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# **Teaching English to Japanese Students**

By

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This page discusses characteristics and challenges of Japanese students upon their learning of English. It is written for the purpose of assisting the teacher so that he may understand and teach Japanese students more effectively. It is categorized as general characteristics, mannerisms, pronunciation/speaking, listening, grammar, reading/writing, and vocabulary. The information provided in this page is not exhaustive, but these are the main elements I can think of as a result of my own experience, opinions of my fellow ESL teachers, and interviews with Japanese students.

## **General Characteristics**

Although most of the older generation has never had training in English, most of the young generation in Japan has taken English classes for three years in junior high school and three years in high school. However, Japanese educators put the focus on English grammar and reading, and listening, pronunciation, and speaking are not taught as effectively as they should be. One of the reasons that these three skills are not taught well is that most English teachers in junior high and high schools have never lived in an English speaking community, and they themselves are lacking these skills. Hence, Japanese students are strong in their grammar and reading, but not in listening, pronunciation, and speaking. It is common for a Japanese speaker who has majored in

English at a Japanese university to come to the United States and realize that he cannot communicate in English at all. He has a vast knowledge of English in his brain, but is unable to use it. The ESL teacher needs to be aware of this point and give assistance to the Japanese student in this area of weakness. The teacher especially needs to take this point into consideration when he wants to place the students into different levels.

## **Mannerisms**

The mannerisms of Japanese students described here are very general. The purpose of this description is not to let teacher stereotype the students, but to let them help the students more effectively.

In a multi-cultural class, the teacher usually notices the obedience and politeness of Japanese students. They always do their homework and never disturb the class. This ethic comes from their society. From a very young age, they are taught to do all of the assignments they are given. They are also taught to respect the teacher and do whatever she tells them to do.

However, this ethic is not always good. Since they do not want to disturb the class, Japanese students often do not ask the questions that they have. Instead, they ask their peers questions or check in the books after class. Since they are very reserved, they do not outgoingly participate like Europeans and Latin Americans. They believe that saying their opinions in front of the class is a form of "showing off". They believe that their job is to memorize the things which the teacher teaches. Since they are so quiet in the class in this manner, the teacher might wonder whether they understood or not. The teacher needs to pay special attention with regards to this point and assist the students by calling on them by name, encouraging them to participate more freely, giving some kind of leadership responsibility in class, etc.

Aside from their reservedness, there are other factors to be aware of due to cultural differences. It is better to avoid putting the Japanese student on the spot. It is okay if the student successfully accomplishes the task, but if he does not, especially if he is older or is socially at a higher position than the rest of his classmates, he will be very embarrassed. It is better to avoid physical contact and winking. Since the Japanese are not accustomed to these situations, they feel uncomfortable, or in a bad case, they get the wrong idea. The Japanese usually do not use eye contact while they are talking with others. This does not mean that they are insincere or guilty of wrongdoing. Also, they do not accept compliments because accepting compliments means that they admit that they are good, which they believe to be conceited.

## **Pronunciation/Speaking**

The first step to helping Japanese students on pronunciation is to help them realize that English has more sounds than Japanese. Most students who have not had good training on pronunciation justify their pronunciation by substituting close-sounding Japanese sounds that they are accustomed to using for new and discrete English sounds. They must realize that there is a difference between the sounds, and that substitution of the sound could change the meaning of words. Then they need to learn how to produce the sounds easily and correctly in their conversation.

The reason why it is hard for Japanese students to hear or produce certain sounds is due to either the sound not existing in the Japanese language or two sounds being very similar and sounding the same to the Japanese. For example, [f] [v] [s] [d] [r] and [l] sounds do not exist in the Japanese language. They are usually substituted with [h] [b] [ ] [d ] [r] (Japanese [r] and [l] both equal the Japanese [r]) which are the closest counterparts of each sound. The [s] and [z] sounds are used in Japanese, but when they are followed by [i] or [I], they are changed into [ ] and [d ] in Japanese. Hence, it is hard for them to pronounce words such as *sick* and *zipper*; they pronounce them *shick* and *zhipper*. The flap [r] in *letter* and *Betty* is another example of sounds which do not exist in Japanese, and the Japanese student will need help with them.

[l/r], [hw/f] and [y/e] (when followed by [i] or [I] such as wheat/feat, year/ear) are the biggest challenges for the Japanese, both hearing and producing. Production can be mastered through persistent practice, but perception requires a great amount of experience in English. It is more realistic to teach the student to guess which sound he hears according to the context of the utterance.

In Japanese all the words end with vowels. When the Japanese students begin to learn English, they tend to attach some vowels after English words which end with consonants. Here are some examples:

[i] is attached	[u] is attached	[o] is attached
after [tʃ] -catch [kæt <i>i</i> ]	after [l] -pool [pul <u>u</u> ]	after [d] -bread [brEdo]
[dʒ] -judge [jʒ <i>i</i> ]	[k] -book [buk <u>u</u> ]	[t] -note [nouto]
	[g] -egg [Eg <u>u</u> ]	
	[p] -top [tap <u>u</u> ]	
	[b] -cab[k bu]	
	[f] -knife [naifu]	
	[v] -have [h v <u>u</u> ]	
	[z] -prize [praiz <u>u</u> ]	
	[ ] -mash [m u]	
	[m] -gum [g mu]	
	[θ] -teeth [ti u]	

The same thing can be said for consonant clusters. They add vowels after every consonant within a consonant cluster. For example, film becomes [filumu] and swan becomes [suwan].

Another challenge is English vowels. [a] [ ] and [ ] all sound as [a] to Japanese students. Naturally, they substitute [a] for all of these sounds. [i] and [I] sound the same to them , too. Another problem is that every time they see the letter "o", they try to pronounce [o]; as a result, when they see words like *hot* and *top* they tend to pronounce them "hote" and "tope". The teacher needs to pay special attention to these sounds and assist the students by explaining their slight differences.

In speaking they often make errors which they have no problem understanding grammatically, but they still make in their speech. For example, subject-verb agreement and mixing up *she* and *he* are common errors.

## Listening

The challenge that the Japanese student meets in this listening skills is due to unclear utterances from native English speakers. For example, let us suppose that the student, who has just come from Japan, is visiting someone's home. The hostess asks, "Would you like a cup of coffee?" This student probably would not catch what she said, because the sentence she said was [wud laik k p kafi] which sounds different than what he learned in Japan: [wud yu laik a k p av kafi]. Native speakers of English usually connect words together in their natural speech, and they also reduce vowel sounds, in other words, most of the vowel sounds tend to sound like [ ]. The teacher needs to explain this point so that the student gets used to natural English speech.

## Grammar

Although a Japanese student may live in an English speaking country for many years and speak English fluently, he often has a hard time with English articles. The articles, such as "a" and "the" not only do not exist in the Japanese language, but are also function words, which mean that they do not contain any meaning and are necessary for functional purposes. Therefore, Japanese students often cannot hear them while they are listening to English speech. This makes it hard for them to learn English articles. Besides, the rules on when to use the articles are so complicated that even the native English speaker cannot explain them exactly. The teacher needs to be aware that this is one of the biggest challenges for Japanese students.

Verb agreement is another difficult thing for Japanese students. For example, the sentence "John closed the book that he is reading." is incorrect in English because the verb tenses do not agree. However, to the Japanese speaker it totally makes sense because they say this sentence as if they were speaking Japanese:

<b>John wa</b>	<b>yonde iru</b>	<b>hon o</b>	<b>toji</b>	<b>mashita</b>
subject	to	present progressive tense	book object	to
indicator	read	indicator	indicator	close
				past tense indicator

In Japanese, the final verb in the sentence signals the tense in which that sentence takes place regardless of the verb tenses within the sentence. Therefore, it is hard for them to understand why they need to match all of the verb tenses in a sentence in English.

Like the verb agreement rule, relative pronouns are hard to learn for Japanese students because they constitute a new concept for them. For example, compare the following sentences.

I'll buy the book *which* my mother recommended to me.

Watashi no haha	ga	watashi ni susumeta	hon o	kaimasu
my	mother	subject indicator to me	recommended book object indicator	will buy

In the Japanese sentence the word which means "which" (relative pronoun) does not appear; therefore, Japanese students have a hard time understanding why "which" is all of a sudden necessary.

Some things are difficult because they are totally opposite to its Japanese counterpart. For example, when someone asks you a negative question: "Didn't you go?", if you did go, you would say, "Yes, I did." and if you did not, "No, I didn't." But in Japanese, they say, "Yes, I didn't." and "No, I did." Hence, when the Japanese student begins to learn this rule, he gets confused. In order to help the student avoid this confusion, the teacher should teach him to look at the verb before deciding to answer in the affirmative or negative. If the verb is affirmative, the answer begins with "Yes", and if the verb is negative, the answer begins with "No".

The meaning of "go" and "come" is also sometimes opposite from English usage. In Japanese if you are moving away from where you are right now, you always use "go", and if you are moving from somewhere else to where you are right now, you always use "come". But in English it is not always this way. For example, on the telephone a host may ask the guest: "Would you come to the party?" The guest would say "Yes, I'll come." But in Japanese, the guest would say "Yes, I'll go." The teacher needs to be aware of this point.

Another common mistake is the omission of the subject. The subject is often implied in Japanese, and that habit is sometimes carried over into their English sentences. For example:

Since Richard didn't come, \_\_\_\_ got angry.  
("I" is omitted.)

If \_\_\_\_ can, I will come to your party.  
("I" is omitted.)

The last point that Japanese students are often frustrated with in English grammar is that the grammar rules that they have learned in Japan are different from the ones which are actually used by native English speakers. In English class in Japan, the teacher teaches strict, traditional grammar and excludes all other rules. For example, the teacher may say that "May I go to the restroom?" is correct, but not "Can I go to the restroom?". When the student actually talks with native English speakers, he realizes that the natives do not follow the rule. The teacher needs to help the student realize that both ways are used, and while some people believe that only one way is correct, others believe that both ways are acceptable.

## **Reading/Writing**

Although English writing is often seen on the label of many products and signs in Japanese nowadays, it is still hard for Japanese students to get used to reading and writing the English alphabet. Most of the Japanese writing is written in Chinese characters, in which each character represents a meaning instead of a sound. Therefore, when the Japanese student learns to read English, it requires a lot of effort. The students whose native languages are of Latin origin usually learn to read English very quickly, but Japanese students need to spend more time and effort to get used to reading English. The teacher needs to be sensitive of this point.

## Vocabulary

The Japanese student has a head start in learning English vocabulary. Although the origins of Japanese and English have no relationship, the Japanese use English words for many imported products, names of food, technological terms, medical terms, concepts and ideas, etc. When the student begins to learn English words, he has already known many words, which he uses daily. Example:

Terebi	for television	koohii	for coffee	mania	for maniac
[t'l'bi]		[kofi]		[mania]	

However, these English words could be a drawback. Since Japanese changes the pronunciation of these English words into a more Japanese style, when the student pronounces these words in English, he tends to pronounce them with a Japanese accent. The teacher needs to be aware of the student's pronunciation of these English words.

\*This document is a “must read” for new tutors before they can start teaching.