brain as a whole.

### V. What on Earth is a Right Brain Learning Method?

The dual nature of human thinking—verbal, analytic thinking mainly located in the left hemisphere, and visual, perceptual thinking mainly located in the right hemisphere—was discovered by a psychobiologist, Roger W. Sperry, who received the Nobel prize in 1981 for his innovative studies.

The most widely cited characteristics of the right and the left hemispheres of the brain are divided into groups as below: (4)

#### Left Hemisphere

Verbal  
Sequential, temporal, digital  
Logical, analytical  
Rational

#### Right Hemisphere

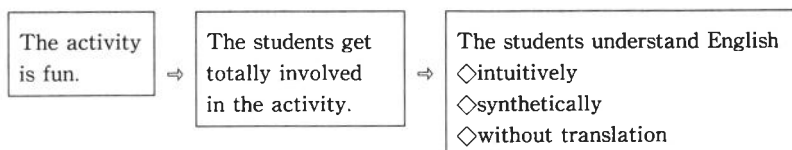
Nonverbal, visuospatial  
Simultaneous, spatial, analogical  
Gestalt, synthetic  
Intuitive

The precise hemispherical shape of the model in the above case, however, is not an important issue here. What is important is that incoming information can be handled in two fundamentally different ways. I'll use the term "Right-mode" instead of "Right-brain" and "Left-mode" instead of "Left-brain" to try to avoid the location controversy hereafter.

We may, therefore, say that the Right-mode learning method is the one that makes special use of the fundamentally different mode of thought that involves spatial and imagery processes rather than words.

One of the greatest advantages of the Right-mode learning method is that it can be fun. Being fun can help students get totally involved in the activity. In this way, the students come to understand English:

- ◇intuitively
- ◇synthetically
- ◇without translating into Japanese



## VI. What is the Weak Point of the Left-mode Learning Method?

The left-mode learning method, which we have been so accustomed to and which we thought was the only learning method, is, on the other hand, a completely different language learning process from the Right-mode learning method.

When we listen to English spoken to us, we try to translate what the other person says into Japanese in order to comprehend the meaning. Unless we translate what is said into Japanese, we don't seem to feel that we understand fully. We unconsciously change every sentence we hear into Japanese in our minds and try to comprehend. The result is that we can not follow the speed of naturally spoken English and ask "Please speak more slowly." or "I beg your pardon?"

When we speak in English, we first try to construct a sentence which is free from any mistakes, and then only when we feel secure do we utter that prepared sentence. Generally speaking, the sentences we use are those memorized in the past, and their number is very limited.

Based on this Left-mode learning method, it is difficult, perhaps almost impossible, to comprehend any unmastered sentences, and what we can and do utter are only those sentences we have previously memorized.

In order to undergo an increase in speaking and listening abilities, we have to devote a tremendous amount of time and energy into absorbing English. Yet, that goal will always be far ahead of us.

## VII. Everyday Observation of Right-mode Capabilities

We often think in words and feel that words are indispensable for thinking. We often, however, manipulate and experience the world without the benefit of language, though we are usually unconscious of this.

◇For example, we visualize images and use a mental map to find our way to a friend's home. This mode of thought is much easier than memorizing a verbal sequence such as "Go south from Hongou crossing and turn right after the second traffic light."

◇At times we can visualize a clear image of a certain movie star, yet can not think of her name. The older we become, the oftener we have this experience.

These are good instances of how the Right-mode surpasses the Left, and a language education program which makes further use of the Right-mode should be given greater consideration.

One of the greatest benefits of the Right-mode learning method lies in the fact that the capability of instantaneously converting reality into images enables students of English to comprehend meanings without translating each sentence s/he hears into Japanese.

Thus by utilizing this Right-mode capability, we can overcome the weakest point of the Japanese—the tendency to try to understand English by way of the Japanese language.

## VII. Right-mode Activities

1. **Lies:** As the students check the content of the sentences for correctness, while the teacher increases his reading pace, the process of translating each sentence into Japanese gradually fades away. Eventually an “English circuit” will be constructed in the students.

When they hear the English sentences, the students come to convert them into images. In this way, the students will overcome their feeling that they understand something only after they translate it into Japanese. And they will gradually respond promptly to the English sentences.

Write “T” if the sentence you hear is true. Write “F” if it is false.

1. A rectangle has three corners.
2. My pants are green.
3. Dogs say, “Bow-wow.”
4. Fish walk.

2. **Colors:** There is no need for teachers to explain colors. Anyone glancing at a color knows it immediately. Thus by simply repeating the names of the color cards the students see, picking up the pace little by little, the teacher encourages the elimination of the English-to-Japanese translation process.

“Colors” are the best suited educational material for changing the habit of the Japanese who unconsciously try to translate English to Japanese.

Write the names of the colors you see your teacher holding.











1. brown    2. dark blue    3. purple    4. light green
5. chartreuse    6. yellow    7. orange    8. black
- ...

The teacher holds up the color cards and changes them swiftly.—if the students are

allowed too much time to answer, they use a Left-mode process and try to understand by translating into Japanese.

**3. Shapes:** Shapes, like colors, can be perceived instantaneously. Images of shapes are input without verbal explanation. While the students repeat the names of shapes several times, the process of translating the name of the shape into Japanese and recognizing that Japanese equivalent disappears eventually.

The teacher will dictate the names of shapes in a rapid sequence. Draw the shapes in the boxes below.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
①										
②										
③										

**4. Simon Says:** The well-known Western game “Simon Says” can be used for educational purposes. When the teacher says, “Simon says, ‘Touch your knees’”, the students must touch their knees. If Simon doesn’t say it, the students don’t do it. The students have to promptly respond to the command forms. They cannot afford the time to translate what the teacher says into Japanese. The objectives of this game are

- ◇to motivate and practice careful listening
- ◇to reinforce the command forms of verbs, the names of the parts of the body and the objects in the classroom.

By getting involved in the game, the affective filter of those who are usually shy, quiet and hesitant in public and those who have an inferiority complex about English become less effective, and they all find themselves enjoying themselves.

You must do what Simon says. For instance, when Simon says, “Simon says, ‘Touch your kness’”, you must touch your knees. If Simon doesn’t say it, don’t do it. When someone makes an error, the teacher points to him or her and says, “Out!”. If you are out, you have to sit down or go to the place the teacher suggests.

Sentence patterns to be used:

1. Touch your (parts of the body).
2. Point to the (objects in the classroom).
3. Verbs in command form.

5. **Bingo:** This common game, Bingo, used for educational purposes, enables the students (1) to convert an English word or sentence into Japanese, and vice versa, and thus reinforce the use of the word or sentence.

octagon	bronchi- tis	hexagon	chin	diamond
giraffe	arm	circle	pentagon	thumb
square	throat	<b>Free</b>	fore- finger	carrot
cube	triangle	stomach	eyebrow	heart
forehead	elbow	back	rectan- gle	earlobe

1. Write the English words the teacher says in each square in a random fashion.
2. The teacher says the Japanese words. Find the English equivalents and circle the words.
3. When you circle five words in straight line either horizontally, vertically or diagonally, you call out “Bingo!” and raise your hand.

(2) to practice useful "Question and Answer" expressions, and thus reinforce the fixed English patterns.

Here you are.	Leave me alone.	I don't know.	<b>Open</b>	Pardon?
Beats me.	I agree.	Yes, please.	Great.	Sorry.
Really?	<b>Closed</b>	I forgot.	No, thank you.	No problem.
Sure.	Come on.	No way.	You're welcome.	Stop it!
Why not?	Really?	Yes, it is.	Shame on me.	Hold on a minute

1. Write the English sentences the teacher says in each square in a random fashion.
2. The teacher says the English sentences in the question form. Find the answer sentence to that question and circle that sentence.
3. When you circle five sentences in a straight line either horizontally, vertically or diagonally, you call out "Bingo" and raise your hand.

The teacher sets the pace and has the students follow his somewhat fast speed. He never compromises by giving sufficient time for the students to translate. The students will eventually come to experience the Right-mode capability which lies deep within them as they try to follow the teacher's pace.

6. "What Am I?": The teacher gives some clues and the students try to guess the answer. The students, listening to the teacher's clues in English, visualize the image and decide on the answer. The visualization helps the students to find the answer without the Japanese interference.

Listen to sentences the teacher says and then try to guess the answer.

- (1) 1. I have four corners.
2. I have two long sides.
3. I have two short sides.
4. I am a shape.



5. I start a with a “R”.
  6. What am I?
- (2)
1. I am cold.
  2. I am white.
  3. Children like to play with me.
  4. I fall down from the sky.
  5. You can make a snowman with me.
  6. I start with a “S”.
- (3)
1. I can hop.
  2. I have two long ears.
  3. I am a small four-legged animal.
  4. I like to eat carrots.
  5. I start with a “R”.
  6. What am I?

7. **Numbers:** Numbers are easy to visualize and good material, in this sense, for the Right-mode processes of the students to be exercised. The population of Japan, for instance, “120 million”, is easily visualized in this English form. When translated into Japanese, it loses its original image, and, what is worse, the prompt answer to the question “What’s the population of Japan?” can not be produced.

Fill in the blanks with suitable numbers.

1. What’s the population of Japan?

120

million.

2. What’s the population of Tokyo?

12

million.

3. What’s the population of the world?

5.2

billion.

4. What's the population of China?

**1** billion.

5. How high is the statue of Buddha in Nara?

**53** feet.

6. How much do you weigh?

**150** pounds.

7. How much is one dollar in yen?

**105** yen.

**IX. Conclusion: Involvement Is Crucial**

《The Relationship between the Result of an Exam and the Attitude of the Students toward the Class》

Students' Attitude in Class \ Result of the Exam	Low (0-6 points)	Middle (7-12 points)	High (13 points and over)	Total
	Not Active (0-6 times)	7 (70%)	1 (10%)	2 (20%)
Average (7-14 times)	8 (50%)	6 (38%)	2 (12%)	16
Active (15 times and more)	2 (18%)	3 (25%)	7 (58%)	12
Total	17 (45%)	10 (26%)	11 (29%)	38

$X^2=10.754, df=4, p<0.05$

The table above shows the relationship between the result of an exam and the attitude of the students toward the class.

The attitude of freshmen in one class of a college was divided into three categories—“Not Active”, “Average” and “Active” —according to their participation in class. This was based on the number of the times each student participated in class by answering questions voluntarily. Each time they answered the questions in their seat or on the chalkboard, they were awarded one point.

Those freshmen were also divided into three levels— “Low”, “Middle” and “High” —according to the results of a mid-term exam in July, 1994, which was set questions from materials taught under the Right-mode learning method.

There was a significant relationship between the results of the exam and the attitudes of the students in class. ( $X^2=10.754$ ,  $df=4$ ,  $p<0.05$ ) Those students who were actively involved in the class got higher grades in the exam and vice versa.

Teachers need to provide students with classes which the students enjoy and in which they get involved easily. In the end, these kinds of classes help the students acquire communicative competence in English.

The tortuous methods on which the Japanese education system places great value allow only a very few to succeed.

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