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How Long Does It Take for Japanese Speakers to Learn English?*

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Abstract

This paper addresses the question of how long it takes to learn a second language in order to provide the best possible estimate of the time required for Japanese speakers to develop a high proficiency level in English. The data examined come from assertions made by Japanese educators in English, Japanese learners' TOEIC scores, English speakers' acquisition of Japanese at the U.S. Foreign Service Institute, and the time needed for Japanese speakers to acquire native-like English vocabulary. Results indicate that Japanese speakers need around 2,500 hours to attain a high level of English proficiency and at least twice as much to attain native-like English vocabulary. Given that Japanese students normally have approximately 1,000 hours of exposure to English in secondary school and university, the findings suggest that, first and foremost, we should be realistic about the outcome of English language teaching in Japan without expecting too much from it.

Introduction

In first language acquisition, it is generally assumed that any normal child successfully acquires whatever happens to be the language spoken in his or her community in the first several years (cf. Pinker, 1984). How many hours of exposure do they receive during that period? McLaughlin (1987, p. 46) states that "assuming that young children are exposed to a normal linguistic environment for at least five hours a day, they will have had, conservatively, 9,000 hours [9,125 hours, to be exact] of exposure between the ages of one and six years." Odlin (1989, p. 40), quoting Slobin's (1982) work, suggests that children acquire the "essential of linguistic structure" of any native languages in similar lengths of time, that is, in approximately the first five years. Based on McLaughlin's (1987) assumption that children are exposed to their first languages for five hours a day, this amounts to 7,300 hours of exposure between the ages of one and five years. Finally, Lightbown and Spada (1999, p. 2) state that "it is generally accepted that by age four, children have mastered the basic structures of the language (or languages) which have been spoken to them in these early years." Again, assuming five hours of daily exposure, this adds up to 5,475 hours of exposure between the ages of one and four. These figures indicate that children's success in learning the structure of their first languages is based on at least 5,500 to 9,000 hours of exposure in the first

four to six years of their life.¹

How about second language acquisition? It is not so easy to answer this question due to the several additional complexities of second language acquisition. First, the native language of the learner will have effects (e.g., Odlin, 1989). For example, a native speaker of a language related to English (e.g., French, German) would find it easier to learn English than a native speaker of a language unrelated to English (e.g., Japanese, Chinese). Secondly, there seem to be greater individual differences among second language learners, due to such factors as their age and aptitude (e.g., Skehan, 1989). For example, the age of the learner may affect the speed and the outcomes of second language acquisition, although this issue is not yet settled in second language acquisition research (e.g., Bialystok & Hakuta, 1994). Finally, it is difficult to define what is meant by *learning* a second language. That is, what level of proficiency in a second language does a learner need to attain to be called someone who has learned the language? Is it a survival level at which a learner can handle everyday situations and topics in a second language? Or a proficiency level equivalent to that of a native speaker?

Despite these complications, it is worthwhile to attempt to answer the question of how long it takes to learn a second language, not least because of its practical importance. After all, once we set our mind to learning a second language, the first thing we need to know is what it takes to achieve that goal. Therefore, information about the basic amount of time required “is of special interest to teachers, administrators, program designers, and students alike” (Omaggio, 2001, p. 25). In other words, this information would be a prerequisite for developing effective curriculums and setting realistic goals for them (cf. Kunihiro, 1999, pp. 341-343).

In this paper, I attempt to answer the question focusing on the case of Japanese speakers learning English as a second language. By Japanese speakers, I have in mind the majority of Japanese native speakers who start to learn English at the age of 12 upon entering junior high school in Japan. By learning English, I mean acquiring a high communicative ability that would allow the learners to use (i.e., listen, speak, read, write) English fluently and accurately so that they can deal with both familiar and unfamiliar situations and topics. Although learners who have attained this level may not be native-like, making occasional errors in grammar and vocabulary, overall, they have little difficulty communicating in English. Admittedly, this definition is quite broad, but it would serve as a reasonable working definition of success in second language learning, where native-like attainment is a rarity (cf. Selinker, 1972). In the following, I examine relevant data from Japanese-speaking learners of English as well as English-speaking learners of Japanese, which is followed by the discussion of the implications of the findings for English language teaching in Japan.

Japanese Speakers' Acquisition of English

Data relevant to the question of how long it takes for a Japanese speaker to acquire English come from two sources. One is assertions made by Japanese educators in the English language. Kaoru Kobayashi, one of the “masters” of English featured in Sugita (1996, p. 259), suggests the “magic number” 2,000 as the number of hours required for a Japanese to build up a solid foundation for English. Ishii (2000), in his book on how to learn English in Japan, claims that it takes 2,000 hours to acquire English. However, short of any supporting evidence, the 2,000-hour theory is at best based on experience or anecdotes and thus should be treated with caution.

The second source provides data on Japanese speakers' scores on the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC), on the basis of which one could infer the amount of time required to reach a particular level. The TOEIC is a proficiency test of English as a second language developed by Educational Testing Service in the U.S. in 1979 and has increasingly been popular especially among Japanese business people and university students as a yardstick of their communicative ability in English.

According to *TOEIC test 2001: Data & Analysis* (Institute for International Business Communication, 2002), in 2001, a total of 38,807 university freshmen in Japan took the TOEIC in the Institutional Program, whose average score was 356. The TOEIC proficiency scale stipulates that this is a level at which the learners are supposed to have developed a “minimum proficiency to communicate in everyday conversation” (Institute for International Business Communication, 2002, p. 9). International Communication Consultants (2002) provided an estimate of the hours of instruction needed to attain certain TOEIC scores, based on a sample of 2,000 Japanese company workers attending a twice-a-week, in-house English conversation class taught by a native speaker. The results are given in (1), which shows how many hours of instruction were necessary to improve TOEIC scores by hundred points (International Communication Consultants, 2002, p. 3; Kano & Otsuka, 2002, p. 6).

(1) 300 -> 400 points	200 hours
400 -> 500 points	250 hours
500 -> 600 points	300 hours
600 -> 700 points	350 hours
700 -> 800 points	400 hours

(1) indicates that Japanese freshmen, with the average score of 356, would need to study English for another 1,200 to 1,500 hours to reach 800, a level at which the learners are supposed to have established the foundation to be able to communicate in English properly in any situations despite occasional errors in grammar (Institute for International Business Communication, 2002, p. 9).

In order to estimate the total amount of time needed for a Japanese to reach 800 on the TOEIC, we also need to know how much the Japanese freshmen had studied before entering university. According to the *Courses of Study for Middle School* compiled by the Ministry of Education (1989a), those freshmen had received three to four English classes per week in middle school. Given that a school year in Japan's secondary school consists of 35 weeks, it adds up to 105 to 140 classes per year and to 315 to 420 classes over the three-year period in middle school. Since a class is 50 minutes long, it is 87.5 to 116.7 hours a year and 262.5 to 350 hours over the three-year period. In high school, more freedom is given for each school to decide how long it teaches English, but four 50-minute-long English classes a week would be a good estimate (Ministry of Education, 1989b). If so, this amounts to 350 hours over the three years in high school. Altogether, the university freshmen had received 612.5 to 700 hours of English instruction in middle and high school. Taking into consideration the amount of time the students must have spent studying English outside the classroom (e.g., at home and in a cram school), a reasonable estimate would be that the Japanese freshmen had received approximately 1,000 hours of exposure to English before entering university.

Thus, the Japanese students have studied English for roughly 1,000 hours before entering university, and they still need to study it for an additional 1,200 to 1,500 hours to reach 800 on the TOEIC. This means that it would take a total of 2,200 to 2,500 hours for Japanese speakers to reach the 800 level, at which they could be considered to have “learned” English with little difficulty communicating in the language. Note that these numbers are only slightly higher than the number 2,000 suggested by Kobayashi and Ishii.

English Speakers' Acquisition of Japanese

Given the linguistic distance between English and Japanese, it might not be unreasonable to assume that just as it is difficult for Japanese native speakers to learn English, so it is difficult for English native speakers to learn Japanese (although in different ways). If so, the amount of time needed for English speakers to learn Japanese can be taken as an indication of the amount of time needed for Japanese speakers to learn English. An estimate of how long it takes for English native speakers to learn various foreign languages including Japanese is made on the basis of information from foreign language courses at the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) of the U.S. Department of State (Liskin-Gasparro, 1982). In the FSI language courses, foreign service officers are taught their host countries' languages intensively (i.e., 30 hours a week) in small-size classes so that they can acquire practical communication skills in the target languages (Liskin-Gasparro, 1982; Odlin, 1989; Omaggio, 1986, 2001; Oxford & Rhodes, 1988).

Liskin-Gasparro (1982) (reproduced in Omaggio, 1986, p. 21, 2001, p. 26) provided a chart showing the amount of time needed for U.S. diplomats to attain particular levels of oral proficiency in the intensive FSI courses. According to the chart, it takes 2,400 hours (80 weeks) to 2,760 hours (92 weeks) of instruction for English speakers to reach Level 2+, 3, or 3+ in Japanese (contingent on the aptitude of the learner). Level 3 would satisfy the criterion of “learning” assumed in this paper as being the level of “minimum professional proficiency” at which learners can handle a variety of situations and topics with sporadic errors never interfering with communication (Omaggio, 1986, p. 15, 2001, p. 18).

While Japanese is among the most difficult Group IV languages (along with Arabic, Chinese, and Korean), Dutch, French, Spanish, etc. are the easiest Group I languages, in which English speakers can achieve Level 2, 2+, or 3 in 720 hours (24 weeks). German, Bulgarian, Greek, etc. are Group II languages, in which English speakers can attain Level 2/2+, 2+/3, or 3/3+ in 1320 hours (44 weeks), with Russian, Hungarian, Turkish, etc. being Group III languages, in which English speakers can reach Level 2, 2+, or 3 in 1320 hours (44 weeks).²

However, caution is necessary in interpreting the FSI data for two reasons. First, with no concrete evidence provided by the FSI, it is not clear how much real data it is based on, or to what degree it reflects informal understandings based on experience (J. Liskin-Gasparro, personal communication, August 19, 2003). Secondly, the FSI estimate is based on data collected in a “very special context” (Omaggio, 2001, p. 25), that of 30-hour-a-week intensive language courses for training diplomatic personnel taught in small-size classes, and therefore may underestimate the time required in a context in which instruction is provided only several hours a week (Oxford & Rhodes, 1988, p. 6).

Nonetheless, studies using the FSI proficiency scale (or some further developments of them) have produced some encouraging results consistent with the FSI estimate.³ First, the time needed for English speakers to reach a particular level does seem to differ according to the language group the target language belongs to (for a review, see Tschirner & Heilenman, 1998). In one study (Walker, Williams, & Navarrete, 1988), 72 FBI Special Agents attended intensive foreign language courses at the Defense Language Institute. Nineteen of them were taught a Group I language (Italian, Italian-Sicilian), 26 of them a Group III language (Polish, Vietnamese, Russian, Czech), and 27 a Group IV language (Arabic, Korean, Chinese). After 36 weeks (1,080 hours) of instruction, learners of Group I languages had on average reached Level 2, whereas after 47 weeks (1,410 hours) of instruction, learners of Group III and Group IV languages on average had reached Level 2, and Level 1+, respectively. Thus, the results are largely consistent with the FSI language divisions.

Secondly, it seems extremely difficult for English speakers in secondary school or college

foreign language programs to reach Level 3 on the FSI oral proficiency scale (for reviews, see Omaggio, 2001, pp. 21-27 and Tschirmer & Heilenman, 1998). Research shows that after several years of instruction at secondary school or college, learners can only reach Level 2 or 2+ even in “easy” languages like French. This is not surprising if one compares the amount of instruction the learners have received and the time required to reach Level 3 as stipulated in the FSI chart. Assuming that secondary school students receive five hours a week of foreign language instruction in 30-week-long school year, this amounts to 150 hours a year and 600 hours in four years. According Tschirmer and Heilenman (1998, p. 152), foreign language majors at U.S. college are typically required to receive about 700 hours of instruction. These hours are not enough to reach Level 3 even in the easiest languages (720 hours), let alone in more difficult languages (1,320 to 2,760 hours).

Finally, it appears that when instruction is indeed provided sufficiently, some learners can attain Level 3. In the Walker et al. (1988) study mentioned above, six of the 26 learners of Group III languages had reached Level 3 after 47 weeks (1,410 hours) of instruction when the FSI data expect the attainment of Level 2, 2+, or 3 in Group III languages in 1320 hours (44 weeks). Hamm (1988) looked at two groups of English-speaking high school graduates in Canada. One group consisted of 14 subjects who had received core French instruction from Grade 1 through high school and had taken a six-week French course in Quebec after graduating, with a total of approximately 1,500 hours of exposure. Another group consisted of 20 subjects who had attended French immersion programs through high school and had had some traveling or working experience in a French-speaking environment, with a total of approximately 3,000 to 7,000 hours of exposure. Results showed that the core French group had attained the median French speaking proficiency of 1+2 with one reaching Level 3, and that the immersion group had reached that of 2/2+ with six attaining Level 3. The findings may be less than expected under the FSI estimate (as it expects the attainment of Level 2, 2+, or 3 in 720 hours in Group I languages), but they at least suggest that, given sufficient amounts of instruction/exposure, Level 3 is attainable even in mostly formal settings.

In sum, the FSI data suggest that 2,400 to 2,760 hours are needed for English speakers to develop Level 3 oral proficiency in Japanese. Although this is an indirect measure of the time needed for Japanese speakers to learn English, it is interesting to note that the estimate is close to the estimates of 2,000 hours (Kobayashi, Ishii) and 2,200 to 2,500 hours (based on TOEIC scores) made for Japanese-speaking learners of English.

Notes on Vocabulary Acquisition

So far, I have discussed the time needed to learn a language in terms of the development of general proficiency. In this section, I shift the focus to one specific area of language proficiency, vocabulary, and consider how long it takes Japanese speakers to learn English vocabulary. Estimates of how many words the average English native speaker knows vary from 40,000 to 80,000 words (Bloom, 2000; Lewis, 1993; Miller & Gildea, 1987). Bloom (2000, p. 25) states that “the average American or British high school graduate has learned about 60,000 words,” and that “since word learning starts at about 12 months of age, this averages to learning 3,750 new words a year, or 10 words a day—a word every waking 90 minutes” (assuming one is awake 15 hours a day). If the high school graduate has needed 90 minutes to learn a word, then he or she must have spent 90,000 hours learning 60,000 words! This may be an overestimation since not all of the waking hours would count as linguistic exposure. But, even assuming McLaughlin’s (1987) five hours of daily exposure (which may well be too conservative especially for later years of childhood), the figure amounts to nearly 30,000 hours (29,200 hours, to be exact) between the ages of one and 17 years. This is, conservatively, three to five times more than the time children spend acquiring the basic structure of their first language (i.e., 5,500 to 9,000 hours).

How long does it take for a second language learner of English to acquire a vocabulary equivalent to that of a mature native speaker? Gairns and Redman (1986, pp. 67-68) estimated that 1,000 vocabulary items could be learned over 125 hours of English language instruction, which is eight words per hour. Based on this assumption, Lewis (1993, p. 122) suggested that it would take 6,000 hours (6,250 hours, to be exact) for second language learners of English to acquire the near-native vocabulary of 50,000 words. If the average native speaker’s vocabulary is 40,000 words (Miller & Gildea, 1987, p. 94), the time required is 5,000 hours. The number increases to 7,500 hours and 10,000 hours, respectively, if the native speaker knows 60,000 words (Bloom, 2000) and 80,000 words (i.e., Miller & Gildea, 1987). Thus, it would take 5,000 to 10,000 hours for second language learners to acquire native-like vocabulary in English.

This estimate is much higher than the previous estimate of around 2,500 hours needed for Japanese speakers to attain a high level of general proficiency in English. This discrepancy is partly due to the different criteria used: Here, vocabulary learning is considered in terms of native-like attainment, whereas the development of general proficiency was considered in terms of attainment of a high, but not necessarily native-like, level. However, the discrepancy would still suggest that native-like attainment of vocabulary is by its nature much more time-consuming than the acquisition of general proficiency, as is also evident in first language acquisition. Thus, Japanese speakers, having developed a high level of general proficiency in English, still need to have further

exposure of 2,500 to 7,500 hours to attain anything like native-like vocabulary.

Summary and Implications

This paper has examined data that bear on the issue of how long it takes to learn a second language in order to provide the best possible estimate of the time needed for Japanese speakers to develop a high level of English proficiency that would allow them to communicate without difficulty. The Japanese educators in English, Kobayashi and Ishii, speculated that 2,000 hours is required. An estimate based on Japanese learners' TOEIC scores points to 2,200 to 2,500 hours. The FSI data from English-speaking learners of Japanese indicate that 2,400 to 2,760 hours of instruction are necessary for attaining a high proficiency level in Japanese. Finally, data on vocabulary acquisition suggest that it takes even longer, 5,000 to 10,000 hours, for Japanese speakers to acquire near-native English vocabulary. Thus, the question of how long it takes for Japanese speakers to learn English can be answered as follows: *It takes Japanese speakers around 2,500 hours to become proficient enough to communicate in English without difficulty and at least twice as much time to acquire native-like English vocabulary.*

However, it should be noted that this rough estimate is provisional based on limited data and thus that more work needs to be done to confirm it.

Assuming the correctness of this estimate, what implications does it have for English language teaching in Japan? First and foremost, it suggests that we should be realistic about the outcome without expecting too much from it (cf. Omaggio, 2001, p. 26). As discussed above, Japanese students normally study English, in and out of the classroom, for approximately 1,000 hours over the six-year period in junior and senior high school. This means that they need at least an additional 1,500 hours of exposure to achieve high communicative proficiency in English. Although some of them continue to study English at college, they normally have only two 90-minute classes per week for the first two years there. This amounts to no more than 180 additional hours (assuming the university school year is 30 weeks long), still more than 1,300 hours short of the 2,500-hour target. These numbers should make us realize why "Japanese people study English for as long as six or eight years but still can't communicate in English," a frequently-voiced complaint, which is unfair given these considerations.

Secondly, considering the limited time available for English language teaching in Japan, all teachers need to make utmost efforts to improve the quality of their teaching to maximize the efficacy of what little time they have for classroom instruction. For example, spending an hour translating a set of isolated sentences would not count as much as an hour of meaningful interaction with a teacher or an engaging text.

Finally, it is important to maximize the quantity of students' exposure to English because even the most effective classroom teaching would not enable Japanese students to acquire a good practical command of English, if all they have is approximately 1,000 hours of exposure spread over a six- or eight-year period. One thing to be done is to increase the learners' exposure to English outside the classroom. This may sound difficult to do considering the environment they are in: Typically, there is hardly any need or opportunity for them to use English outside the classroom. However, there are a number of English learning sources available in Japan, such as English conversation programs on TV or the radio, bilingual TV or satellite TV programs, audiovisual materials (CDs, videos, etc.), graded readers (cf. Day & Bamford, 1998), and English-language newspapers. These sources could easily be integrated with the classroom instruction so as to boost the students' exposure to English outside the classroom. Another thing that can be done is to introduce immersion-type, content-based instruction by teaching some of the content courses (e.g., math, social studies) at secondary school or university in English (see Kanatani, 2002, for a similar proposal among others). Such programs, if successfully implemented, would provide the Japanese students with greater exposure to English, thereby improving their chances of succeeding in learning English.

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Footnotes

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¹ If we assume that the children's first year also counts, as it might well do, the number amounts to 7,300 to 11,000 hours.

² Odlin (1989, p. 39) provided the "maximum lengths of intensive language courses" at the FSI for 1985 to 1986, which ranged from 20 weeks (600 hours) for the easiest languages such as French and Spanish and 44 weeks (1,320 hours) for the most difficult languages such as Japanese and Arabic. Odlin (1989, p. 39) states that the aim of all FSI courses is "to develop students' linguistic skills to a high level of proficiency that is comparable in each of the languages." However, it is not clear what Odlin means by a "high level of proficiency." The Liskin-Gasparro (1982) chart discussed above indicates that average-aptitude English speakers can reach between Level 2 and Level 2+ after 20 weeks (600 hours) of instruction in easy languages (French, Spanish) and that they can reach Level 2 after 44 weeks (1,320 hours) in difficult languages (Japanese, Arabic). At Level 2, learners can only handle simple situations and concrete topics with errors sometimes interfering with communication (Omaggio, 1986, p. 15). This indicates that, after 600 or 1,320 hours of instruction, "high-level" learners in Odlin's sense have not yet reached Level 3, the proficiency level that satisfies the definition of "learning" assumed in this paper.

³ The FSI scale has since been developed into the Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) scale and the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) scale. See Omaggio (2001, p. 11) for the historical details.