

Which is More Important in Teaching English
at Junior High School -- Accuracy or Fluency?

Ashikaga Daini Junior High School
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1. Preface

Which is more important in teaching English at junior high school, accuracy or fluency? Because I am an English teacher, I always want to improve my English ability and I often find myself asking this question. Through much contemplation, I have discovered that fluency is more important than accuracy.

Fortunately, I had a chance to attend two seminars last year. One was the Institute for Educational Leadership on Teaching of English in Tsukuba, and the other was the Japan Ministry of Education English Teacher Training Seminar at the University of Texas in Austin in the U.S. During these seminars, I had ample time to think about English education, and to reevaluate my teaching goals. These seminars helped to convince me that fluency is more important than accuracy. Now I will share some of my ideas with you.

2. The Present Situation of English Education

Before we consider which is more important in teaching English at junior high school, accuracy or fluency, we should consider the present situation of English education. English education is changing and developing day by day, but it still has some weak points. Let's review Japan's present-day English education.

a) Lack of exposure to spoken English

Japanese have few chances to use English in daily life. We use English only in English lessons. And even in the lessons, we usually use only classroom English. Furthermore, our classroom English is set phrases, far from communication.

However in the U.S., especially in Texas, Americans learn Spanish as a second language in junior high school and their ability to speak Spanish is better than our ability to speak English. Why? I think it is because they have many chances to use Spanish in their daily lives.

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b) Only grammar English in Japan

There are two types of English: "spoken English" and "grammar English".

"Spoken English" is very important. It means correct, right, and suitable English. It is almost the same as "grammar English", but a little different from it. "Grammar English" is grammatically correct English, but is not used in conversation.

The grammar translation method is one way to communicate in English class, and we tend to use it easily at school. The goal of English when we teach with such a method is rather similar to learning "grammar English".

Mastering "grammar English" is not enough to communicate or converse in English. Thus we should explain to our students various ways to use English words; i.e. in different contexts the same word can mean different things. For instance, the girl said to her mother, "I've gotten into trouble." This has two meanings. It means "I've had trouble", but also means "I am pregnant." Another example is the phrases "a close friend" means a good friend, whereas "an intimate friend" means a friend with whom you have a sexual relationship.

Understanding the various ways certain English words are used in different contexts is important.

c) Adherence to traditional teaching methods

I think that the grammar translation method is the most traditional technique used by Japanese English teachers. It was born from the study of Latin or Greek. We originally studied English not to use English, but to use it as an intellectual training. In those days, it was a very effective method. But nowadays, it is not a good method because it is important to communicate in English for international exchange. So it is the old fashion way: to study English is not to translate English.

Furthermore, we continue to teach some old grammatical points at school that are never used in conversation. For instance, we teach "Take an umbrella lest you should get wet," which is an old expression that is rarely used in English conversation or writing. "Take an umbrella so that you won't get wet," is a natural expression and more widely used. Moreover, we teach "Look at the house whose roof is red," when actually "Look at the house with a red roof," is more correct and is used in conversation.

d) Others: large class size, entrance exam preparation

Recently class size has become smaller in Japan, but there are still 40 students in each class. When I visited one school in the U.S., there were 15 - 25 students in each class. I was very surprised and envious of such a situation. Teaching a small class would be an ideal situation because the students would have more chances to speak and to use English in class. I think that teaching large classes remains a major flaw in our educational system.

Furthermore, because Japanese students are faced with entrance exams which focus on written English and grammatically correct English, not spoken English, they must be taught the English that prepares them for the exam. Thus, little time can be given to teach conversational or spoken English. However, such ideas are changing, and we are only just beginning to realize that students must learn to communicate in English, not just to write it or read it.



(a class in the U.S.)

3. Basic Principles in Teaching English

In the Institute for Educational Leadership on Teaching of English in Tsukuba, I listened to a lecture by Mr. Osamu Kageura, a Curriculum Specialist in the Ministry of Education. In his lecture, he mentioned basic principles in teaching English and made reference to the following 5 points. I was extremely impressed by them.

- (1) To listen to as much spoken English as possible

Earlier, I touched on the matter of spoken English. English is too difficult for us to listen to, and we are also required to have speedy understanding.

Therefore, listening is the base for mastering a foreign language. Although we can't easily understand spoken English, we can familiarize ourselves with

it. We need to listen to as much spoken English as possible to improve our English ability.

(2) To read as much English as possible

This means to read English rapidly without translating. We tend to think reading English means translation. Reading and translation, however, are completely different. The important thing to remember is not to translate English but to understand English. We should try to think in English, and if possible, we should try to consider, not only the surface meaning of what we read, but also the underlying meaning, too.

(3) To have as many chances to use English as possible

In addition to exposing ourselves to spoken English, we should try to express ourselves with easy English. When I attended the English Teacher Training Seminar in the U.S., we had to make many speeches in class. The tutor always told us to use easy English. She also advised us not to be afraid of making mistakes. I think that keeping these positive ideas in mind will help to make us better English speakers.

(4) To extend a cultural background knowledge

It is important to explain to our students about different cultures. Cultural background knowledge is helpful in understanding English. If we understand the English-speaking cultures, our international understanding and speaking will be strengthened.

In the English Teacher Training Seminar in the U.S., we had an American culture class. We studied about nonverbal communication, family life, women's positions, and social events. We often had homework in which we interviewed Americans about our interests. While I studied at the university, I thought that this class was the most useful in using English and understanding the American way of life. This experience was strengthened through my homestay visit. I could communicate easily with my homestay family, and I enjoyed staying with them. I was surprised at how easily I could speak English. The experiences of the classroom helped me tremendously in my daily life. I don't feel that my English ability has improved that much, but I have a much greater understanding for the people of America and their culture.

(5) To establish an identity as a Japanese

I think that this is the most difficult point for us to do. The means to establish an identity through the activities I try to do to express myself. So we should use English as much as possible. We shouldn't hesitate to communicate. We shouldn't hesitate to make mistakes.

4. Attitude of English Teacher

There are many trends in teaching English today. One of them is the communicative approach. The Communicative approach is one of the well-known methods a teaching English.

In the communicative approach, teachers put the first priority on acquiring communicative competence. The process of acquiring communicative competence is enjoyable for the students. The students genuinely like to study English through this approach. We must create enjoyable and meaningful activities, and the activities of exchanging ideas with each other. There are three key elements.

(1) How to Develop a "Positive Attitude"

"Positive Attitude" is a contrast to Japanese way of thinking. Considering the Japanese old attitude, "Silence is golden." But this idea is quite opposite to the "positive attitude" in studying English. We must create English lessons with several activities. We should give the students many chances to use English as a means of communication, so that they can understand English as a living language. For example, we make the students set up their own targets by themselves, or give them some activities such as an interview in which they fill in the information blanks.

We should encourage the students to take an interest in English. We shouldn't correct so much, but encourage them to actively participate.

(2) Teaching Materials

As for teaching materials, we should be flexible to the varying needs of the students. Language learning activities will be more active and fulfilling for the students. Complete understanding of basic materials accompanied with fluent skills of using them is more important than surface understanding of complicated materials without fluent skills of using them. First, we should continue to use basic materials, and then we should use new materials.