

ENGLISH EDUCATION AT COLLEGE

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This is a proposal for improving the present situation of general English education at college, based on the opinions, needs, and desires of the students concerned.

I . INTRODUCTION

After eight years' experience of teaching English in a high school I have now taught it nearly two years at a private technical college, and have realized that some students are quite indifferent to learning English, or even loathe it, showing unexpectedly poor knowledge of and ability in the language, making classes languid, inactive, noisy, ineffective. Some students sleep throughout the class, some chatter with neighbors, and others even go out of the room immediately after their names are called.¹ Some students cannot read the most elementary words, some mispronounce them and have difficulty in reading sentences aloud, and others read aloud but understand nothing whatever. In the face of these students I cannot help wondering why they all must take English courses, or what on earth English education at college is meant to do. However negative and pessimistic it may sound, that is an aspect of the reality we have to cope with.

But on the other hand I know that there are students who are positively eager to learn English, and that I cannot bear to leave the present situation I have mentioned above as it is. Consequently, with a view to steering English classes in a better and more effective direction, I had some 200 freshmen and 150 sophomores write freely and frankly what they think about English and the English classes, and what they expect of English education at college.² In the light of those opinions I am going to reconsider this serious problem in the following pages, for students' needs and desires, though mostly disregarded, seem to me very important and useful in organizing effective English courses.³

II . STUDENTS' OPINIONS

"What disillusioned me most in entering college was the English lessons,⁴" With this shocking statement, one sophomore majoring in architecture begins his paper. He goes on to say:

I can't help doubting the method and content of the English lessons. What could we gain from only reading an English novel or essay and translating it into Japanese? It seems to me that we are doing this only to take examinations for credits. So I'd like to ask you to change at least one of the two courses⁵ we are taking now into English conversation. . . .

This seems to be one of the typical examples of the students' papers I have received.

For the purpose of generalization, I first picked up every kind of view and assertion from all of the students' papers, then tried to place them in categories (though it was not easy), and finally counted how many of them have similar opinions. These are the chief findings and the numbers of the students who expressed them:

Items	Freshmen	Sophomores
Desire for English conversation or practical English	114 (54%)	83 (55%)
Dislike for, or inability in English	95 (44%)	45 (30%)
Disapproval of high school English or grammar-translation method	39 (18%)	80 (53%)
Desire for elective courses from a variety of English studies	6 (3%)	43 (25%)
Resolution to work hard(er) on English	52 (24%)	—
Desire for more interesting materials and/or methods	—	31 (21%)

Now, the most striking feature in the table above is that the majority of the students, both freshmen and sophomores alike, feel some interest in English conversation and they wish they could make use of English to a certain practical degree. Though there may be some students who feel it only vaguely without knowing exactly why, I suppose that this is a crucial fact to which we are not allowed to keep our eyes closed.

Nearly half of the freshmen(44%) say that they do not like English or that their ability of English is very poor, and some even confess that they have chosen technical college merely because they are weak in English. What seems significant and constructive here, however, is that they sometimes add that they are going to work at English much harder than before. Notice that 24 percent of the freshmen positively declare their determination and willingness to master English, while there are very few sophomores who explicitly refer to it. This shows that freshmen may have, at the beginning at least, some fresh readiness or motivation to learn English, which may easily disappear, as time goes on, into languidness or sheer indifference.

What is characteristic of the sophomores is that 53 percent of them point out the inadequacy of "high school English" and "college English" as well, while only 18 percent of the freshmen do so. This is probably because the general type of English education at college is conducted much the same way as in their high school days, and because they have realized through one year's experience at college that this way of learning English is quite irrelevant to their needs and desires. I am afraid that the monotony and irrelevance of English classes may be responsible for the decrease in the percentage (44 to 30) of those students who express their dislike for or inability in the English language. They have probably been too disillusioned and discouraged to do so positively with some hope to overcome it. And those who still have positive attitudes may suggest that English courses should be optional, not required, or that there should be elective courses for reading, composition, conversation, etc. (25%). Tired from the old-fashioned translation-centered English classes, they further claim that we should be more careful in selecting textbooks which will interest them, or that we should find better ways to entertain them at one

time or another during the class (21%).

III. THE PURPOSE OF ENGLISH EDUCATION AT COLLEGE

It is generally said that the purpose of English education at junior and senior high school level is to let pupils acquire the four fundamental skills of English: hearing, speaking, reading, and writing, and through these activities let them know something about the customs and manners, the culture and tradition, the way of thinking, etc. of the English and American peoples. This is very good in principle or definition, but in reality it has hardly been accomplished, as is often pointed out with many complaints. English education at this level is not directed to accomplish its own purpose but is twisted and abused for another aim: to pass the notorious entrance examination.

Other people argue that "school English" should be distinct from "society English," that English education should not directly meet the requirements of society or the industrial world, that there must be some particular purpose of English education different from that of the "practical English." And the purpose they have in mind seems to be centered on or around the study of the cultural and traditional backgrounds of the English-speaking peoples, implying that English as a means of communication is inferior to English as a cultural subject in higher education.⁶ If so, I would like to say that they should immediately stop claiming that what they are doing is *English* education, because without some ability of English as a means of communication one cannot accomplish this purpose smoothly using textbooks written in English. Study might as well be done in Japanese, using translations if necessary, for this way educators would be able to achieve their purpose much easier and more effectively.

Now there are a surprisingly large number of colleges and universities in Japan, and more and more students enter them year after year.⁷ And invariably the English language is taught at all of them as required, for at least eight credits, in spite of the undesirable phenomena described in the first section above. Is it really necessary and worth-while that all students should learn English at college or university,

sometimes unwillingly and only because they are required to? What is the purpose, then, of such popular and universal English education in Japan? Unfortunately it seems to me that its purpose or *raison d'être* is neither clear nor persuasive. We might as well say that there is some prejudice that any institution named college or university must require students to take English courses, or that English is taught without any definite purpose merely because it has been taught for years.

Such being the case, I believe that it is urgently necessary to clarify the definite and relevant aim of college English education in our present situation.⁸ Taking into consideration everything that has been noted and reported up to now, I find quite proper and reasonable the desire of one student: "... I'd like to become able to manage to read technical books written in English, and orally communicate with foreigners in English to some extent. ..." Thus I would like to conclude that the aim of English education at college should be the acquisition of the four fundamental language skills, however "unscholastic" and unsatisfying to some teachers of English this may appear. By declaring this, of course, I do not mean to deny that English education may give or sometimes require some knowledge of English and American ways of living and thinking, their culture and tradition, etc. But I mean to emphasize that more attention should be paid to correcting and strengthening the language abilities, especially the hearing and speaking, of the students, so that they will be able to express themselves and communicate in English, orally and in writing, and to proceed to further technical studies of their own using English more effectively.

IV. SOME MEASURES REQUIRED

From what has been presented in the preceding sections it is undoubtedly clear that the traditional translation method should not continue to be the main current of English education:⁹ it is neither effective for the purpose defined above, nor does it meet the needs or desires of the students concerned. But on the other hand this does not seem necessarily to mean that English courses at college should be like those of the English conversation school, though most students express desires for "conversational" classes, for the aim is obviously not

simply to develop the skill for daily conversation.

What is important, therefore, is to organize English courses in such ways that they may include a variety of activities¹⁰ which will help students acquire and strengthen all-round language ability. In this connection I believe it very helpful and constructive to keep in mind these directions from the "Instructor's Manual" of the U.S. Defense Language Institute:¹¹ "Do not do in the classroom what the student can do at home." And "the most important element in the classroom is the presence of the teacher who supplies the model, drills the student to listen and to speak, and corrects mistakes."

Consequently, as for the curricula, I would like to propose that a variety of courses should be provided systematically. Our courses in "English I" to "English IV," for example, should not be much the same, as they are now, but they should be systematically organized, as introductory, elementary, intermediate, and advanced courses, or as courses for speaking, writing, literary reading, and technical reading. The teachers should not all be doing just as they like, but they should hold discussions together to organize effective courses for the students. And, if possible, all or at least some of the courses should be offered as elective so that the students would exert themselves more in choosing courses they like to take.

In the choice of textbooks, which are not necessarily needed, we should be careful not to choose books too difficult for the students, as is often the case, lest it should result in compelling us to do nothing but translation. Rather, it would be wiser to select easy textbooks, which could be used more effectively in various ways. It would also be wiser to select those textbooks which are furnished with the recorded tapes of the materials, for students will be fairly satisfied only by listening to the native speaker's voice. And the materials should vary so as to rouse interest in students: essays, literature, current topics, technical books, etc., and they should be given in good balance and order.

Activities in the classroom should be full of variety and be organized so as to let students work as positively and frequently as possible: understanding through paraphrasing or translation if necessary; listening to the recorded material; questions and answers; reading practice in chorus and individually with the teacher's

correction; recitation of the material after practice at home: discussion of problems concerned with the material: speeches or reports about some question that has something to do with it; etc. Of course the emphasis may differ as the intention of the course differs, but the rule should be that everything is to be done in English, with the exception that Japanese can be used when necessary, with the teacher's permission. In this connection it seems to be outrageous that the number of the students of one class should range from 70 to 100: there is no doubt that the smaller the class is, the better.

If some of the measures proposed above are taken, it seems to me that English classes will be run much better and more effectively than now, with the students' needs and desires better satisfied. And if the negative situation described in the first section still presents itself, then I think we should boldly and seriously deal with the problem by making all English courses elective and allowing students to decide how many of them to take.

V. CONCLUSION

Paying attention to the real situation of English education at our college and my students' attitudes toward it, I have concluded that its purpose should be the acquisition and strengthening of the four basic skills of the English language.^{1,2} I have pointed out that, to satisfy students, it is necessary to let them work in various ways: read, recite, listen, speak, and write, and at the same time to provide elective courses. I have pointed out the necessity of decreasing the number of the students to be enrolled in one course. Also I have insisted on the necessity of cooperation on the part of the teaching staff for the organization of effective English courses, though concrete procedures for each class remain to be experimented and decided upon.

I have also suggested that one effective way to provide English courses at college might be to make them all elective, not required.

Though I have written this paper based on students' opinions, needs, and desires of our private technical college, I must add here that I have later realized that these are more or less shared by freshmen and sophomores of a national university where I have been teaching English for about a year.

Finally I would like to express my hearty thanks to Prof. P. Williams of Tohokugakuin University for his kindness in sparing time from his work to look over my manuscript and offer several useful suggestions.

NOTES:

- 1 Also, students answer the roll call for others, and these things seem to happen because they are all required to be present at most of the classes to get credit for the course.
- 2 Incidentally, 11 percent of the freshmen made efforts to write in English, responding to my request, which encourages me very much.
- 3 Cf. John Landon, "After the Entrance Examination—On the Aim of General English Education at College and University," and Ken Methold, "English Education in Japan — A Visitor's Impression," *The New Current Report*, No. 20 (Eichosha, Tokyo, 1971), p.6 and p. 27 respectively.
- 4 The original is in Japanese.
- 5 Our college provides "English I" to "English IV," sophomores taking III & IV, which are all required and much the same translation-centered reading courses.
- 6 See the discussion in "New Views of English," *The Rising Generation*, Feb., 1971, pp. 6—7.
- 7 According to the official bulletin (June 13, 1971) of the Ministry of Education of Japan, 17.1 percent of the high school graduates entered college or university in 1970, and in 1980 it is estimated 31.9 percent will do so.
- 8 Though it is also decidedly necessary to reconsider Japan's English education as a whole, I must let it pass for the time being because it is too big a problem for me alone to deal with.
- 9 But we should not forget that this method has the advantage of enabling students to understand difficult written materials fairly efficiently.
- 10 Remember that one and the same activity during the 90- or 100- minute period of a class is not effective, boring students and blunting their sensitivity, and that all the courses being much the same will have similar effects.

- 11 See Yoshio Ogawa's "Observations of English Education in the World," *The Rising Generation*, Feb., 1969, p. 9.
- 12 In the panel discussion of the 1971 all-Japan LLA meeting (Oct. 2-3 at Aichi Prefectural University) there was an argument that this kind of thing is language "instruction" and not "education." But I think this is not a matter of definition or terminology; language "instruction" at college should include aspects of "education," and *vice versa*.