

# Learning English in Sweden and Japan Part 2: Obstacles to Fluency

Stephen Howe

*‘Would you teach dancing by giving rules for dancing  
and keeping the learner fixed in his seat?’*

Joseph Payne (1874)<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

This brief working paper discusses a number of obstacles to foreign-language fluency. It is the second of three papers on learning English in Sweden and Japan, examining why Sweden produces some of the best non-native speakers of English. The current paper looks at a number of obstacles – negative factors that hinder students from becoming fluent – and attempts to show how they could be turned into positives, drawing on best practice from Sweden.

The *Japan Times* wrote on 29 March 2015 as follows:

‘The education ministry reported last month that high school English-proficiency scores fell far short of its goals ...

The test carried out last summer at 480 randomly selected public high schools found that third-year high school students’ English skills in listening, speaking, reading and writing were far below government targets. In each section, a majority of students scored at or below the equivalent of Grade 3 on the Eiken Test in Practical English Proficiency ...

Students’ English proficiency was especially low on the more active, productive skills of speaking and writing ...

The difficulty with speaking and writing reveals once again that junior high and high schools

continue to teach English to pass university entrance exams, instead of working toward students learning functioning and creative English. Speaking and writing skills require a lot of consistent practice to be acquired ...

Speaking and writing must also be acquired in the context of realistic and useful content. It is easier to understand how grammar, listening and even reading can be learned through relatively passive methods ...

However, for students to really function in a language, they need active and regular practice in producing meaningful, content-filled communication. Communication that contains meaningful content connects language study with students’ innate curiosity and motivates them to keep learning ...

Unsurprisingly, in a related survey of students’ attitudes toward English, nearly 60 percent said they did not like studying English. Students do not need to be entertained or to love English. If they are challenged in age- and level-appropriate ways, they will likely be less resistant ...’

In Sweden, by the time they graduate, almost all school-leavers and university students are fluent in English, and Swedish schools achieve good levels of English across the ability range. In a recent European report, Swedish and Norwegian schoolchildren showed the best results in English, followed closely by Finland,

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<sup>1</sup> Monthly Journal of Education, p. 306, quoted in Atherton (2010: XXV).

the Netherlands and Denmark.<sup>2</sup> What do Swedish schools do, and what factors in Swedish society produce such excellent English ability?

In its *Action Plan*, the Japanese Ministry of Education suggests research and data collection on English education inside and outside Japan. My aim in these papers is thus to use real-world examples to help understand what leads to a successful foreign-language programme. I was a doctoral researcher in Sweden for about three years and speak Swedish; I have taught English in Japan for almost ten years. The research is based on a number of reports, informal interviews, questionnaires with teachers and students in Sweden and Japan, and my experience in the two countries.<sup>3</sup>

Below I examine a number of obstacles to fluency: (i) Seen but not heard, (ii) Errorphobia, (iii) Peer pressure, (iv) Examination pressure and (v) International exposure.

### Obstacles to Fluency

#### Seen but not heard

Outside class, Japanese students are gregarious – they love to talk and socialise. However, as a newcomer to Japan, one is struck by the comparative silence of students in class. The Japanese sociolinguist Takao Suzuki writes (1978: 167–168):

‘We Japanese are not particularly good at expressing our own opinions and making our position clear before we have considered the addressee’s feelings and thoughts. Rather, we feel comfortable with other-oriented behavior, that is, waiting for the other person to express himself first and then adapting our view accordingly.’

According to Suzuki (1978: 169), difficulties on the part of Japanese to present their view in an international context are not due to foreign language aptitude alone, rather

‘may be in large part due to our lack of determination to express ourselves fully in words, and particularly our lack of self-assertiveness in presenting our opinion no matter what others may say or feel.’

This shows obviously that foreign-language teaching should include not only language, but also intercultural communicative competence. Such intercultural communicative competence is part of learning a foreign language in Sweden. Erickson (2004–2015:2) writes:

‘The Swedish national syllabuses for foreign languages are to a considerable extent inspired by, and partly comparable to, the Common European Framework of Reference ... Areas focused upon are receptive, productive and interactive skills, as well as intercultural communicative competence ... Subsystems like vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation are considered important prerequisites but not as goals *per se*.’

The US and UK also achieve poor fluency in foreign languages, even though we (perceive ourselves to) have the opposite classroom style, i.e. greater active participation by students. However, the common denominator is that in foreign-language classes, in English-speaking countries and in Japan, children do not speak enough *in the target language*. As stated, Japanese students are not *absolutely* silent – they are animated and love to talk outside the classroom.

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<sup>2</sup> Swedish National Agency for Education, *English Here and There and Everywhere*, p. 14.

<sup>3</sup> I would like to thank my respondents for their helpful input:

1. Swedish university teacher A
2. Swedish university teacher B
3. Swedish schoolteacher of English A
4. Swedish university graduate A
5. Japanese university teacher of English A
6. Japanese university teacher of English B
7. Japanese university student, English major, A
8. Japanese university student, English major, B
9. Japanese schoolteacher A
10. Native-English university teacher of English A, Japan
11. Native-English university teacher of English B, Japan
12. Native-German university teacher of German A, Japan

A summary of an earlier version of this paper was presented at JALT 2007 (Howe 2007).

Unfortunately, one realm of silence is the classroom, and this is a significant barrier to language learning, especially if the aim is to *speak* a foreign language. The extent of talk depends on the context. If the foreign-language classroom could turn this context on its head, then foreign-language abilities could improve greatly.

### **Errorphobia**

Linked to Suzuki's argument above is that many Japanese learners prefer not to speak unless they have the 'correct' answer, often requiring long pauses or consultation with a classmate before uttering a word. According to Crystal (1997: 377), worrying about making a mistake is also a consequence of traditional teaching methods:

'traditional FLT provides learners with a great deal of conscious knowledge of linguistic rules. As a result, they may come to rely too much on this knowledge, so that it actually gets in the way of their ability to communicate. People who worry too much about making a mistake, and who thus are reluctant to use their FL ability, are in this view "overusing" their monitor.'

Any tendency to be silent unless one has the 'right' answer is therefore likely to be exacerbated by traditional teaching based on rules rather than communication. A former student of mine states that as English is an exam subject in Japan (and generally a written one), making mistakes in your English means you will lose marks or in the worst case fail your exam. This could result in a bias towards 'perfection' over performance. To counter this, teachers must instil in students early on that they learn from their mistakes and that *practice makes perfect*. Writing is slow and considered; it can be rewritten, checked for errors, and words can be looked up in a dictionary. But producing spoken language at speed requires active brain training.

Many Japanese express a lack of confidence in their English and therefore avoid using it. Confidence – the assessment of one's abilities – can be improved by the teacher shifting the students' point of

reference. To become 'perfect' in a foreign-language class is an impossible task,<sup>4</sup> and one that can surely demotivate. However, to be able to use English to communicate can be achieved in a single lesson, and built on successively. Compared to a native speaker, a foreign-language learner is always less skilful; but compared to someone who knows no English, students know a great deal. Japanese has borrowed thousands of English loanwords, giving students a significant lexical head start. Confidence can thus be boosted by stressing what students *can*, not what they *cannot*.

This is indeed the case in the *Common European Framework*. In Sweden, national assessment of foreign languages is based on a number of principles (Erickson 2007:3). These include:

- 'Giving students the chance to show what they actually know/can do, instead of primarily trying to detect/focus on what they do not know/cannot do'
- 'Commenting on strengths before weaknesses; when analysing weaknesses, distinguish between errors that *disturb* and errors that actually *destroy* communication, i.e. between errors representing different degrees of gravity'

Swedish children show a high level of confidence in their English abilities. Three-quarters of pupils surveyed, and often considerably more, judged as very easy or rather easy situations such as *I can understand instructions and questions or requests in everyday English*. In the same survey, several Swedish teachers pointed to the importance of helping each pupil not only improve her or his English, but also her or his motivation and self-confidence. A stated aim of the curriculum for English in Swedish schools is that students should maintain and develop their desire and ability to learn English, and that this should continue into adult life (Swedish National Agency for Education, *Kursplanen i engelska för grundskolan*).

### **Peer pressure**

Related to errorphobia and a reticence to speak is

<sup>4</sup> As discussed in the first paper in this series, if we assume that a child's language exposure and use in native acquisition is approximately 10 hours per day, and that a child reaches fluency (though not adult proficiency in all aspects of language) by age five, then we have a figure for native-language acquisition of about 5 years × 365.25 days × 10 hours = 18 263 hours. If we compare the approximately 500 hours of English in the classroom in Japan and Sweden with this figure, we see that it is less than 3%. Five hundred hours are equivalent, numerically at least, to about fifty days of native-language exposure and use. That is, around seven weeks. For further discussion, see Howe (2015).

negative peer pressure. One of my respondents, the head of English at a Swedish upper secondary school, when asked what factors she thought prevented students from learning English, stated ‘Fear of embarrassing yourself and making mistakes’. The role of peer pressure is discussed below.

Particularly in adolescent years, peer pressure is probably met in all schools in all countries of the world. A Japanese former high school English teacher tells of peer pressure, especially amongst boys, *not* to pronounce words in a native-speaker-like way, instead pronouncing them in Japanese *katakana* fashion to avoid ‘showing off’.

However, peer pressure can be positive as well as negative. The best schools have and use positive peer pressure. With the right approach in the language classroom, positive peer pressure can encourage students to excel. Negative peer pressure not to sound different will be strongest if classes are mostly in the students’ (and teacher’s) home language (cf. Orwig). Conversely, if lessons are almost all in English, the target language, and students become used to this from the outset, in the classroom at least peer pressure to conform will be to speak English, rather than not being able to do so.

This may be one of the factors for success in Sweden – it is the *norm* to be able to speak English, and he or she who cannot is the odd one out. Who in a Japanese classroom would want to admit that they couldn’t write *kanji* or add up? Thus, one possibility for Japan – and the UK and US for French, German, Spanish and other foreign languages – is to examine how to generate and maintain such positive peer pressure in language classes.

### Examination pressure

To return to the quotation at the beginning of this paper, Japanese students are currently being examined on the words and rules of English. The exam format encourages passive command of the language; an active command is generally unnecessary. Whether or not students can speak English has little bearing on their examination success.

As the *Japan Times* writes, the de facto aim of English language teaching is to pass entrance exams. The strong bias towards the easiest skills to test creates a false goal that distorts the educational aims. The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology is fully aware that ‘entrance

examinations tend to serve as final goals’ (*Action Plan*).

Testing of words and rules is not unique to Japan. A recent report writes on Korea (*EF EPI 2014 Main Report*, p. 15):

‘South Korea spends more private dollars per capita on English learning than any other country. Yet its EF EPI score has stagnated. To improve English education in South Korea, language education experts agree that teachers must be trained to help students develop practical communication skills, and they must be freed from high-stakes exams that focus primarily on grammar and vocabulary.’

In Japan, several interviewees in the current study, a former high school teacher, a former JET teacher and two former students, told independently how the character of teaching changed as entrance exams loomed. Another informant revealed that even an English centre-of-excellence school had problems as it faced the practical reality of getting students through exams. One interviewee recounted how in the first year at junior high school, classes were positive, enjoyable, and included fun activities. In the second year of junior high school, the enthusiasm began to drop. And in the third year, students were silent and taking notes.

As most students who go on to further and higher education will take entrance exams for senior high school and subsequently university, this has a strong influence on the practice of English teaching, concentrating on those aspects of the language that will be tested. With the exception of the *EIKEN* test, entrance exams generally contain little or no speaking component. The national university entrance exams include a listening component but no speaking component.

In Swedish schools, national assessment of foreign languages is based on a number of principles. These include (Erickson 2007):

- ‘Making the most important assessable, *not* making what is easily measurable the most important’
- Teachers are responsible for evaluating and grading their students. There are no formal examinations; however, there is an extensive

system of national assessment.

- There is a fair amount of consensus that assessment should be an integrated part of the didactic process, which ‘should be *for* learning, not just *of* learning, and of course never *against* learning’

A national test in Sweden typically comprises four sections: an oral test, in which pairs or groups of students talk about different subjects, a listening comprehension and a reading comprehension, and a writing test. There are detailed teacher guidelines, including test specifications, and commented answers and samples of benchmarked oral and written performance. All assessment materials are developed in cooperation with various experts, including students (Erickson 2007). For further information on foreign-language assessment in Swedish schools, including sample materials, see <http://nafs.gu.se/english/information>.

To conclude, it is not the case that Japanese schools are failing in English language teaching – they are succeeding in the de facto aim of passing entrance exams. Looming exams naturally focus the attention of teachers and students on what will be tested. It is a wise decision to prioritise time and effort on what is presently necessary, with no time for the luxury of learning to speak. However, once the exams have been passed and forgotten, the educational system will have produced students who lag behind best-performing countries like Sweden. When they travel abroad, or communicate with people from other countries, for work or pleasure, these young Japanese, many of whom are very keen to communicate with people from other countries, will find themselves speechless.

To turn this negative into a positive, the power of entrance exams can be used to promote English communicative ability greatly, if they are reformed to include compulsory and significant speaking assessment. A first step to improving English communication skills is to test them. Entrance exams or assessment, if set correctly, can provide a powerful motive for teachers to teach and students to master spoken English. The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology states in its *Action Plan*:

‘without doubt, the methods for selecting applicants have a major influence regarding the

improvement for teaching methods, motivation, and desire for learning’.

### International exposure

A factor in the linguistic self-confidence of Swedish children is, according to Erickson, that they regularly come into contact with English through various media. Ninety-three per cent of Swedish schoolchildren surveyed judged as very or rather easy *I can understand radio and TV programmes, CDs or cassette programmes even if I do not know all the words* (Swedish National Agency for Education, *English Here and There and Everywhere*, p. 27). Exposure to English outside the classroom and the influence of English-language TV on English abilities in Sweden will be taken up in the final paper of this series (Howe forthcoming).

Japan emerged from a period of relative isolation only two lifespans or so ago. Writing in the 1970s, Suzuki (1978: 165–167) describes, on encountering a foreigner (meaning a Westerner of European extraction), how

‘our ability to identify the other suffers a kind of paralysis due to the shock of seeing a “red-haired, blue-eyed” person’ and of a ‘mental block which most Japanese experience toward foreigners’.

He also speaks of ‘a state of mental insecurity brought on by unexpected contact with the unfamiliar and unplaceable’. However, my experience is that Japanese are just as curious about and interested in communicating with people from other countries as Swedes. For the reader unfamiliar with Sweden or Japan, the quotations below give two views of the respective societies, repeated from the first paper in this series. The reader will notice a certain similarity between the two descriptions, reflecting of course as much the society as the outsider’s meeting with it. First, the view of DeWitt (2004: 70) on Sweden:

‘All Swedes today learn English at school from a young age. On one level, this means that it is very easy for the visitor to communicate, but this is deceptive. Although Swedes are charming and helpful to strangers, on a longer-term basis they are reticent, and slow to make new friends. Until the advent of inexpensive flights, travel outside the country was less common, so ideas, attitudes,

and social habits were quite insular. For a visitor to move beyond acquaintanceship to friendship requires patience. The Swedes are considerably less loquacious than people from countries further south ... Swedish conversation has an exchange pattern all its own, and foreigners, especially those from North America, tend to go wrong by offering too much information too soon. The conversational comfort zone of a Swede follows a certain cadence: a brief question followed by a brief answer.’

Second, the view of Roberts et al. (2004: 109–115) on Japan:

‘... generalisations about the Japanese must ... be qualified by the fact that there are considerable differences in the attitudes and outlook of the different generations. Due to its geographical isolation, Japanese civilisation developed with comparatively little influence from other countries and cultures ... Until the late 19th century, the Japanese had only the most limited interaction with other nations ... Longer term visitors who are working in Japan will probably find their employers and Japanese colleagues hospitable and considerate; however, relationships in the workplace are particularly circumscribed by the hierarchical structures which figure so prominently in Japanese relationships – although it is easy to overstate the case and forget, in making generalisations of this kind, that the western world has its own pecking orders ... Many foreigners are surprised by the willingness of the Japanese to go out of their way to help them ... Most Japanese are still fascinated by the *gaijin* and are usually very keen to be hospitable ... you may feel that your new acquaintances are reserved or superficial. Friends may take months to reveal anything about the[ir] personal lives and private thoughts ... westerners, for the most parts, are treated with a degree of courtesy that has given the Japanese a reputation as an exceptionally

“polite” people.’

Japan has become economically successful globally without general fluency in English. However, Crystal (1997: 373) rightly points out that language is a prerequisite for full mutual understanding and cooperation between nations. The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology writes similarly in its *Action Plan*, ‘international understanding and cooperation are essential, as is the perspective of living as a member of the international society’. It adds:

‘For children living in the 21st century, it is essential for them to acquire communication abilities in English as a common international language. In addition, English abilities are important in terms of linking our country with the rest of the world, obtaining the world’s understanding and trust, enhancing our international presence and further developing our nation.’

As the global lingua franca, ability in English means the ability to communicate with people from all nations, not just native-English speakers. National-language literacy – where Japan excels<sup>5</sup> – and English ability are linked by the authors of a recent report (*EF English Proficiency Index*, Main Report, p. 30):

‘Historically, speaking a second language ... was a marker of the social and economic elite. The influence of the English language has grown, first under the British Empire, and then during the post-war economic expansion of the United States ... However, globalization, urbanization, and the Internet have dramatically changed the role of English in the past 20 years. Today, English proficiency is less associated with the elite, and it is not as closely tied to the United States or the United Kingdom as it once was. Instead, English is becoming a basic skill for the entire global

<sup>5</sup> The Japanese education system and Japanese society produces some of the best young readers/writers and mathematicians worldwide. It also achieves good literacy across the ability spectrum. In mathematics, Japan is ranked 7th in the world and Sweden 38th. Percentages of 25–34 year-olds achieving one of the two highest literacy proficiency levels (in their national language (s)): France 14%, USA 16%, Germany 17%, England 18%, Canada 20%, Australia 21%, Sweden 24%, Japan 32%, Finland 37%. Percentages achieving the lowest three literacy proficiency levels: Japan 16%, Sweden 31%, Germany 42%, England 43%, USA 48%. All figures OECD (2014: 50). Mean score for mathematics (OECD average = 494): Japan 536 (ranked 7th), UK 494 (26th), USA (36th), Sweden 478 (38th) (PISA, 2012).

workforce, in the same way that literacy has been transformed in the last two centuries from an elite privilege into a basic requirement for informed citizenship.’

The same report writes on Japan (*EF EPI 2014* Main Report, p. 15):

‘To revamp its traditional teaching methodologies, Japan has recently implemented new reforms ... A few leading universities ... are beginning to offer undergraduate programs that are taught exclusively in English. And with the 2020 Tokyo Summer Olympics on the horizon, English training has begun to attract additional funding and media attention.’

The current requirements for foreign language teaching issued by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology are focused on communication in English, ‘heightening students’ awareness of being Japanese citizens in a global community, and cultivating a spirit of international cooperation’. This means acquiring a kind of global literacy – the ability to understand and communicate with others internationally.

### Preliminary Conclusions

This paper has briefly examined a number of obstacles to English-language fluency in Japan:

- (1) Seen but not heard
    - a. Foreign-language education should teach intercultural communicative competence
  - (2) Errorphobia
    - a. Give ‘students the chance to show what they actually know/can do, instead of primarily trying to detect/focus on what they do not know/cannot do’
    - b. Comment ‘on strengths before weaknesses; when analysing weaknesses, distinguish between errors that *disturb* and errors that actually *destroy* communication’
  - (3) Peer pressure
    - a. Encourage positive peer pressure in the English-language classroom
  - (4) Examination pressure
    - a. Make ‘the most important assessable, not ... what is easily measurable the most important’
  - b. Assessment should be an integrated part of the didactic process, which ‘should be *for* learning, not just *of* learning, and of course never *against* learning’
  - c. Entrance exams or assessment, if set correctly, can provide a powerful motive for teachers to teach and students to master communication in English
- (5) International exposure
    - a. English is a key to ‘global literacy’ – the ability to understand and communicate with others internationally

The final paper will suggest a number of positive measures to improve English-language abilities based on best practice in Sweden.

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