

Personal Language Learning Narrative

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Reflecting on my long history of English learning as a language teacher and researcher, it seems that generally I have been a fairly good learner for the reasons that follow: First, I **have been always intrinsically, integratively and instrumentally motivated**. Second, I **have made the most of the learning environment surrounding me and resources that were available**. Third, I **have adopted mostly effective learning strategies**.

In order to make my points clearer, I would like to elaborate on my language learning history. The boldfaced and underlined parts indicate the strategies and tasks that I think have contributed to the development of my English skills.

(1) **At the junior and senior high school levels:**

I started learning English at junior high school, which was very common for people in my generation. In those days, more accurately, in 1970s, you only had opportunities to study English in the formal school learning setting. Outside of the classroom, you could listen to songs in English on radio and to an NHK English education programs. Since I learned *romaji* at elementary school, by which I thought I was learning English, I **looked forward to learning English** at junior high school and **becoming able to communicate with native speakers in the near future**. In fact, the more I studied English at junior high and senior high school, **the higher and stronger my intrinsic and integrative motivation became**. I had a dream of living and studying in the United States and of becoming a simultaneous interpreter. The motivation has never weakened. Thus, one of the important facilitating factors of my language learning has always been present.

The learning environment at my junior high school in general was not ideal. However, the school had a reputation of being one of the top in terms of the Standard Academic Achievement Test among more than 300 junior high schools in Saitama

Prefecture. Naturally, students and teachers were proud of being part of the school, which led to a good self-image.

Under these conditions, what I usually did to improve my English skills was to prepare for a lesson for one hour, to concentrate on listening to the teacher's instructions at school, and to review what I studied at home for one or two hours. For instance, I checked new words in a dictionary, wrote down the words and meanings in my notebook and on word cards, copied the text, and wrote the translation in my notebook. During the lesson, I tried to understand the teacher's explanation about grammar points and translation of the sentences. I compared my translation with the teachers' model translations and tried to find my weak areas and errors. Finally, the procedure I used to the review of the daily lesson was (1) to analyze my translation errors by reading a grammar reference book and a dictionary, (2) to write new words and the meanings of the new words with parts of speech on word cards, (3) to read the new words aloud and write them several times to memorize the spellings and the meanings, and (4) to read aloud the text at natural speed with emotion by listening to and imitating native speakers' reading on the tape, and (5) to try to memorize the reading passage and words.

In addition to these class-oriented studies, I did a few extra things to help improve my English ability: (1) I listened to an NHK Basic English Program in the morning everyday before I went to school and tried to imitate the native speaker's reading in order to improve my pronunciation and listening skills. More importantly, (2) I taught English to my classmates at their request, as a voluntary tutor before the mid-term and term examinations, which helped me check my understanding of grammar points and create systematic and clear views of the language system. (3) I studied for the STEP tests by making a study plan and studied intensively according to it. (4) After school, I asked the teachers questions regarding the textbook or learning materials I chose on my own. This also helped them gauge my English levels and recognize my personal needs, which, in turn, I suppose motivated teachers too, thereby making them better mediators and creating a learning environment that suited me. (5) I studied for high school entrance exams based on the study plan I had

made. Finally (6) I learned English from a private tutor, another mediator to solve my questions and effectively improve my English. This helped me maintain my reputation and status of being an advanced student at school, which protected and promoted my good self-image.

At senior high school, my approach was basically the same as I had adopted at junior high school. However, surrounded by highly motivated and successful language learners, and due to my learning experiences, my learning strategies became more effective and expanded. I used several more techniques and materials that helped me learn more efficiently. Several of them are: (1) Before and after the class, I discussed what was not clear with my classmates. (2) I bought a basic phonetics textbook and followed instructions to produce English sounds naturally, and at the same time, I tried to improve my pronunciation by recording my oral reading and comparing it with the tape-recorded native speakers' reading by using an English learning kit, and more importantly. (3) In my junior and senior years, in the morning and after school, one of my close friends, who also shared the dream of becoming simultaneous interpreter, studied with me in an empty classroom. We made our own vocabulary quizzes and tested each other, discussed connotations and collocations of words and expressions, solved entrance exam questions, and encouraged each other when we had flagging spirits. We also surveyed previous university entrance exam questions, made a two-year study plan to pass the entrance exams to universities of our own selection, and revised it whenever we found materials and strategies ineffective to upgrade our study plan. One of the tasks included in the plan was to read short stories rather quickly (i.e. a kind of extensive reading) to compensate for classroom reading which were usually covered in short chunks (a kind of intensive reading, but not always effective). (4) In my senior year, especially with particular university entrance exams in mind, I also studied English strenuously with a glossary of previously used exam questions, grammar, composition, and reading exercise books. (5) With a view to compensating for the exam-oriented study just mentioned, I took a course at a preparatory school in the long vacations and often took mock entrance exams. This helped me check my improvement in receptive

skills. Finally, (5) I often thought about good learning strategies and **learned from successful learners, especially from my sempai in the same sports club.**

From my reflection on my junior and senior high school studies, the factors that contributed to effective language learning can be summarized in a following way;

- (1) I was **intrinsically** and also **integratively and instrumentally motivated** for learning English.
- (2) I had **clear and accessible short-term and long-term goals** and **confidence** in achieving them.
- (3) Because I was **patient about the improvement of English skills** and **meticulous** about any kind of study, i.e. **a perfectionist**, I adopted **a regular study habit to do what was expected to do and to understand everything.**
- (4) Related to (3), I adopted and executed **metacognitive strategies** to promote and maintain **self-regulation—intention control and action control strategies**-- for a long period of time, until the goals were achieved. I often **reflected on my learning on the path, too.**
- (5) I **employed effective learning strategies** from teachers and used them in the beginning, but I was **open-minded and flexible** enough to adopt other effective learning strategies from other successful learners, i.e. **an inclination for learning style shifting and style expanding.**
- (6) Since I was a perfectionist, I **paid careful attention to forms and meaning** of words and sentences, and checked if my understanding was correct or not, by **volunteering answers to teachers' questions, discussing language points with my classmates** or by **teaching other students (hypothesis generating and testing).**
- (7) I used a learning strategy, a kind of **shadowing** to **automatize meaningful chunks of language** and another one, **a kind of spaced retrieval**, to **learn new vocabulary.**
- (8) I **created a good, if not ideal, learning environment** or **maximized it** by utilizing available learning resources, my friends, sempai, teachers or private English teachers.

- (9) I was—actually still I am now---**performance-oriented enough to maintain and protect my good self-image** and **mastery-oriented enough to attain a goal of acquiring a high level English proficiency.**
- (10) **Cooperative or collaborative learning, especially with motivated peers,** helped me **maintain emotional stability and motivation. This also helped me overcome my weaknesses and deepen my understanding of the subject matter.**
- (11) **Challenges that could be overcome** emerged occasionally as I made progress, which gave me chances to enable me to **notice my weaknesses,** to **look at the language learning from different perspectives,** to **study harder, and to use different strategies.**
- (12) **My extroverted and sociable personality** helped me to talk to many people, especially advanced learners, about English learning strategies.

Having described my learning at secondary schools, my approach to studying English was not always effective or well-balanced, as you may immediately notice. Although the teaching centered around the Grammar-Translation method adopted by the senior high school teachers did help me understand English grammar and sentences accurately and get good scores in the entrance exams, it also had several negative effects on my English learning:

- It slowed down the reading speed—in fact, I read any kind of material at the same slow speed,
- It made me more meticulous and intolerant of any kind of ambiguity,
- It forced me to memorize words, even low-frequency words, mainly in a decontextualized fashion and expressions and sentences, sometimes archaic or incorrect, that are not useful for communication,
- It did not incorporate any tasks or opportunities to teach listening, speaking, and writing, which somewhat frustrated me,
- It did not provide any opportunities for expressing ideas and opinions. Even writing was nothing but a translation exercise from Japanese to English and I could not write a paragraph coherently.

- It led me to form a false belief that the four skills were different and independent skills and therefore should be studied differently. This idea remained in mind even when I became an English teacher.

Despite my intensive hard work at the high school, I failed in the entrance exams and had to study at a preparatory school for one year. There was no choice but to study in the same way as at the high school. However, I regularly read *The Student Times* (**authentic materials**) to **learn useful words and expressions for communication**, and **listened to one of the NHK Radio English Conversation programs** because I always **had a long-term dream of going abroad and developing speaking skills.**

(2) **At the university level:**

After entering the English Department at university, while being required to read a lot of novels and other academic books in English and to learn a lot of facts about British and American cultures and histories in class and out of class, naturally I **had to be very strategic about completing the overwhelming amount of assignments**. There was no room for reading books word by word in the Grammar-Translation fashion.. **With highly motivated and advanced students in class**—one third of them had gone abroad for at least a year before they entered the university and were already able to speak with native speakers. In the beginning I lost confidence in my English ability, felt an inferiority complex, and naturally formed a poor self-image. However, I soon became able to cope with the challenging learning environment for the reasons that follow: (1) I **got to know several people who shared the same problems**, one of which was that we did not really understand the lessons taught by the native speaker teachers—and we **made a study group** to help each other after the class. (2) Native speaker teachers **had consultation** with some of the students at their request and understood our problems, and **gave an extra assignment** each week to **help us improve our listening skills**—actually it was helpful but it took a week to complete. (3) We were repeatedly told by the teachers and our *sempai* that if, as an English major, we could not get a STEP 1st grade certificate, there was **little chance to get a good job at a major and**

prestigious company. (4) My long-cherished dream of going abroad, being able to speak English comfortably and to work as a simultaneous interpreter, and also my pride as an English major at a good university enabled me to take advantage of this challenging situation and to consider it as a kind of ideal learning environment. In other words, achieving English proficiency at the same level as those of advanced speakers became a short-term or immediate goal. (5) I needed a high TOEFL score anyway to meet the requirement of a studying abroad program I wanted to apply to. (6) Personally I felt indebted to my parents who paid tuition for my preparatory school and university education, and I would have felt guilty if I had not studied English as hard as I could.

Through the university life, various types of classes were offered, but those that turned very effective to me were Prof. Beck's classes. I liked his teaching style, selection of materials, and intellectually stimulating explanations so much that I took five different courses that he offered before my graduation. I will describe the best of his courses, which was a content-based seminar for a small number of juniors and seniors that focused on analysis of language use in American advertisements. He brought advertisements taken from various sources, such as magazines and newspapers, distributed them to students and explained the background. This was followed by a group discussion session and presentation. He encouraged us to analyze the effectiveness of the language use, such as a play on words or a famous saying, in small groups with a worksheet that he carefully prepared. While discussing the advertisements, he visited each group, observed our discussion and looked at our analysis on the worksheet, and gave suggestions to us so that we could explore the language use more deeply and from different perspectives. We had an opportunity to individually talk with the teacher about something important. After this, a person the teacher selected from each group presented their analysis to the rest of the class, and finally he summarized students' work and gave his own analysis with a handout he had prepared. More importantly, in addition to the regular activity, this course had two appealing projects: a group project and an individual project. The group project required us to choose our own article and to present some background information and

analysis of the language use by using the blackboard or a handout. The teachers and students asked the presenters questions and wrote comments on the evaluation sheets, which he summarized and gave to the presenters in the following session. **The individual project** required us to create our own magazine or newspaper advertisements as a summary of our learning and presented it to the class on the last day of the term. Thus, his teaching approach was both **teacher-centered and student-centered.** Although this type of approach, **using authentic materials and emphasizing discussions, presentations, and projects,** is very common nowadays, it was **very unique and motivating** to students who were accustomed to classes conducted in the Grammar-Translation method.

Now, I would like to analyze my learning at university and summarize several factors that I believe contributed to my language acquisition.

- (1) I made the best of **the challenging situations** and made a clear goal of achieving a high level of proficiency that advanced classmates had already acquired. (**Positive thinking, motivation-maintenance strategies, self-regulation, short-term goal setting**)
- (2) I **shared my problems with my classmates** and **made a study group.** (**Emotional and motivation control**)
- (3) **My hard-working disposition,** my feeling toward my parents, my future dream, and job prospect drove me to go forward with the study of English even though I came across difficulties. (**A good study habit, maturity, obligation, requirement, integrative and instrumental motivation**)
- (4) The teacher's teaching style, **new, unique, and catering for students' needs,** not only **matched my learning style,** but also guided me to **find out my unknown potential and further encouraged me to improve my communication skills by speaking to an audience.**
- (5) Related to the teaching style, **being taught by and communicating with a native speaker on a personal level motivated me to get actively involved in learning in class.**
- (6) Related to the teaching style, **opportunities to discuss and present opinions, and**

to get feedback from my teacher and classmates promoted my active learning. In addition, the **group project work helped the members support each other and protected our self-image** by presenting a group product not an individual one. Both projects **accommodated individual ideas and differences in skills and preferences**, and led us to **feel a sense of accomplishment and ownership**.

- (7) **Using authentic materials** and a task to analyze advertisements and summarize the analysis effectively and convincingly was **a new experience and a challenge, but within the reach of students**.

(3) During the period when I studied abroad:

In my senior year, I finally went to California and worked as a volunteer teacher and guest speaker of Japanese culture at elementary, intermediate, high schools, at community centers and even at senior citizen's homes. I learned a lot from this experience by interacting with many people, but for the limitation of space, I will just describe the main activities and strategies.

- (1) I asked teachers at the elementary and secondary schools to give me as many classes as possible to **increase opportunities to communicate with students in English**. In addition, I tried to take advantage of staying in the English-speaking environment by attending parties on a regular basis, going to movies with students on weekends, watching TV at home, talking to the principals and teachers when they were free and willing to talk to me, discussing social and family issues with my host family for two hours after dinner, and working as a basketball coach at a junior high school. **My outgoing personality** helped me seek opportunities to use English. (**Maximizing the amount of input and output, extroversion, inductive learning, learning and cultural assumptions**)
- (2) I voluntarily **wrote a report after a week's teaching** and handed it into my host teacher and the principal. They usually gave me their comments with **corrections of my English**. (**Informational feedback**)
- (3) Teaching elementary and junior high school students provided me with a good learning environment because, unfamiliar with foreigners' accent and

pronunciation, they did not understand what I said if I did not speak naturally.

(Hypothesis generating and hypothesis testing)

(4) I tried to go out with my host family and **participated actively in various kinds of activities** to learn appropriate language, especially pragmatics. **(Promoting noticing, and culture learning)**

(5) I stayed in one classroom for a week and taught based on a one-week syllabus, and then moved to a different classroom in the following week. I basically repeated the same syllabus, but with some revisions based on my reflection and teachers' comments **(Task repetition and fluency development)**. In addition, by attending parties, **I understood the norms and language use, including jokes, at parties.** **(Task repetition, fluency development, and language socialization)**

(6) To back up my English learning, I attended a night school to improve overall skills and occasionally asked teachers to check my English in essays I wrote. **(Solving ambiguity, risk-taking, formal learning, utilizing available resources, and seeking support)**

It is true that my language learning was not such a straightforward ideal path as I have described because it included occasions when I wasted time, energy and money. There were also some discouraging experiences. But in general, I have used good learning strategies in the last 20 years or so.