

Using Authentic Materials in College English Classes

村上 光久

(平成17年9月30日 提出)

When it comes to the nature of ‘English’ as a subject to be taught at school in Japan, there has been a dichotomy of two extremes—English as a content subject, just like Japanese, first language, arithmetic, history, science, etc. from complete mastery of the 3 R’s to aesthetic appreciation of literary heritage of the nation, and the other extreme being English as a subject with the main focus on skill-learning, just like a course for driving, cooking, or taking musical instrument lessons.

In this paper, the author has a unified image of both aspects of English at the college and university level for learning, studying, and practicing it as well as a skill-learning course, while making academic studies of the system of the language on lexicon, usage, discourse, syntax, para-language features such as prosody, plus, in part, as a content subject on the cultural, philosophical and intellectual heritage of an English-speaking world.

Keyword: authentic materials, social awareness and mental development,
exposure to the target language, voice magazine, cultural and intellectual heritage

Preface

The author of this paper has been using an English version of news articles from the international news and broadcasting media for over thirty years, mostly the Voice of America (VOA). Since 2004 all the teaching materials used in his English classes at the university of his place of work have been taken from VOA broadcasts, which include both regular and special English programs. The following is meant to report what has made the author decide to use VOA materials and to explain how they are used and how they can be made better use of. This report also includes reactions from his students as well as what meta-level of support it provides when

using them in colleges and universities in Japan.

I. Use of VOA in Class

1. Rationales for Using VOA Programs

There are several reasons for the author’s use of VOA materials in English classes. In addition to their material cost, which is virtually nil, some other reasons come from students, some from the author’s inner voice, and others from those in areas other than English education in Japanese society.

Japanese students in general are known for com-

plaining about English taught in regular classes in Japan. They say that all they have been learning and working on at school are grammar, translation work, and learning techniques for college entrance examinations; they want real English. This is one major reason that VOA is used in the author's classes. All materials used in class reflect —what the students are crying for and demanding —a true picture of the English language of today in a variety of ways. What the students want to learn at school, and the English language in reality, in fact, share a lot in common: the basic rules of the language are the same. What the students need is simply more exposure to and practice of the language as it is actually used. Using authentic materials like the VOA, in part, serves the purpose in that the language is observed constantly in actual use, which naturally should help students see easily that it is in real service. While reflecting 100% the grammar of present-day English, it carries messages, just as Japanese, for describing what is going on, performing in putting in words, making future commitments, affecting the listeners and readers in terms of attitude and action, explaining and clarifying the intentions and meaning of the person doing the speaking when required to do so (Leech 1983) .

In the case of professionally qualified journalists, we are more or less assured that they are more capable than others, of doing their business; although they may be constrained in some way, mostly by time, they are regarded in general as being qualified for their assignment. Often they do not just write, but give oral reports of their writing as well. They sound more natural because they know what they are talking about. This is generally how language is actually used; the person doing the

speaking is supposed to know the stuff coming out of his or her mouth, except when he is talking in his sleep or under the influence of such stuff as alcohol and other drugs. Their writing and reporting should be good enough examples for our students and learners to model on. The writer is sure of the value, the time, and effort they spend studying them because of the professional level of the journalists' language skills .

VOA is completely funded by the U.S. government; its broadcasting service was started in 1942 for promoting 'democracy' for people living in areas not as much favored in the system as they should, shortly after the United States entered World War II with Nazi Germany(for more details the reader can log on to the website— <http://www.voanews.com/english/About/index.cfm>) .

Because of this, some people take VOA as an organ of the United States government. At times it might look like one, and it really is in part in the case of their editorials but it also has a rather strict publicly-declared code with regard to the reliability of news sources, accuracy of information, balance of antagonizing views, fairness to all parties concerned, etc. This is clearly and definitely stated in their website(http://www.voanews.com/english/about/VOA_Charter.cfm) . The author thus believes that VOA programs are good and sound materials to be used in class, as long as those using them take the materials objectively, and with a grain of salt at times, if and when necessary. Because of the nature of the material, we should be cautious at times since their editorials are, naturally, opinionated.

Modern Japanese society needs more and more students and young people to be able to have

access to information in English and understand it. Furthermore, in many cases, conferences and meetings across the borders of countries are conducted with English as the medium of communication. People equipped with English skills and ability can be in a favorable, secure position in the present day and will be even more so in the future. This is what the college and university students should be recommended or urged to be prepared for regardless of their major.

2. Cause for Social & Mental Development Among Young People

For some time in the past, high schools in Japan have been widely and publicly recommended to use newspapers, i.e., Japanese editions of newspapers, in the classroom 'for developing the students' mental and social awareness.' The author, as well as others, believes that the same recommendation would apply quite naturally when we teach English, which is a foreign language for the majority of the students, at intermediate and higher stages of learning, in order to acquire, or to get used to all-round working knowledge of the language. Since college students have learned English for at least six years, they are supposed to have learned its basics. Using authentic language materials can have the same effect as using Japanese newspapers in class in high schools, if it is done on the assumption that they have learned the basics. Using materials written in English will surely help college students in Japan become more aware, in an ever-shrinking world, especially for developing a sense of immediacy of what is going on in other parts of the world. It would stimulate the students in general to further

development, mentally and socially, into becoming part of full membership of the global community.

There are two other points that the author would like to draw the readers' attention to. One is that a lot of English majors need one or two remedial courses of work in English in order to form a good enough basis for further development of their English skills. For this purpose, articles of the day are best, in many ways, in that there almost always exist by necessity, behind news events, facts which the students are either familiar with or may have interest in and that certain structural patterns and vocabulary items are used again and again, providing them with a better chance of consolidating the basics of real English. Furthermore, for those in need of forming a secure foundation of the language, the programs provide ample opportunity to learn and re-learn the important parts of English — structure and vocabulary — and become more certain that they have learned what they think they have learned. The sense of confidence is very crucial in language learning. Learners learn what they can be sure of, whether or not they are right or wrong in their judgment.

Because of this, the author encourages his students to start reading aloud the materials whose meaning they are sure they know perfectly, with a long pause in between phrases on their first reading, with imaginary listeners trying attentively to devour every word and phrase in their reading. When they reach the level where they can fully absorb the whole piece while reading a given passage or the whole article, they can gradually increase their rate of reading and repeat their oral reading at least fifty times in a row, which would lead them to a better command of well-balanced

English skills in the future. The importance of oral reading applies to individual words as well; certain words, numbers, and proper nouns, among others, pose a lot of trouble to Japanese learners of English. They are advised to become able to pronounce these articulately enough before they can sound more natural in communication.

3. Aspects of Language Study

When the author started 'teaching' his students in class about 40 years ago, he practiced, or at least tried to practice what he believed—and still does—to be the role of a teacher, to be a good stimulant to his students, as a person senior to them following the same path of learning and studying English, a person for them to emulate during the course, and hopefully to surpass him sometime, even during, or months and years after they leave him.

This comes from his belief that the best education, especially in language learning and teaching, is to help students decide, by and for themselves, what they should or want to learn; teachers are just there to encourage their pupils and students to be able to do so with facility and efficiency by giving them quick answers to their questions, seeing to it that they constantly provide them with a meta-level of intellectual stimulation, besides reaching higher than average levels of oral skill in expressing themselves in the target language. Teachers themselves should be able to display good enough models for their students to emulate in terms of working knowledge of the language and academic achievement, as well as a satisfactory level of pronunciation, communication skills, just as some forms of art—singing, dancing, playing a musical instrument,

which generally can be achieved only after months and years of strenuous efforts, diligence and perseverance. Here lies the place for qualified language teachers using authentic materials treating issues of the day. The materials are as new to all those present in class as to the teacher. The teacher in charge should be able to set a good enough model with skills required as language users. He has to be able to demonstrate that he has an edge over them in as many areas as possible, from preferably a professional level of oral performance to working levels of linguistic, phonetic, pragmatic, sociolinguistic, and academic levels of achievement.

In order to tackle some of the facts and figures as well as encyclopedic information efficiently in class. We can now do so far more easily than before, thanks to compact electronic gadgets available now, which cover most of the information necessary in one unit for daily transactions. The one the author finds handiest has all reliable information on the meaning of regular words, phrases, and pronunciation—an English-English, an English-Japanese dictionary, a dictionary of English collocations, and a comprehensive Japanese dictionary—the whole unit of which he encourages his students to use as often as necessary in and outside the class and also when they prepare for the class.

4. Why VOA Programs Are Recommended

It is a well-known fact that there are quite a few English majors in colleges and universities in Japan who need a remedial course of basic grammar of English, even though they have supposedly learned the basics of the English language. VOA materials can help them learn, and re-learn the basics since

the same structure, speech patterns and vocabulary appear again and again even when different sentences are used carrying different messages in different contexts. When they come to realize that English is a language used as a communication medium in an ever-shrinking world, they should naturally be more motivated to learn and study it.

Up to high school education, many of the students apparently just passed the time of day and followed their impulsive, particular and often accidental interest in other areas, without tackling first things first—the conventional three basic R's—reading, writing and arithmetic even though the classes were taught, studied and practiced in the Japanese language. In the area of English education, most of the teachers have neglected, on their part, to train their learners and students well enough in basics. The majority of high school graduates are not being equipped with a satisfactory level of basic English. We should help them train themselves in the basics in remedial courses, which the students in general hate even the idea of nor are the teachers themselves very willing to work on consolidating language foundations in such remedial classes. Teachers usually do not consider the classes of that nature as constituting what they want or are called on to teach. They have their own declared or undeclared special fields or subjects of contents other than remedial education. Most of the college and university students lack these basics, mostly because of lack of exposure to English, in and out of their English classes. There are obviously no native-English speaker-teacher-volunteers, who are well-educated, nice and friendly, walking around on the streets ready to help Japanese youths who want to learn or practice 'real English.' An image of this

sort is actually even weird. Basically, the students are supposed to do this all by themselves, or by going to a cramming school of their own accord.

Apart from the above, students justifiably complain that they are not given practical enough materials; teachers help them only with their reading, grammar, and translation work. This is not the whole truth but the time for English classes is so limited, only 4 hours or so, on an average, a week totaling 140 hours per year and the teachers may not know how to get access to free, authentic, and up-to-date materials the students in general 'claim they want.' The use of VOA programs could provide a solution to this situation. At the college level they can use VOA materials at no charge as long as they credit the source of the texts. They only have to link to: <http://www.voanews.com/english>, to view tens of the latest news articles from all over the world on their computer screen. They can usually get the audio version of the same text in one or two days. Since the news reporter himself or herself reads the whole article, the person doing the reading, theoretically, has it all at the tip of his or her fingers. Listeners can, therefore, feel confident that the speaker knows what he or she is reading or talking about, which is very close to real life talking—getting it straight from the speaker's mouth.

II. How VOA Materials Are Used

1. What Students Have to Learn

Japanese, who are planning to study at American colleges and universities, are required to take the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), just as other non-native English speaker-candidates

are. It is a well-known fact that the Japanese do quite poorly on it, close to the bottom of the list of all the TOEFL examinees. This poor achievement is quite understandable since Japanese is not part of the Indo-European Family and our language, values, religion, and cultural institutions are entirely different from those of the Indo-European family of languages.

Moreover, there are a couple of other factors; throughout their compulsory education, 6 years of the basic foundation forming school education is done entirely in Japanese, mainly thanks to the advancement of education and modern civilization of this country. At the core of the compulsory education lies the main purpose of primary education which constitutes teaching and training children in the 3R's—reading, writing, and arithmetic.

As is stated above, the TOEFL is an accredited examination for measuring the skills of English required of students-to-be for higher education in such countries as the United States of America, Canada, Australia, the UK and other countries, where English is the medium of communication in education.

Here lies the major justification for the writer using VOA materials: if and when a non-native English speaker can handle them with efficiency and facility with his skill in reading, writing and comprehension, he should be able to tackle what are required in the institutions of higher education in such countries where reading and writing academic papers are required. The audio version of the texts should help him get used to natural English and enable him to listen better and to accommodate his or her pronunciation to the model. This will help the student prepare for

future lectures conducted in English.

A word or two along the same line: a lot of Japanese students these days are considered to be lacking in intellectual readiness or enough knowledge to digest and rate different views of the people they come across. They are not equipped with common denominators to do the task—such as academic abstract vocabulary—which is unfortunately a fact that many counterparts among American college graduates might also share. Many of them lack knowledge of the world, what is going on in the world, as well as enough basic grammar and English expressions to build their sentences with, or to fully understand what others are saying in English which is beyond their level of vocabulary for mutual communication. The present author believes that this is the case and he has been using the VOA materials to bridge the gap between what the students want and what they need to, or should, learn, and study. The following article dated September 26, 2005 is part of the VOA news text actually used recently in his seminar. A rough explanation of how the class on this particular occasion was conducted follows:

(Text of the VOA article)

Hurricane Evacuees Begin Returning Home

By Greg Flakus

Houston

26 September 2005/09/30

Listen to Flakus report(Real Audio)

Traffic is moving steadily back into Houston, as a staggered return policy for people evacuated ahead of Hurricane Rita takes effect in the fourth-largest city in the United States. Many

services have yet to be restored, but officials expect things to be back to normal by week's end.

Traffic is heavy, but steady along most major highways leading back into Houston. On Monday, Authorities want only people from certain less-affected areas to return. People from areas farther south are supposed to return during the next two days.

In the flow of vehicles, there are people trying to get back to all areas evacuated before the storm, including some of the areas that were heavily damaged, like the cities of Port Arthur and Beaumont.

Authorities are towing abandoned vehicles to police lots, where owners can pick them up at no charge. Many people ran out of gasoline as they fled the city in heavy traffic last week and had to leave their vehicles on roadsides. Enough gas is available now that motorists returning on Interstate 45 and other major routes are not having a problem obtaining fuel.

Other services are coming back slowly. Many restaurants and stores remain closed, and motels along the return routes are fully booked.

Even though he knows his house is not inhabitable, Beaumont resident Nick Anderson drove for hours trying to get back, and could not find a hotel.

— the rest is left out for economy of space —

First of all, the author called on one member in his class to read the headline and give its structural account. The student did his assignment well enough, dividing the whole by binary branching (Radford 2004), i.e., NP+VP with an apt translation of it in Japanese. The writer added his further explanation of the affix '—ee' in the word 'evacuee' with its meaning and a group of words with the same ending hoping that they would be able to hook the meaning onto the same group words for helping their memory: employee; examinee; interviewee; trainee; nominee, etc. Some showed quite an interest in this as well as the affix '—er' of the verb 'stagger' appearing in the first paragraph with its meaning of iterative, whose Japanese counterparts are generally expressed with repetition of one or two syllables of the same sounds — 'to tatter' *zuta-zuta ni naru*; 'to glitter' *kira-kira hikaru*; 'to chatter' *pecha-pecha shaberu*; 'to snicker' *niya-niya suru*; 'to flicker' *yura-yura suru*; 'to patter' *para-para to furu*; 'to loiter' *bura-bura aruku*, etc. Apparently some students especially liked the different way of describing similar phenomena in different languages.

As for the pronunciation of such proper nouns as 'Beaumont,' 'Abbeville,' 'Houston,' etc., the first two of which are not found in an ordinary dictionary, the reading by the reporter Greg Flakus helped them. In the case of 'Houston,' the students' guess-work from their phonic knowledge failed: they simply have to learn things like this by rote memorization (Pinker 2000).

The author has taken advice from Saito and Saito (2003), as well as his own inner voice for tens of

years, advised the students to practice reading of the article whose meaning they know completely at least fifty times at a rather slow pace on their first reading, with as long a pause as reasonably possible put in at the end of each meaningful group of words and phrases.

With this particular news article, some explanations and information were necessary on such words, which reflect cultural, or administrative differences, such as 'interstate highways,' 'officials,' 'authorities,' etc., together with the meaning of 'staggered policy,' 'available,' 'to book ~,' etc. whose meaning can be better understood with the Japanese counterpart expressions.

2. Dictionaries

Any type of dictionary would be OK if the user realizes that the place of a dictionary is for him to use his brain better than otherwise for logical thinking and sound reasoning in context on the basis of his knowledge and understanding of the world. With this in mind, what the writer now recommends is an electronic dictionary containing several functions of conventional types of dictionaries and an encyclopedia. This portable gadget comes in really handy; students can get access to their individual needs instantly while they are in group activity in class. He also encourages them to use this type of dictionary before, during, and after class; the more knowledge or information they have, the better in general they can use their logic and their brain.

As long as the students have the basics—basic grammar, basic knowledge of their culture and society, some knowledge of modern society and the world they live in with an interest in things outside

themselves, beyond small circles of their social interaction, the more vocabulary they have or are familiar with, the better and deeper insight they should have into the situations and the surroundings they are in. With this, they can and should be able to come closer to full membership of an ideal adult society of the present-day world.

3. Acceptable Pronunciation

In the previous section, the author touched on some characteristics of the pronunciation of English.

He would recommend that English learners and students in Japan get used to counting figures in English at an early stage of their learning, being always conscious of the difference in the two different numerical systems correctly. When we would want to learn about what is going on in the world, we should be familiar with the way numbers are counted in the target language, which appear constantly in important contexts—about facts and figures of nations and areas concerned.

Between Japanese and English, there exists a troublesome difference between the systems—five-digit grouping of the Japanese numbers versus the four-digit grouping of the English. Usually college entrance examinations do not make too big a point about this difference, high school students generally make light of the significance of this kind of difference in life; some are even known to read figures written in English in Japanese. In this respect, though high school graduates often complain about the lack of practical aspects of language learning and studying, they are mostly college entrance-examination-oriented; the majority of them do not

learn or study what is not given on entrance examinations. They should be reminded from time to time at an early stage of their learning a foreign language to stop and think what they should learn if they really want to learn what they declare and proclaim is important in learning the target language. With an audio version of VOA materials they can constantly practice reading, using and listening to them since figures appear again and again in various programs on the VOA.

In addition to this, some proper names are pronounced differently from their first language and in rather 'egocentric' ways in English, just as in Japanese. Our students should be reminded of this commonplace phenomenon between languages. They should refer to pronunciation dictionaries for this information, but unfortunately the dictionaries do not cover all the proper names; furthermore, though students are interested in real world English, they are not so much interested in the proper names which are outside their immediate interest. Herein also lies the significance of using the audio version of a given text.

Reporters reading their articles know the acceptable —or the way the person knows or believes his or hers to be —pronunciation of the proper nouns in their writing which are generally important in their own right in context. Needless to say, names of great philosophers, thinkers, artists, and statesmen constitute an important part of a given cultural and intellectual heritage of a given nation. They are just as, or sometimes more important than average words. Their acceptable pronunciation, which is very different from Japanese, should be respected to the same degree, or closer to, their acceptable pronunciation.

4. VOA Special English Programs

The author recommends his students try and listen to the VOA Special English Programs on their own every day and also during the long vacations, in summer and spring, since the Japanese are not so much exposed to 'real' English as in Europe and other countries overseas. Their Special English Programs are meant to bridge the gap between English learners not fluent in English and those whose English is good enough to communicate with native-speakers of English (http://www.voanews.com/specialenglish/about_special_english.cfm). The programs are broadcast with a core vocabulary of 1500 words, presumably based on an intuition on the part of VOA in the selection of the words. In the fields of medicine and science, technical terms are in use frequently beyond the scope of the core vocabulary. The announcers read at a slower pace, about two-thirds the speed of standard English. This helps people learning English to hear each word clearly. It also helps people who are fluent English speakers understand complex subjects. (ditto)

Furthermore the VOA Special English furthermore has quite a few good points besides the points mentioned above. For example, the variety of contents of their programs: People in America; This is America; Economics Report; The Making of a Nation; American Short Stories. People can listen to these programs like a voice magazine with the contents ranging from agriculture to traveling. They could just sit back and relax listening to the programs as if leafing through pages of their favorite weeklies and monthlies.

III. How Much More Should Be Done

At a different university from the author's present place of work where the writer taught English part-time for 20 years, until the spring of 2005. The students liked the VOA programs very much and four students out of 20 who responded to the course evaluation rated the contents of the course 'excellent.' Roughly one-third of them have had an experience of studying abroad before the end of their secondary school education. The author had them write a comment or evaluation of any of the news items they worked on in class at the end of each day, between 200 and 300 words. They almost always handed in a very good piece of writing with virtually no serious mistakes in paragraph formation, word order, or failure to include a verb in a sentence. Most of the mistakes they made were in tense, dropping of a 'be' in the passive form, omitting an 's' with the third person singular subject in the present tense and with a plural noun, or an unnecessary addition of an 's' to abstract nouns or uncountable nouns. The author does not make too much a fuss about these, which, after all, they learn from experience or these are supposed to come from whims, so to speak, of a given language, or from different perceptions of nature and the world in different language systems.

With the present group of students, the author is planning to ask them to write comments, opinions, and ideas taking hints from the programs treated in class, or their evaluation of each class for the present author's own reference, as well as for the students to improve their communication skills, especially in writing. The author got the hint from Clark (2003), specifically from pages 9 and 10 in

his 'The Essential 55' done with great enthusiasm to aid students in every way.

A special note of thanks:

The author is especially grateful to Associate Professor Patrick Enbody, one of his colleagues at the university, for his comments and suggestions on the first draft of the paper.

References

- Bolinger, Dwight. 1986. *Intonation and Its Parts*. Stanford University Press.
- . 1989. *Intonation and Its Uses*. Stanford University Press.
- Clark, Ron. 2003. *The Essential 55*. Hyperion, N.Y.
- Kobayashi, Toshihiko. 2004. *VOA: Special English News & Regular English News*. Goken, Tokyo.
- Leech, Geoffrey. 1983. *Principles of Pragmatics*. Longman.
- Radford, A. 2002. *Minimalist Syntax*. Cambridge.
- Saito, Takashi & C. Saito. 2004. *Nihongoryoku-to-Eigoryoku*. Chukoshinsho.
- Wichman, A. 2000. *Intonation in Text and Discourse*. Longman.

VOA Website:

- <http://www.voanews.com/english/About/index.cfm>
<http://www.voanews.com/english/about/VOA>
<http://www.voanews.com/specialenglish>