

THE ENGLISH MONSTER

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A variety of subjects are taught in Japanese high schools. Some of the subjects, like math, home economics, or industrial arts, may already be useful to the students in their daily lives. Music and art give students the opportunity to express themselves creatively. Other subjects, like science or social studies, help teach the students discipline, or provide them with a well-rounded base of knowledge to prepare them for the challenging adult lives which await them. All the subjects are important.

So why is English different? Why does it require special teaching techniques, and even assistant teachers? English is unique because it is alive. It's living. It's breathing. It is a MONSTER.

What is a monster? *Webster's Dictionary* defines a monster as :

1. an animal or plant that differs greatly from the usual type
2. a creature of strange or horrible form
3. a huge animal or thing

Everyone, I think, knows the stories of "Godzilla" and "Frankenstein." These stories are about monsters who, because they are misunderstood, become a threat to the general population. They become frightening. But both of these monsters are also shown to have heart, to have feelings — to be essentially loveable and good.

Like Godzilla, the English monster has terrorized Japan. In a recent survey English was found to be the subject most hated by Japanese students. This is not surprising to me. Though I personally like English very much, and though I know that learning a second language can be one of the most exciting things in life, I am not surprised. I am not surprised because the English monster is one of the most misunderstood beasts in Japan.

The English monster "differs greatly from the usual type" of subjects. This is because it is a language, and unlike math or science, enters our lives before we even start kindergarten. We learn about language as a tool for communication as soon as we learn to say "Mama".

In order to understand second language acquisition, linguists often look at

the ways we learn our first language. Linda Lombardo, an English professor at an Italian university, lists the following characteristics of first language learning:

- a non-threatening, supportive learning environment
- opportunities for the learner to want to express something meaningful
- a fine adjustment between demands made on the learner and the learner's cognitive and/or linguistic capabilities.

1) NON-THREATENING, SUPPORTIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

If you can't remember how you learned your first language, think about how you teach your own children, or watch a parent talking with his or her child. The child feels comfortable and secure talking with the parent. He isn't worried about making mistakes — he is only thinking about expressing himself. The mother will correct the child's mistakes, perhaps without even noticing, but since the child does not feel insecure or threatened by the corrections, they are seen as a natural, comfortable part of learning. Here is an example of a dialogue between a mother and a small child :

Child : I'm go to school.
Mother : Oh, you're going to school?
Child : Ya, I'm going to school.

When the child repeats his statement correctly it is likely that he isn't even aware that he is being corrected, His thoughts and feelings have been confirmed, his mother has supported his statement.

Of course, a second-language classroom is somewhat different from a casual conversation between a mother and child, but it doesn't have to be *that* different. It is useful to remember that children often learn best when they aren't even aware that they're learning. They learn best when they are comfortable and do not feel that they must be constantly worried about making mistakes — when the teacher is an ally, not an enemy.

2) OPPORTUNITIES TO EXPRESS SOMETHING MEANINGFUL

Ms. Lomardo writes that " in order to use a language authentically a person has to want to say something." It is clear that this is the case in *first* language acquisition. We need our fist language in virtually every aspect of our daily lives. I want to point our that personal expression — meaningfulness — is also essential to second language learning.

When I ask teachers, parents, and students in Japan "Why is English

important?" a common answer is "for success on the entrance exams." The importance and pervasiveness of the entrance exam in Japan cannot be denied, *however*, we must also ask the question "Why is English a part of the entrance exam?" It's there because Japan, as a nation, and Japanese people, as individuals, want to be able to communicate.

When I go out in Ashikaga — to restaurants, offices, department stores, wherever — I often overhear conversations. Since foreigners are relatively rare in Ashikaga, I can't help noticing that the conversation is often related to me. But, most often, they're not talking about my nose or how tall I am. 90 % of the time they're talking about English.

Many times every day I hear these kinds of comments :

"Ah, I can't speak English."

"Oh, wouldn't it be good if I could speak English."

"I studied English for six years but I still can't speak at all."

I am a walking reminder to everyone of the extraordinary time and effort they put into learning English in such a way that it was useless to them as soon as they handed in their test paper. That's the sad part of these conversations I overhear. The happy part is that as soon as people see me, they think about *communicating*. The interest is there — they want to say something meaningful.

To many people, this second category listed by Ms. Lombardo is the role of the AET. They see the AET's visit as special opportunity for the students to communicate in English. This attitude is highly developed in Ashikaga, and that's wonderful. But it doesn't have to stop when the AET goes home. It can be equally as exciting, perhaps even more so in a way, for a student to use meaningful English with their own English teacher — or even with teachers of other subjects.

It is overwhelming to me to realize that I am living in a nation where *everyone* studies the same foreign language, and for a considerable number of years. I think this presents a phenomenal opportunity to employ and *enjoy* a shared knowledge. Japan's songwriters, clothes makers, and advertisers seem to be well aware of the pleasure to be derived from using another language to broaden their range of communicative capability.

It's fun to use foreign words, it's gratifying, it's even fashionable. If all this is true, imagine how much more fun it would be for students to use complete English phrases and sentences to express themselves — not only to the AET and not only in class — but all the time, among themselves. If we use class time to make the students aware that English is more than memorizing

textbook phrases and more than an occasional *katakana* word in a Japanese sentence, then they will be eager to create their own opportunities to express something meaningful.

3) ADJUSTMENT OF DEMANDS TO CAPABILITIES

In second language learning, Ms. Lombardo says this adjustment “means asking learners for something that is just beyond what they are already comfortable with.” We need to use things the students have already learned as a basis for expansion; for example, asking the students to extend something they already know to a new situation, or to combine learned elements in a new way. Since Ashikaga teachers must use the *New Crown* textbook, this requires careful thought. It is essential to use the patterns learned from *New Crown*'s key sentences in many many different ways, to demonstrate their usefulness to students in a variety of situations.

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

In an article entitled “Teaching English in Japan”, four Japanese university professors point out that

Many students start studying English in junior high school with eager anticipation, but due to the emphasis on memorization and *learning about* English, rather than *using* English for the purpose of communication, many soon lose interest.

As personal experience and the recent survey show, they not only lose interest in English — they come to hate and fear it. We've all seen it : first year students will eagerly ask and answer questions using all the English they know. Their older brothers and sisters, the third year students, may hesitate to answer even a simple “yes/no” question. How can we show the students that, though English may be a “huge creature of a strange form”, if treated properly it can really be a friendly monster?

Ashikaga's English teachers strive to answer this question. Many have excellent ideas for creating a relaxed but stimulating classroom atmosphere, and for giving the students opportunities for meaningful communication. It is very important for us to share these ideas with each other, to maintain and improve Ashikaga's exemplary English program.

Now I'll review Ms. Lombardo's conditions for effective language learning, and add some ideas from teachers and articles.

- ① A non-threatening, supportive learning environment

- Casually repeat what the students say. If they're correct it will reinforce the sentence for other students ; if they're mistaken you can subtly correct them in your repetition.
 - Have the students stand, sit, move around, or close their eyes.
 - Have class in a new place sometimes, or with seats in a circle or a fan. These things help students to relax, by distracting them from the tension they associate with English class.
 - Put English signs in classrooms and hallways.
 - Ask the AET or other foreigners for letters, certificates, tapes, etc., which you can use between AET visits.
- ② Opportunities to express something meaningful
- Provide basic dialogues which the students can adapt to fit themselves,
 - Insist that students look at *each other* when practicing a dialogue, not at the paper.
 - Have students give each other commands which require some action from the other students.
 - Use English often, in the halls and in the teachers' room—even if it's only simple words like “yes” or “no.”
 - Assign homework which requires them to *use* English outside of class. Examples :
 - A. Ask your mother /sister /homeroom teacher, in English, what song/food/color they like.
 - B. Write down some English you hear on TV/in a song tonight.
 - Encourage use of English in class newspapers.
- ③ Adjustment of demands to capabilities
- Have a short review at the beginning of every class, to reinforce learned patterns.
 - Give a variety of examples of a new pattern, beyond the textbook.
 - Show examples of grammar patterns in English newspapers and magazines, even if the words are difficult.
 - Practice learned material in class as often as possible.

