

# An Examination of Challenges Encountered by Japanese Learners of English

by  
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## Abstract

This research paper analyses the various difficulties encountered by Japanese students when learning English. Firstly, three main contributing factors were proposed: linguistic differences between English and Japanese, societal barriers, and the education system in Japan. In examining the linguistic difficulties, a survey was administered to 25 Japanese learners of various levels to determine which area of English grammar posed the most difficulty. There was then an examination of the societal barriers and education system in Japan and how these also contributed to the relatively low level of English language proficiency in Japan.

**Key Words:** EFL, Japanese learners, English grammar

## 1. Introduction

The aim of this thesis is to uncover the reasons why so many Japanese find it difficult to speak English despite six years of formal English language education. In exploring this topic, I will discuss the system of English language education in Japan and how it relates to Japanese people and society in contributing to the low level of English language proficiency in the country. Through a questionnaire, I will also be determining which grammatical structures give Japanese learners the most difficulty when speaking English. I will therefore be looking at linguistic, educational, and social problems and discuss, with reference to

relevant literature, why these problems occur and suggest possible solutions to overcoming them.

According to David Crystal, “English is now the language which is most widely taught as a foreign language — in over 100 countries, such as China, Russia, Germany, Spain, Egypt and Brazil — and in most of these countries it is emerging as the chief foreign language to be encountered in schools, often displacing another language in the process.” (2003: p.5) This shows how influential the English language has become in the global context. Even when travelling abroad, the presence of English in non-English-speaking countries is quite obvious. Crystal states that ‘in the tourist spots of the world, accordingly, the signs in the shop windows are most commonly in English. Restaurant menus tend to have a parallel version in English. Credit card facilities... are most noticeably

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in English.’ (2003: p.104) It is clear then why more and more people are coming to realise the importance and the significance of English in the world today.

Japan is a country renowned for its technology and rapid levels of development and growth. It is also known as a country steeped in its own unique culture and history that has had, and continues to have, a great influence on the rest of the world. It can therefore be said that globally speaking, Japan has significant influence and presence among foreign nations and, as a result, good communication skills would be of paramount importance.

However, it is apparent and a relatively well-known fact that a majority of people in Japan find great difficulty in communicating in English. Masakazu Iino confirms that ‘the English skill of Japanese people is extremely low, especially compared with the elite overseas.’ (2010: para.6) When trying to initiate a conversation with a Japanese person, the phrase ‘I don’t speak English — I am Japanese.’ can sometimes be the response said jokingly but somewhat sincerely. This indicates that they are fully aware of the low levels of proficiency the country is known for and have become somewhat resigned to this.

The motivation for this research came as a result of my interest in the standard of English language education in Japan after my experience of spending two years teaching English as an Assistant Language Teacher there. During this time, I was able to see first-hand how English is taught in schools and understand more about the education system. Through this, I gained a better understanding of the grammatical difficulties Japanese learners experience when studying English and also the barriers to communication they encounter because of social norms.

For the purposes of this research project, I will be focusing on spoken English. In particular, I will look at the difficulties Japanese speakers of English have from a grammatical point of view. Although

the phonology of English is also an important factor for Japanese learners, my research will focus on the syntactic aspect.

It has been observed that a person’s spoken and written ability in a foreign language can differ vastly and in fact, it is seen that Japanese learners are far better at written English than spoken English because of the grammar-translation teaching methods used. Grammar is drilled into students in almost every class and as a result, Japanese learners are able to produce fairly comprehensible written work in English, but when it comes to having a conversation, they struggle far more.

## **2. What are the factors that hinder Japanese learners?**

### **2.1 Main Factors**

In this analysis, I divided the factors that hinder the ability of Japanese learners to speak English fluently and communicate effectively into three main areas which I will discuss:

- (i) Linguistic differences between Japanese and English
- (ii) Societal barriers
- (iii) Education system in Japan.

### *2.2 Linguistic differences between Japanese and English*

Generally speaking, the cause of the difficulty for Japanese learners in grasping any specific grammatical or phonological structure in English is the fact that there is no equivalent in Japanese. For example, in terms of pronunciation and intonation, native Japanese speakers ‘have considerable difficulty in acquiring /r/ and /l/.’ This is because ‘there are no phonemes similar to English /r/ and /l/ in the Japanese phonemic system. (Nakamori 2009: p.87)

There are many differences between English and Japanese, including the fact that Japanese has a completely different writing system which

comprises *hiragana*, *katakana*, and *kanji*. In addition to this, almost all Japanese are able to read *romaji*, which is the use of roman characters to write Japanese. On the other hand, in English, only Roman letters are used.

Another difference is between the sentence structure of Japanese and that of English. In English, we tend to follow the structure of Subject-Verb-Object. However, in Japanese, they follow the pattern: Subject-Object-Verb. (Yamaguchi 2007: p.158) In addition to this, the subject may be covert or 'hidden' to avoid placing the blame on someone and embarrassing them. This is seen as a way of 'saving face' that has been incorporated into their grammatical structure and has to do with the societal influence which will be discussed later.

As mentioned before, there are various grammatical differences between Japanese and English which cause great difficulties for Japanese learners of English. Through this research and my experience of teaching in Japan, I noted that there are five areas that seemed to be most problematic. These are:

- (i) Articles — use of the article gives Japanese learners difficulty because there is no article in Japanese. Learners find it difficult to determine when and where to use them.
- (ii) Verb and Tense Agreement — in Japanese, the verb and tense are not related and are completely separate.
- (iii) Subject-Verb-Object Order — as mentioned previously, Japanese uses the Subject-Object-Verb order whereas in English, the order is Subject-Verb-Object.
- (iv) Use of Pronouns — in particular, the differentiation between *he* and *she*. Japanese pronouns are important for the speaker (the first person) and also the hearer (the second person). It is an issue of gender differences where the speaker would refer to him/herself differently depending on the gender. (Tsujimura 2007: p.433) However, in terms of referring to the third person, there is no *he* or

*she* pronoun and Japanese tend to confuse the two when speaking.

- (v) Passive Voice — the passive construction does exist in Japanese. However, there are three different types: direct, indirect, and *ni yotte* passives. (Tsujimura 2007: p.273) However, because of the differences in sentence structure as noted in (iii) above, when forming the passive in English, Japanese learners have some degree of difficulty.

### 2.2.1 Questionnaire to determine the most common difficulty

A very basic questionnaire was produced and distributed to 25 Japanese learners of English of different ages and levels. The goal of the questionnaire was simply to determine what area of English grammar (out of the five listed above) gave these learners of English the most difficulty so that I could then assess these difficulties and suggest possible solutions.

All of the participants were born and raised in Japan and underwent the usual six years of compulsory English education. All the participants have completed high school education in Japan and have gone on to continue studying English to varying degrees of seriousness. Therefore, how frequently the participants studied English after these six compulsory years varied. I chose to survey 25 participants because I wanted at least five learners from each of four levels: beginner, intermediate, advanced, and fluent.

The participants chosen were Japanese friends and family and their friends, family and co-workers. Some of the participants were people whom I have had sufficient contact with to assess their level of English. Knowing this, I mentally placed them at a certain level and then looked for participants of other levels. However, when the results came back, I noticed that many of the participants ranked themselves at a lower level than I had anticipated despite the fact that I gave an explicit explanation of each level and what a person

of that level should be capable of.

This caused a slight discrepancy in the equality of the number of participants in each level. The fact that many participants ranked themselves lower did not come as a surprise since this can be seen as characteristic of Japanese society. It is often seen as a positive characteristic to lower yourself and your self-worth to others. For those participants I do not know personally, I cannot tell how accurate their self-evaluation was.

The definition of each level was formed by looking at the websites of a number of English as a Foreign Language schools and compiling various aspects of the self-evaluation section. Through this, I was able to guide participants to choose their appropriate level and maintain clarity and consistency in the results.

On the questionnaire, I explained each level as follows:

- (i) Beginner: You can understand and answer only basic questions and can for simple sentences like 'my name is...'. Although each participant would have undergone six years of English education at school, I used the term 'beginner' to refer to their current level of proficiency. This is reflective of the fact that despite six years of English education, many Japanese learners are still at the 'beginner' stage where a few simple greetings are the extent of their knowledge.
- (ii) Intermediate: You know enough grammar and vocabulary to have a conversation on various topics. You are conscious of your own mistakes and try to improve. Most of the participants ranked themselves at this level.
- (iii) Advanced: You are able to have a conversation fluently and accurately on most topics. You have a wide vocabulary and good knowledge of grammar and pronunciation. Some participants I considered fluent ranked themselves as Advanced.
- (iv) Fluent: You are able to have a conversation on any topic and can work, study and live

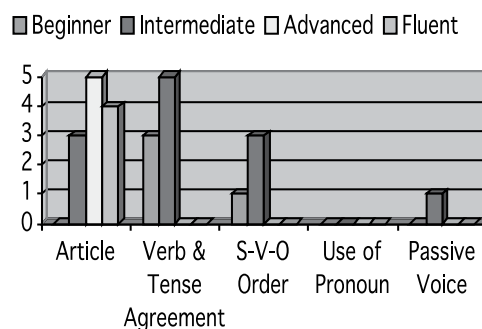
comfortably in an English-speaking environment.

There are rarely any English language situations you do not understand.

As mentioned before, through this questionnaire I sought to determine what personally gave Japanese learners of English of varying levels the most difficulty.

### 2.2.2 Results of questionnaire

#### Areas of Difficulty for Japanese Learners of English



The results of the questionnaire showed that the majority of participants found that the article and also verb and tense agreement were the most common problems they encountered. Interestingly, all advanced and fluent participants found that the article was still the most difficult problem and beginner and intermediate participants found verb and tense agreement to be most problematic.

Through my personal experience of teaching English in Japan and from various readings, I was of the view that the lack of articles would be the most difficult for all learners. However, upon examination of the results, I found that the verb and tense agreement was also most difficult for an almost equal number of learners, but of different levels.

The fact that all advanced and fluent speakers chose the article as the area that gave them the most trouble may be an indication that indeed the article is difficult for speakers of all levels, but when Japanese speakers reach the advanced and fluent level, or the peak of their second language (L2) acquisition, they still encounter difficulty with

the use of the article. It must be noted that all the fluent speakers who participated in this questionnaire have lived in an English-speaking country for some period of time, with some still using English every day.

In terms of the other areas of difficulty, the results showed that the Subject-Verb-Object problem was most difficult for only four participants of intermediate and beginner level; no participants found the pronoun to be the most difficult (although it is a common mistake heard at all levels, it was not the *most* difficult); and only one participant of intermediate level found the passive voice to be the most difficult. It can be seen that based on each learner's level and stage of learning, the area that is most difficult for them at that particular period varies. This means that as learners advance and become more proficient in certain areas, what is most difficult for them will change.

Since the results showed that all advanced and fluent learners found the article to be the most difficult, I will attempt to determine why this particular problem still gives proficient learners such difficulty. Also, considering the fact that a very high number of other learners found the verb and tense agreement to be most difficult, I will then analyse this area.

### 2.2.3 *The article*

It has been mentioned before that the Japanese language does not possess the definite or indefinite article and therefore Japanese learners of English find difficulty in incorporating it into their mental Japanese-to-English translations. The difficulty lies in where to use it and when to use it. It is noted that the definite and indefinite article in English can be optional, mandatory, or prohibited depending on the circumstances. When native English speakers are asked to explain where and when to use the article, it sometimes causes some degree of difficulty for them to give a definitive and concise explanation of this.

It is possible that this can be seen as a structure of grammar that comes as part of our 'innate knowledge' of language which Noam Chomsky refers to as Universal Grammar. (Klein 1986: p.7) Chomsky suggested that each person is born with this mental capacity for language which comes naturally to us. This explains why we cannot ourselves as native speakers explain why we use certain grammatical constructions. We just *know* that they are correct.

It is often these features of innate knowledge that cause non-native speakers difficulty when learning any language, especially if the feature does not occur in their native language. This is exactly the case of the definite and indefinite article in English.

It is important to first understand the structure of the article in English. Grammarians Huddleston and Pullum refer to articles as determinatives. They mark definiteness and function as determiner in the structure of the noun phrase (NP). (2005: p.23) If the NP is definite, the determinative which precedes the NP would be 'the' and if the NP is indefinite, the determinative would be 'a'. Therefore, a definite NP would be used in cases where the speaker assumes that the listener knows what (s)he is referring to. An example is:

- (1) I saw *the* child standing in the middle of the road.

In this case, the speaker is referring to a particular child that he must have previously spoken about with the listener. This sentence would probably follow a dialogue where the speaker and listener discussed or introduced this child. On the other hand, an indefinite NP is used where the speaker assumes that the listener does not know what (s)he is referring to and the speaker is not necessarily referring to a specific thing. For example:

- (2) I saw *a* child standing in the middle of the road.

In this sentence, the speaker probably does not

know who the child was and neither does the listener. It is a random child whom neither party has any affiliation with.

It can be seen that the use of the definite and indefinite article, or determinative, has certain rules and it is used in quite specific situations. Japanese learners must often take a moment to consider whether or not it should be used and if so, where to place it in the sentence. In Japanese, there is no such thing to consider as there is no use of the article. The following example demonstrates:

- (3) neko wa koko ni iru  
cat here it is  
The/A cat is here

This sentence can mean either ‘*the* cat is here’ or ‘*a* cat is here’. In most cases, the only way to determine which article to use would be context. This is why it is often difficult for those translating from Japanese to English because there is such a high degree of ambiguity in many cases.

It becomes even more complicated where, in English, we sometimes omit the article depending on style or preference. In examples 4 and 5 below, both the inclusion and omission of the article are acceptable:

- (4) Would you like to go for coffee sometime?  
(5) Would you like to go for *a* coffee sometime?

However, this is not the case for all situations. The fact that there is no hard and fast rule makes it complicated for learners.

A possible solution to deal with this problem is to place more emphasis in English classes on this issue. After speaking to those learners who had problems with the article, it was found that this problem was not addressed with enough importance when they were learning English. For this reason, students never really obtained a firm grasp on how to use it. Another suggestion would be to introduce it much earlier in the curriculum so

that students are exposed to it at an early stage so they can have more opportunities to practise using it.

#### 2.2.4 *Verb and Tense Agreement*

The second most common difficulty found through the results of the questionnaire was the topic of verb and tense agreement. In English, the verb agrees with the person and number. For example:

- (6) Martha *eats* strawberries.  
(7) I *enjoy* sunny days.

According to Bas Aarts, ‘in the past tense only the inflectional forms of ‘be’ agree with their subject: we have *was* for the first and third person singular, and *were* elsewhere.’ (Aarts 2011: p.88). This can be seen in the following examples:

- (8) She *was* exhausted.  
(9) They *were* having dinner when the incident occurred.

In addition to this, Huddleston and Pullum note that: ‘It is worth observing, however, that although more often than not the subject is not directly identifiable by pronominal case and verbal person-number, inflection still has a significant indirect role.’ Thus, the significance of the subject *they* in (9) is understood by the fact when *they* is replaced by *he*, *were* must be replaced by 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular *was*. (2002: p.237)

In Japanese, there is no such structure and the verb does not change according to the person or number. However, in terms of tense, the verb itself does not change but rather a ‘verbal suffix’ is added to it.

Since there is no inflection for person or number in Japanese, many learners of English find it difficult to make a link between the subject and the verb and conjugate it accordingly. It appears that

these structures are taught in English classes in Japanese schools with a relatively high degree of importance since teachers are aware that this is a problem which needs to be overcome in order to achieve a higher level of fluency. However, learners still seem to have difficulty with it. Looking back to the results of the questionnaire, it was a positive observation that only beginner and intermediate learners found that to be the most difficult. Advanced and fluent learners all said that the article was the most difficult. This does not mean that the subject and verb agreement is not also difficult for them, but it is possible that some were able to overcome this difficulty with practice or they just found the article to be even more difficult.

Having noted this, it is possible that the best solution for both cases would be to implement them much earlier in the English language acquisition of Japanese learners of English so that they would potentially have more time to practise and become accustomed to it. This would mean starting English language education much earlier than junior high school. However, as will be discussed later, there may be some societal barriers to this.

### 2.3 *Societal Barriers*

As mentioned in the introduction, Japan has a very unique and special culture. The Japanese societal norms and customs have been passed down from generation to generation and as a result, there are many features of Japanese society that influence the way people think, live, and behave towards one another. Certain aspects of the mentality of Japanese society have had a significant impact on English education in Japan and I will discuss how these have become a hindrance to achieving a higher level of proficiency in the country.

#### 2.3.1 *Influence of Society in Japan*

In order to analyse the Japanese education

system, it is important to look at how Japanese society influences education and the way in which English is taught. In Japan, it is very important for people to preserve the harmony amongst each other and avoid loss of 'face'. Hiroko Tanaka quotes from Kunihiko stating that 'Japanese respect the feelings of others, and therefore prefer to surmise rather than to question them; open confrontation between opposing viewpoints is often considered offensive, disagreeable to our sense of beauty.' (1999: p.9)

This feeling leads to students not speaking up in class even when they don't understand something. In addition, class participation is lower because students are afraid to look as if they are showing off if they raise their hand and answer a question. Also, in many cases, the majority rules. This means that if for example, a teacher asks a question and most students raise their hands in agreement, a student who does not agree may also raise his hand at the risk of being singled out. There appears to be a stress on the unity and preserving this harmony by sticking together. This causes it to be very difficult for students and Japanese people in general to develop their own individual identity. Thus, classes in Japan can be seen as being very teacher-centred with the teacher doing most of the speaking.

Japanese are often credited for being the most peaceful, polite and kind people in the world. (De Mente 2009: p.73). They also have a very collectivist mentality whereby they all work together and do things together in order to achieve a specific goal. Tanaka notes that the reason for this collectivist mentality has historical roots. She states that it was 'largely formed early in Japanese history as far back as the Yayoi period (300BC-300AD), developing in parallel with the culture of wet-rice agriculture based on communitarian values.' (1999: p.8) This culture of working together has lasted throughout the years and is now a major part of the Japanese identity. Tanaka notes that 'the Japanese are regarded as a relatively

homogenous race of people, sharing similar outlooks on life, value systems, and ways of thinking.' (1999: p.8) This results in a society which values preserving the harmony amongst each other and making sure not to make others feel uncomfortable.

Undoubtedly, this is a very positive aspect of this country's society and has resulted in a culture where people respect each other and show kindness whenever possible. However, when it comes to the education system and particularly the learning of English, it can unfortunately be seen as a hindrance.

### 2.3.2 *Social Effects on Education*

Ikuko Nakane visited a number of Japanese schools in Tokyo and observed the classroom practices. She noted that 'In Japanese classrooms, critical or contradictory comments or disagreements are rarely found. In my observations, students did not raise any issues regarding content, and the lessons were also structured so that critical attitudes were not required or expected... "Why" questions were scarce, compared with factual questions, including ones such as "where is it written in the textbook/handout?" (2007: p.65) This can be seen as a reflection of the societal norms mentioned previously where Japanese feel that by speaking up or standing out in a group setting, they may be perceived as showing off or disturbing the rest of the group. For this reason, they hesitate to participate in class and ask questions even though they may not understand. It is much more common for a student to go home after the class and try to find the answer than for him/her to ask the teacher.

In my personal experience in teaching English at a high school in Japan, I observed that the questions asked by the Japanese English teacher rarely elicited responses other than 'yes' or 'no', and even getting an answer to those questions proved unnecessarily difficult because students were so reluctant to speak out. In many cases, students said "I don't know" even before they took

the time to understand and think about the question and gave up before making an effort.

According to Nakane, the problem with the Japanese education system is that 'the social distance between the teacher and students and the emphasis placed on objective knowledge are closely tied to a pattern of communication in which students are expected to accept what the teacher gives them as non-negotiable knowledge and to avoid standing out in the classroom.' (2007: p.66) This results in a lack of conflict or disagreement in the classroom, which is seen as a sign of a 'good class'. Nakane sums it up when she says that 'Silence in Japanese classrooms is part of a classroom culture which is accepted as unmarked. Thus... when a 'marked' attempt to use spoken interaction as a resource for learning is made, difficulties are experienced both by the teacher and the students.' (2007: p.67)

This can be seen in contrast to Western classrooms where students from an early age are often encouraged to ask questions and give their own opinions. Children are taught in some cases that it is good to disagree with the teacher as long as they can give proper reason and argue for it accordingly. Thus, a 'good class' would be one where there is plenty of discussion between teacher and students and amongst students. Indeed, Japan has not come to the point in their education system where this is the norm and the question may be asked whether this will ever be achieved since the underlying reason is societal, and not something that can be easily changed or implemented.

## 2.4 *Education System in Japan and Contributing Problems*

The English language education system is seen as another factor that contributes to the hindrance of Japanese learners because of its ineffective structure. I will go on to outline this system and discuss the problems it has contributed to.

### 2.4.1 *English Language Education in Japan*



According to the Foreign Press Center of Japan, education in Japan follows a 6-3-3-4 system: six years of primary or Elementary School (age six to twelve), three years of Junior High or Middle School (age twelve to fifteen), three years of High School (age fifteen to eighteen), and four years of University. Only Elementary and Junior High School education is compulsory but as of 2011, the rate of students pursuing high school education was 98.2%. (2010)

English language education starts in Junior High School and ends in Senior High School. This means that children are required to study English from the age of twelve to eighteen, which is a total of six years. English is a part of the curriculum and it is usually necessary for students to pass a final English exam in order to enter university. Ikegashira, Morita & Matsumoto state that ‘Most high schools in Japan teach English as a compulsory second language. The frequency of lessons depends on how much study time each student needs.’ (2009: p.3) This means that those students who wish to become Humanities majors at university will have more classes than those who will major in Science and those who will not go to university ‘have only one or two English lessons a week only in the first and/or second year of high school.’ (2009: p.3)

#### 2.4.2 *Problematic areas within English Education in Japan*

There are a number of problematic areas within English Education in Japan. These include:

- (i) Inadequate exposure of students to English at school
- (ii) Lack of fluency in Japanese teachers
- (iii) Focus on entrance examination
- (iv) Use of grammar and translation method

##### 2.4.2.1 *Inadequate Exposure of Students to English at School*

A major criticism of English education in Japan is that there is just not enough of it. Ikegashira,

Morita & Matsumoto go on to say that ‘About 60% of the high school students go to universities but maybe only half of them are required to study English for the entrance examinations. Then the rate of high school students who have to study English is only 30%.’ (2009: p.4) This shows that there is not such a high level of importance placed on English language education in schools and the purpose is mainly to pass the entrance examinations for university. Thus, the teaching of English in Japan has come under criticism for many years. It is important for us to understand that the problem lies in both the teaching and the student. My experience and research has shown that the problem is not as a result of just one or the other but rather a combination of the two.

##### 2.4.2.2 *Lack of Fluency in Japanese Teachers*

It is often the case that the Japanese English teachers are not fully fluent or capable of speaking English themselves. Many Japanese English teachers have never lived outside of Japan and have only studied Japanese through textbooks and from other Japanese English teachers. This has been shown to be somewhat controversial because they are often limited to English learned from a descriptive point of view. This means that although they may know a significant amount of grammar and rules, when it comes to having a conversation, they experience great difficulty.

Japanese English teachers who have never studied English in an English-speaking country tend to lack proper pronunciation and consequently, a certain confidence when speaking English. Miki Ikeda noted that because many Japanese teachers have never lived in an English-speaking environment, they lack proper listening, pronunciation and speaking skills. She says, “It is common for a Japanese speaker who has majored in English at a Japanese university to come to the United States and realise that he cannot communicate in English at all. He has a vast

knowledge of English in his brain, but is unable to use it.” (2005: para.2)

Nakata agrees and notes that ‘teachers of English have not been trained sufficiently to acquire tolerable communicative ability, since they usually major in English & American literature taught in translation and learn optionally some theories of English linguistics in their universities. This seems to be one of the reasons why most Japanese teachers of English are, expectedly, communicatively incompetent.’ (1990: p.84)

As a result, Japanese teachers find it easier and less stressful to teach in Japanese. Thus, most English classes are taught in Japanese and it is often the case that an entire English class is conducted in Japanese and students are not given the opportunity to be exposed to English as is necessary for them to develop good listening and speaking skills.

#### 2.4.2.3 *Focus on Entrance Examination*

The teaching methods and even the syllabus have been seen to focus on enabling the students to just pass the entrance examinations required for university, rather than encouraging them to become fluent. Nakata quotes from *Educational Standards in Japan* and states, ‘University graduation is considered in Japan as an absolute requirement for desirable employment while graduation from one of the few “prestige” universities is considered as the equivalent of a guarantee of economic success.’ (1990: p.80) This aptly sums up how important it is in the lives of Japanese people to have at least a first degree in order to obtain a good job. Because of this, most high school students spend hours upon hours studying at school and outside of school at a *juku*, which is an after-school study centre, in order to gain acceptance to their university of choice. The quote continues, ‘Consequently competition for admission to a university is so keen as to be, all too often, actually desperate.’ (1990: p.80) Students dedicate their High School life to working towards passing this

examination in order to enter university. This results in students who are very motivated and hard working, but when it comes to the educational aspect, students are less inclined to enjoy learning when they have such a crucial and demanding goal in mind. Some may argue that enjoyment is an important contributing factor to successful learning and others say that it is not necessary to enjoy something in order to be successful in it.

#### 2.4.2.4 *Use of Grammar -Translation Method*

Another criticism is that when it comes to English classes, Japanese teachers focus mostly on grammar and translation. This apparently comes as a result of the Meiji Restoration period in Japan where the government ‘tried to introduce Western thought and civilization through enormous quantities of translations’. (Nakata 1990: p.77) This ‘tradition’ has been passed down throughout the generations and is still the method of teaching used today. Nakata states that ‘one of the major problems with most of the language textbooks published thus far in Japan seems to have been and still is the fact that too much stress has been put solely on acquisition of grammatical competence.’ (1990: p.77)

In the grammar-translation method, students are given a text in Japanese and are required to translate it into English and vice-versa. This method can be helpful, but in many cases, translation is often too difficult for students and can cause them to lose interest and motivation if they cannot accomplish it. Nakata believes that translation should not be introduced in the early stages of English learning. He states that ‘a number of Japanese learners of English easily come to lose interest in learning it in their early stages of learning because of a great gap between their insufficient knowledge and command of English and the demands of the given task... which is far beyond their reach’. (1990: p.82)

Furthermore, after students have done the translation, it has been seen that they are unable to

use these translation skills in real life or translate everyday speech, but rather 'textbook English' and this inhibits their ability to communicate naturally. Students learn set phrases and vocabulary which are indeed standard English, but are not commonly used today. This causes problems when students come to realise that they cannot communicate naturally when attempting to speak English.

Nakata goes on to say that, 'It is clear that translation should not be introduced in early stages of learning. We can posit a hypothesis that a number of the Japanese learners of English easily come to lose their interest in learning it in their early stages of learning because of a great gap between their insufficient knowledge and command of English and the demands of the given task... which is far beyond their reach.' (1990: p.82)

It can be seen that translation in the early stages may not be the most effective method. Donna Christian states that 'to promote learning of a new language, attention should be paid to input, opportunities for interaction and output, and the needs of individuals. In addition, the sociolinguistic context for language learning cannot be ignored.' Therefore, in order to achieve successful language education, it is important to provide learners with 'interesting, relevant, and comprehensible input in order to develop their language skills...' (2011: p.14)

### Conclusion

This paper has sought to understand more clearly the problems that Japanese learners encounter when studying English through an analysis of various contributing factors including linguistic, societal and educational factors. Through a questionnaire, it was understood that the most common grammatical difficulties learners encountered were the use of the article and also verb and tense agreement. It was discovered that advanced and fluent Japanese speakers of English still found the article most difficult. This showed that despite many years of

studying English and living in an English-speaking society, this particular problem still affects these speakers. Also, a surprisingly large number of participants found the verb and tense agreement to be most difficult.

An examination was made of Japanese society and how it affects learners of English. It was seen that the society of Japan has many positive features, but when it comes to the learning of English, these features become obstacles for Japanese learners. For example, shyness and therefore lack of participation in the classroom has caused many learners to lose the opportunity to practise English and gain a greater level of proficiency.

The education system in Japan was then examined and it was noted that there were various problems including inadequate exposure of students to English, Japanese teachers who are not fluent in English, an excessive focus on entrance examinations and too much emphasis on the grammar-translation method.

It can be concluded that there must be a change in the attitude of Japanese people towards English language education in order for there to be progress in the level of proficiency among speakers. It is noted that Japanese need to first understand fully the importance of English in this rapidly developing and globalised society.

In conclusion, I believe that it is indeed possible for Japan to become a nation with fluent English speakers but as mentioned before, there needs to be a shift in the mentality of the society and the importance of English to the nation must first be realised so that effective educational reform may be made and greater progress achieved towards fluency in English.

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