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English Language Oral Communication Lessons - A Further Consideration

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Abstract

Successful oral communication is dependent on how effectively a given language can be utilized in spoken word form. Oral Communication (OC) lessons should therefore be offered, principally in order to help students learn how to communicate well (enough) through the medium of speech in their chosen non-native tongue. The main observable deficiency in many or most English language OC lessons and exams. in Japan is most likely to be ‘inadequate’ / ‘insufficient’ output on the part of OC students. Many or most Japanese English language OC students often or generally do not ‘utter enough words’ or ‘sentences’ in the time available to them and ‘provide less information than they are, in fact, ‘able to furnish’. Therefore, a main aim of English language OC teachers in Japan must surely be to drive home to their students the vital importance of ‘engaging’ and ‘communicating sufficiently’, and thus ‘extensively’ enough, in public. This is an even more important prerequisite for ‘effective’ and ‘efficient’ OC than ‘communicating correctly’. Serious Japanese English language OC students must try to output sufficiently and make themselves properly understood (and thus known) in terms of their ideas, views, opinions and feelings, etc, as well as in the literal technical sense. They must therefore, whenever necessary, try to overcome whatever failings and inhibitions they have that work against the realisation of these objectives... and require to be assisted accordingly. This paper firstly lists what appear to be the main English language OC lesson and exam. performance-lowering problems, then proceeds to offer some related observations, reflections and conjectures before a short conclusion.

Key words : English Language Oral Communication

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1. Main English Language OC Lesson and Exam. Performance Problems:

It is contended here that the main observable deficiency in many or most English language OC lessons and exams. (at least in Japan) is most likely to be ‘inadequate’ / ‘insufficient output’ on the part of OC students: Many or most OC students often or generally do not ‘utter enough words’ or ‘sentences’ in the time available to them. They often or generally ‘provide less information than is desirable’ or even ‘acceptable’ because - most importantly - they often or generally ‘provide far less information than (in the opinion of their OC teachers) they are, in fact, ‘able to furnish’. Japanese OC students often or generally: a) ‘fail to output already taught words’ which they should therefore ‘know very well or perfectly well’; b) ‘fail to output already learned and familiar words’ which they (certainly do) ‘know very well or perfectly well’. Many or most OC students often or generally under-perform in OC lessons and exams. as a direct result of failures (A) and (B). Many or most OC students would often or generally thus ‘perform in a superior fashion’ (i.e. give better performances) if they “uttered enough words and sentences”, and thus ‘provided enough information’, using ‘already learned’ and familiar words which they (certainly do) ‘know very well or perfectly well’.

Based on extensive observations made in OC and non-OC English language lessons at junior high schools and high schools in Japan in the period 2003 to 2014 and at one provincial university over the past 2.5 years, the following list contains what seem likely to be the main reasons for these major shortcomings and resulting OC underperformance in Japan. The reasons are listed below in rough order of practical importance, from most to least salient. The variables listed can be treated as independent (and causal) or dependent, but in reality, presumably often, or for the most part, tend to affect each other.

It is vital not to lose sight of the fact that realistic foreign language OC tuition is intended to help students become not necessarily ‘excellent’ - let alone ‘perfect’ - foreign language speakers but ‘effective’ and ‘efficient’ ones who can make themselves sufficiently well understood (solely ‘in’ the target foreign language). Since the extent of student advancement is what really matters vis-a-vis any course of foreign language instruction, expectations about what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable OC performance must vary depending on the estimated median current ability of one’s own particular OC students. As such, the following problems should be identified as ‘serious’ only to the extent that they make clear the deficiencies or overall failure not only of students but past tuition efforts and / or the defective nature of current and planned educational initiatives. Teachers must, in the best interests of their students, continuously decide whether the magnitude and frequency of such observed problems renders them practically irrelevant, unimportant and thus acceptable (or at least tolerable) or important and thus unacceptable / intolerable. Problems need to be observed frequently enough or systematically - and be judged to be of serious enough magnitude - to warrant corrective intervention. Efforts to eliminate or reduce OC problems should only be attempted once prior cost-benefit analysis indicates that i) no superior, alternative course of action exists and ii) the chances of an adequate degree of success - outcome-wise - in the time-frame available, appear sufficiently high. Note that in all cases, ‘incorrect’ means ‘unacceptably defective’. Needless to say, it is a description that should only be awarded when no adequate / sufficient grounds for using more generous definitions exist and the ‘benefit-of-the-doubt’ cannot be granted.

01) Lack of sufficient interest and (thus) motivation to study and practice English:

Consciously and / or subconsciously, some or many students likely lack sufficient interest and thus motivation (during and / or after formal lesson time) to study, consider and practice English Reading Comprehension, Listening Comprehension, Writing and / or OC, with native and non-native speaking English teachers (especially the former) either to the 'maximum practical extent' or 'adequately / sufficiently';

02) Lack of sufficient pleasure and / or satisfaction:

Consciously and / or subconsciously, some or many students likely fail to derive 'sufficient pleasure and satisfaction' from some or all of their English language learning courses (because they are 'difficult' and / or 'problematic' in other ways) and activities and perform sub-optimally in terms of skill development and thus overall competency as a result. Vicious spirals can ensue;

03) Lack of sufficient motive and (thus) desire to study and practice the English language:

Consciously and / or subconsciously, some or many students likely think (erroneously or not) that they lack sufficient motive to study, consider and practice English language Reading Comprehension, Listening Comprehension, Writing and / or OC, with native and non-native speaking English teachers (especially the former) either to the 'maximum practical extent' or 'adequately / sufficiently';

04) Lack of sufficient motive and (thus) desire to communicate 'in' the English language:

Consciously and / or subconsciously, some or many students likely think (surely erroneously) that they lack sufficient motive to study, consider and practice English language Writing and / or OC, with native and non-native speaking English teachers (especially the former) to either the 'maximum practical extent' or 'adequately / sufficiently'. Note that such students may well believe to the contrary (consciously and / or subconsciously) that they do have sufficient motive to study, consider and

practice English language Reading Comprehension and Listening Comprehension;

05) Lack of sufficient motive and (thus) desire to communicate orally 'in' the English language:

Consciously and / or subconsciously, some or many students likely think (erroneously) that they lack sufficient motive to study, consider and practice English language OC, with native and non-native speaking English teachers (especially the former) to either the 'maximum practical extent' or 'adequately / sufficiently'. Note that such students may well believe to the contrary (consciously and / or subconsciously) that they do have at least sufficient motive to study, consider and practice English language Reading Comprehension, Listening Comprehension and Writing, etc.

06) Lack of confidence regarding communication:

Some or many students likely feel that they 'lack sufficient confidence' to communicate effectively in English - both in writing and via speech - with native and non-native speaking English teachers and especially strangers;

07) Lack of confidence regarding oral communication:

Many or most students likely feel that they 'lack sufficient confidence' to communicate effectively in English - via speech - with native and non-native speaking English teachers and especially strangers;

08) Nervousness:

Some or many students (including even some students who 'do not usually lack confidence' become nervous when required or urged to communicate orally in English - especially with strangers. OC is - after all - generally likely to be considered seemingly the most difficult of the four core language disciplines for reasons stated elsewhere in this paper;

09) Inadequate reading and / or listening comprehension:

Some or many students have only 'remedial' to 'moderate' English Reading and Listening Comprehension skills. Even advanced students run into difficulties when they attempt to tackle complex printed text or comprehend persons who (even

if using language / vocabulary that they (the students) have definitely learned and can understand), speak quickly or at natural / normal speed and / or have unfamiliar - though not 'unclear' - voices and / or accents;

10) Inarticulateness / Insufficient vocabulary employment:

Many students fail (often to a chronic extent) to employ already learned and familiar vocabulary. Despite knowing - to some considerable extent how - to communicate effectively, and being able to do so, many OC students are likely to often or generally (appear to) find it very difficult to decide precisely what to say at any given time, especially when expected to speak / comment immediately and / or at some length, even in connection with relatively easy and / or familiar topics. This could be due, for example, to 'lack of sufficient interest and thus motivation', 'lack of confidence', an 'excessive desire not to make even minor errors of any kind', and / or a(n) overly ambitious and entirely mistaken) belief that 'making simple, elementary, 'superficial' sentences which 'state the obvious' ought to be strenuously avoided. This problem is often highly apparent and easy to appraise when, for example, (even relatively advanced) OC students are asked to describe and make (any kind of) sentences about familiar, everyday objects, and do so 'sub-optimally' or downright 'poorly';

11) Incorrect pronunciation:

Some students 'pronounce words incorrectly' including words that they should already know how to pronounce 'correctly' (i.e. words which OC teachers either know for sure - or have solid grounds for assuming - have been 'adequately taught' over an 'adequate period of time' and which should therefore now be 'easily pronounceable');

12) Incorrect grammar / Grammatical error:

Many students fail to employ (the) 'necessary and correct grammar forms' in their sentence formulations. They make (sometimes easily avoidable, careless) grammatical errors of kinds that known 'prior teaching' (in light of 'median degrees of anticipated knowledge retention') ought to have rendered

unlikely;

13) Insufficient vocabulary:

For whatever reason(s), a large percentage of OC students have likely learned and remembered / retained (often woefully) insufficient primary vocabulary which leaves them (at best) ill-equipped to communicate informatively, articulately and thus effectively;

14) 'Passivity' / Lack of communicative dynamism:

Many students (including very able ones) for various reasons including, for example, speaking-topic 'disinterest', likely perform too 'passively' in OC lessons and exams. In that they tend to (prefer to) say less rather than more (or not much at all), and are thus 'reticent' and / or 'insufficiently forthcoming', quite possibly (in part) because they assume - after years of language education - that their OC teacher will 'rescue' them via questioning and / or not criticise or penalize them - in response - in any ultimately significant way. This can be a serious failing as it indicates that the student in question may well be likely to 'underperform' in normal two-way conversation (formal and / or informal).

15) Insufficiently 'logical' and / or 'illogical' ordering of information:

To varying frequencies and extents, many or most students fail to orally 'convey information in good logical order' to a sufficient degree with the result that the information they do output is more difficult - within normal time frames - for interlocutors / listeners to process, 'put together', understand and appreciate in overall terms. While likely a secondary or even minor concern in many cases, this failing can nevertheless very seriously degrade overall OC performance and is likely to be considered a definite, major fault.

16) Incorrect word placement / position / order:

Some students sometimes or frequently fail to make sufficient 'syntactic sense' (or any sense at all) when they construct / output sentences (in writing and / or orally, owing to 'sub-optimal' or 'incorrect word positioning / ordering' which can

obviously bring about 'incorrect overall sentence construction' if sufficiently acute;

17) Incorrect word selection / usage:

Many students fail to select and use the 'correct and / or most appropriate words' in their spoken sentence formulations. Instead, they select and use 'less appropriate', 'inappropriate' and / or 'completely wrong words';

18) Word omission:

Most students fail to 'include all necessary words' in their spoken sentence formulations due to oversight or carelessness which, again, is a serious error whenever committed 'too frequently';

19) Insufficient audibility:

Many students tend to speak far too quietly - notably in OC lesson time when required to speak 'in front of' their classmates - and thus render themselves more 'difficult' and 'trying' or actually 'impossible' for their interlocutors and / or audiences to hear sufficiently well - and thus understand - with 'normal' or - at least - 'tolerable' degrees of ease and comfort;

20) Excessive audibility:

A few students tend to speak too loudly, either on occasion or generally for natural, medical and / or emotional reasons;

21) Insufficient seriousness / Lack of seriousness:

A few or some students (most likely those with less well developed current OC skills and thus overall competency / capability) may - for whatever reason(s) - 'play act' and 'joke around' to an excessive and problematic degree at least on particular occasions, with the result being (as they perhaps intend) that they waste valuable time and sometimes thereby at least partially 'escape' having to 'reveal' their actual existing OC capabilities, or the dearth thereof;

22) Insufficient speed / pace:

Regardless of whether they tend to pause to normal and desirable, insufficient or excessive extents, some Japanese English language OC students 'speak too slowly' on 'too frequent' a basis. This is a clearly serious failing that reduces

or entirely precludes speech 'dynamism' and 'fluency' and is likely to undermine or quickly destroy interlocutor / audience interest and attention;

23) Excessive speed / pace:

Some students 'speak too quickly / rapidly' on 'too frequent' a basis, resulting in them becoming more 'difficult' and 'trying' (if not actually impossible) for their interlocutors and / or audiences to understand and 'follow' with 'normal' or - at least - 'tolerable' degrees of ease and comfort. Needless to say, this failing is likely to have an adverse impact on a number of other critical OC performance variables, such as pronunciation;

24) Insufficient pausing:

Some (perhaps especially very advanced and competent) students, fail to 'pause' and / or 'hesitate sufficiently' on 'too frequent' a basis. This is a serious failing that conceivably often stems from emotional state. i.e. 'nervousness'; 'excitement' / 'elation'; 'anger'; an understandable and healthy desire to communicate as much information as possible as quickly and as efficiently as possible; a(n excessive) desire to be seen to speak rapidly and dynamically in order to persuade or demonstrate conclusively to others, one's superior (real or imagined) overall competency. Teachers should bear in mind that (legitimate or misplaced) belief in the success and / or superior quality of one's OC performance may well bring about almost instantaneous feelings of elation. This can be a serious issue as it increases the probability of 'serious error' and undermines or quickly destroys interlocutor / audience comprehension, interest and attention;

25) Excessive pausing and hesitation:

Some students 'pause' and 'frequently hesitate' 'for excessive lengths of time' (with or without the employment of time-gap fillers), on 'too frequent' a basis. This is a serious failing that reduces or entirely precludes speech 'dynamism' and 'fluency' and is likely to undermine or quickly destroy interlocutor / audience interest and attention;

26) Breathing (control) problems:

For whatever reason(s), e.g. 'speaking too quickly' with 'insufficient pauses', a few students tend to exhibit (often increasingly) irregular - and OC inhibiting - breathing patterns when engaged in (more likely than not, dynamic and / or somewhat excited, 'animated', perhaps 'emotionally charged') foreign - but not necessarily native - oral-based communicative interactions... something which generally negatively affects actual overall foreign language OC performance, or at least threatens to do so;

27) Excessive (near) verbatim repetition:

Students with currently 'remedial' and 'less developed' OC skills... who are especially unsure - and / or lacking confidence - about what to say next, and secondly - exactly - how to say it, are quite likely to repeat sentences in essential if not verbatim form to an 'unacceptable' degree. It is very important to note that there is nothing automatically objectionable about an OC student opting, on occasion, to reiterate and confirm, providing he / she does so creatively in varying ways, with different words, sentence formulations and tenses, etc.

28) Insufficient concision and lucidity / verbosity:

For many of the reasons included in this list, at least some students - relatively articulate ones among them - fail (knowingly or otherwise) to be sufficiently concise and lucid in their OC lesson and exam. speaking performances to an unacceptable degree. It is useful to note that students who at any point suspect - or become well aware of - their own lack of concision and lucidity - or for that matter, any type of errors - may well therefore become more likely, henceforth, to re-commit them and / or others besides, due to having been distracted and possibly unnerved.

29) Incorrect / sub-optimal word-stress(ing):

Many OC students cannot and arguably need not ever dwell too long on correct word stressing. That said, advanced OC students should probably - at opportune moments - consider how to ensure that they do not a) stress words that ought not be stressed and b) fail to stress words that can and should

obviously - be stressed (ideally-speaking);

30) Strong accent problems:

Japanese OC students occasionally speak 'in' accents of such pronounced 'strength' and 'thickness' as to be 'difficult' (if interesting and not often actually impossible) for their non-Japanese interlocutors and / or audiences to understand and follow with 'normal' or - at least - 'tolerable' degrees of ease and comfort;

31) Unnecessary, inadvisable use of Nihongo words in English oral communication:

A more soluble problem is the tendency for many students to frequently incorporate Japanese language words and phrases into their English language sentence formulations. This is a habitual practice that may make the speaker feel more self-assured but serves no legitimate purpose and might well engender confusion on the part of non-Japanese English interlocutors / audiences.

32) Incorrect intonation:

In extreme cases, 'incorrect intonation' can constitute a serious issue: one that may be hard for students and teachers to eliminate even over an extended period of serious, relatively intense practice time.

2. Observations / Reflections / Conjectures;

1) A few OC students are likely already to be normally or always excellent oral communicators at any given time;

2) most OC students are likely to be less than excellent oral communicators at any given point in time, by definition;

3) many or most OC students are likely to be less than good oral communicators at any given point in time;

4) at least some OC students are likely to be atrocious oral communicators at any given point in time;

5) median national English language OC skills and thus overall competency / capability in Japanese junior high schools, high schools, colleges and universities and beyond are often 'lower' in comparison to other similarly advanced and thus comparable non- (native) English speaking nations, such

as those comprising the European Union (E.U.).

6) the number of students in a median OC class who can plausibly be deemed to be (actually - or on the verge of becoming -) good or excellent oral communicators at any given time is likely to be relatively small in anything other than highly selective and / or streamed, 'elite' learning venues that tightly restrict enrollment. In other words, it will likely only amount to a small minority...

7) All but a minority of gifted elite, 'high-flying' Japanese English language OC students are likely to find the actual task and process of trying to study, understand, learn, remember - and use - their chosen target foreign language effectively (to an adequate / sufficient extent) an extremely daunting, difficult, often mind-bogglingly complex, tricky, confusing, and frustrating or actually annoying undertaking. Crucially, however:

8) Most OC students are likely to come to regard the actual task and process of trying to study, understand, learn, remember and - use - their chosen target foreign language effectively (to an adequate / sufficient extent) as progressively less daunting, difficult and so forth, the more they themselves (if ably assisted by their tutors) manage to improve and elevate (i.e. advance) their own OC skills and thus overall competency / capability;

9) all students are able to improve their OC skills and thus overall competency / capability to some degree or other;

10) many or most (or perhaps all) students have within them the inherent potential ability to improve their OC skills and thus overall competency / capability to very substantial or great extents;

11) Even currently very poor OC performers with comparatively low, under-developed OC skills and thus overall competency / capability are capable of making excellent OC efforts and knowledge-gains and, consequently, obtaining excellent OC results... when they are - for whatever presumably complex mass of reasons (interrelated and / or otherwise) - more able and willing (i.e. inclined / disposed)

than usual to do so;

12) OC teachers must strive hard enough - as facilitators - to locate, 'unlock', encourage, develop and nourish what is very often non-obvious or hidden potential, even when doing so is likely to be an up-hill struggle and the amount of time that can be reasonably devoted to the effort is limited;

13) However, realistically speaking, many or most students will not - for whatever presumably complex mass of reasons (interrelated and / or otherwise) - make maximal or even good use of their inherent and potential ability to improve their OC skills and thus overall competency / capability;

14) Students improve their overall OC skills and thus overall competency (through practice) to varying not uniform extents. Some students are destined - for whatever presumably complex mass of reasons (interrelated and / or otherwise) - to improve their OC skills and thus overall competency / capability to far greater extents than are others.

15) The finite extent and magnitude of student OC skill and thus overall competency / capability improvement - through any given period of time - varies greatly among students. Therefore, it is each individual student's degree of real, demonstrable progress that is most salient and pressing;

16) Some students' OC skills improve at faster rates than others';

17) Some student's OC skills are likely to improve rapidly;

18) Some student's OC skills are likely improve only very slowly and gradually;

19) Some students' OC skills and thus overall competency / capability may increase very markedly or greatly through any given period of time;

20) some students' OC skills and thus overall competency / capability will increase only very slightly or minimally even in the very long term;

21) the rate at which each student's OC skills and thus overall competency / capability improves (or deteriorates / regresses) is very likely to fluctuate over time (perhaps drastically /

dramatically so) due, above all to variance in the amount effort each student expends, the amount of time he / she devotes, and what else he / she chooses - and has - to do in their everyday life. Part-time jobs can harm performance;

22) student OC skills and thus overall competency / capability usually tend to improve, atrophy and deteriorate / regress quite slowly after their genuine and complete acquisition;

23) In the long run at least, students should study and practice what they appear to be ‘best’ at doing, which tends to be the thing(s) that is / are easier or easiest and / or most satisfying for them to do well;

24) In the long run at least, students normally like and want to study and practice what they appear to be best at doing, which tends to be the thing(s) that is / are easier or easiest and / or most satisfying for them to do well;

25) As such, it surely is not problematic for students to have one or more favorite, preferred - or least / less feared - core foreign language discipline, be it Reading Comprehension, Listening Comprehension, Writing or OC. However:

26) students do not necessarily become and remain ‘good’ at just one or more core foreign language disciplines and then never ‘change’. Some or many students likely become stronger - comparatively speaking - in some disciplines and than others, as times passes, as a result of all manner of decisions, complex factors and interactions. Moreover:

27) A large percentage of students experience broadly level, horizontal-type progress / performance across all four core foreign language disciplines, rather than excelling at any one or more. Fortunately or otherwise, they and even their teachers consequently find it difficult or impossible to identify a clear single best discipline or tentatively propose any particular, hard and fast ranking at any given time;

28) The great majority of junior high school and high school English lessons likely prioritize to a probably excessive degree Reading Comprehension and Writing skill acquisition at the expense of OC skill acquisition (and, to a lesser extent, Listening

Comprehension), with seemingly great potential long-term implications re. university-level study. Many or most students surely may recognize this to be the case if only implicitly or sub-consciously and may therefore be prone to develop the basically dubious or entirely erroneous impression that OC skill and thus overall OC competency / ability development is, for most persons, an always more difficult, ambitious and an ultimately less important endeavor, rightly deserving lower priority for rational reasons: something of an after-thought, that can be tackled, if at all, with less conviction and hope of major success, at a later date, (rather than in addition to - and conjunction with - Reading, Writing and Listening) as is optimal;

29) Very few or no English language OC students in the great majority of Japan’s junior high schools, high schools, colleges and universities likely practice OC to anything near an ‘ideal’ or ‘maximum practical extent’ be it with native and non-native English language teachers, teaching assistants, language coaches or - above all - strangers, because they lack the necessary interest, desire and motivation, opportunity, (seemingly for cultural reasons), determination, energy and / or time and money to do so. Some are likely too timid and thin-skinned.

30) Most junior high school, high school, high school, college and university English language OC students additionally fail to practice target English language OC with one another to anything near an ‘ideal’ or ‘maximum practical extent’ because they similarly lack the necessary interest, desire and motivation, confidence (seemingly for cultural reasons), determination, energy and / or time and money to do so.

31) Given the foregoing, a perhaps large majority of junior high school, high school, college and university English language OC students in Japan may well regard foreign language OC lessons as being more difficult and (at least potentially) less satisfying than Reading Comprehension, Listening Comprehension or Writing, etc. If so, this is presumably

because OC lessons necessarily always require oral output to be near-immediate and basically spontaneously, and where the main mode of information-input involved is ephemeral, real-time, one-off listened-to spoken words, not written / printed data that can be analyzed, considered and digested for some (often lengthy) period of time. For these reasons, OC students must have as their main goal simultaneous co-development (to an adequate and sufficient degree) of the skills required firstly to reliably and efficiently collect, understand, and process foreign language orally communicated and written / printed information, and then, secondly, to orally / verbally respond accordingly / relevantly in a correct, adequately clear, lucid, succinct, concise, audible, well-paced, easy-to-understand manner, in the same target language. All this is clearly very difficult to carry-out well.

32) In fact, many junior high school, high school, college and university foreign language OC students in Japan may even somewhat dislike and / or fear practicing OC with native and / or non-native foreign language teachers (and not necessarily only during formal lesson time) due to a natural, usually strong, and perfectly understandable, yet essentially misplaced unease at the prospect, and a desire not to be seen to make more than a few minor errors (especially elementary errors) through the course of any given OC lesson or practice session, above all when they are in the presence of classmates.

33) As with education outcomes generally, the extent to which students of all ages and both genders excel at foreign language OC is - for numerous reasons - generally likely to be to some (lesser or greater) extent, determined by student socio-economic status. In sum, students from more affluent and economically secure families may well be somewhat more likely to excel at foreign language OC than students who aren't. Very importantly, however:

34) Many students from less affluent and humble socio-economic backgrounds can and frequently do i) improve their OC skills and thus overall competency / capability as much as -

and more than - students from more privileged socio-economic backgrounds and some of them ii) come close to actually acquiring superb non-native foreign language OC competency e.g. almost full marks on TOEIC, TOEFL and Cambridge Univ. tests, etc;

35) English language OC students who have relatives who are to some extent conversant in English may well normally benefit (perhaps hugely) from the fact but:

36) It is by no means uncommon for OC students to cultivate good or excellent overall OC skills and thus overall competency / capability 'despite' having no close relatives who can boast even elementary English language understanding;

37) The Japanese students who complete a particular English language OC course with the most advanced and impressive overall OC skills and thus overall competency / capability are likely more often than not to be those who exhibited some marked aptitude and promise for at least OC at a relatively young age and certainly by the time they graduated from junior high school at the age of 15-plus years;

38) The students who complete a particular OC course with the most advanced and impressive overall (teacher defined) OC skills and thus overall competency / capability are very likely to be among the students who began that very same course with the most advanced and impressive OC skills and thus overall competency. Nevertheless, it is clearly the case that:

39) Not all of the students who begin a particular OC course with the most advanced and impressive OC skills are likely to be among the students who complete that very same course with the most advanced and impressive OC skills and thus overall competency;

40) Students with good or excellent OC skills and thus overall competency / capability are perhaps the most likely to have similarly good or excellent reading comprehension, listening comprehension and / or writing skills, etc. However:

41) Students with good or excellent OC skills and thus overall competency / capability certainly do not all have similarly good

or excellent reading comprehension, listening or writing skills, etc. Great speakers can be hopeless writers!

42) Some students with good or excellent OC skills have far inferior and even ‘weak’ or even ‘atrocious’ reading comprehension, listening comprehension and / or writing skills, etc. Therefore:

43) It is surely wholly unreliable and thus unsound practice ever to just assume a given student’s likely Reading Comprehension, Listening Comprehension, Writing or OC ability merely because one (thinks one) knows something sufficient about their apparent, already demonstrated, ability regarding any - or even each - of the other three core language disciplines. Performance ‘in’ any one discipline surely cannot safely be taken to indicate actual and likely performance in any other. Performance ‘in’ any one discipline can only be soundly ascertained with any confidence by measuring performance in that very same discipline, to an adequate / sufficient extent;

44) Crucially, the students who improve their OC skills, for whatever reasons, most substantially within any given period of time are likely to be among those who, for whatever reasons, practice OC very frequently, seriously and intensively with native and non-native speakers for extended - rather than brief - periods of time. Whereas:

45) The students who improve their OC skills and thus overall competency / capability least substantially within any given period of time are likely to be among those who, for whatever reasons, in fact practice OC not at all, very infrequently or rarely, non-seriously and non-intensively, in short rather than long sessions with only non-native speakers for brief / fleeting - rather than extended - periods of time.

46) Regardless of current OC skill / ability level, students may well see their rate of progress decline and their existing skills atrophy or deteriorate if they fail to continue studying and practicing reading, comprehension, listening comprehension, writing and OC in unison to the current (or historic) peak extent and / level of effectiveness;

47) It is easy for teachers to under-estimate and over-estimate actual, really existing student OC skills and thus overall competency / capabilities at any given point in time, not least for the following reasons:

A) OC teachers may fail to monitor actual individual OC student lesson-time performance adequately / sufficiently closely and well enough, especially when charged with large sized classes;

B) OC teachers may (consciously and / or subconsciously and for various reasons) be - to uniform or varying degrees - too strict and / or too lenient in their OC coursework and / or exam. assessments, either with all, or worst still, some or just one of their students;

C) OC teachers may (intentionally or unintentionally) design end-of-term OC exams. that are, in overall terms and in whatever ways, too ambitious and difficult and / or too conservative and easy (i.e. not ambitious, challenging or difficult enough) in comparison with taught, term-time OC lesson content;

D) OC teachers may (intentionally or unintentionally) design end-of-term OC exams. that are, in overall terms, too narrowly focused (and thus overly related) and / or too wide-ranging (and thus insufficiently related) to taught, term-time OC lesson content;

E) OC teachers may - in respective bids for accuracy or simplicity, etc - compile and opt to use OC exam. measurement criteria lists (self-designed, borrowed or composite) that are respectively too long or too short. The former at least risk being too detailed and complex to use quickly, easily and accurately / reliably, while the latter tend to be far too short (and thus not detailed or ‘fine-grained’ enough), with the result, in both instances, being inaccurate OC exam. measurement, assessment and grading;

F) Even the best, most rigorous and internally sound end-of-term OC exams. are generally or frequently administered by

teachers who are likely to be a) at least known to the intended student examinees and b) generally or frequently on good and / or close terms socially with them. As such, student examinees are likely to be less unnerved and more self-assured - if not necessarily more overtly confident - during the actual OC examination period than they would be if examined by strangers, something that seemingly reduces OC exam. validity to some albeit non-fatal extent;

G) Even the most objective, ethically-aware and careful OC exam. examiners may on occasion say too little or too much during OC exams., for example not uniformly giving suitably constructive prompts to a uniform extent at only acceptable times or interrupting the examinee's line of thought and / or speaking for ultimately minor, pointless or dubious 'excessive' coaxing reasons;

H) Increasing OC student familiarity with single or small numbers of native and non-native OC teacher voices and accents, etc is impossible to avoid but may further (at best threaten to) erode OC exam. (and lesson) realism and thus validity;

I) That both native and non-native foreign language OC teachers alike are - at least on occasion - at risk of speaking with excessive and essentially unrealistic - even unnatural - clarity and precision (and perhaps concision) etc, is beyond doubt and threatens to be another potential reducer of overall lesson, exam. and course validity, if not guarded against and / or checked;

J) In instances where OC students are tested, appraised and accessed by panels of OC teachers instead of single OC teachers, variance in each OC teacher's assessment decisions is of course inescapable yet often considerable or marked, as a result of e.g. differing main preoccupations, interests and concerns, priorities, tastes, preferences, interpretations and opinions etc among the assessors. Resulting calculated average marks, scores and grades may therefore differ substantially from what one, some or even all involved assessors / judges

contend to be most apt, at least when dissenting judges with out-lying opinions are present;

K) Some OC teachers may tend to overestimate their own ability to evaluate student OC performances with adequate / sufficient accuracy 'on the spot', in 'once-and-once-only' fashion, especially if they have chosen or agreed to use overly long and complex assessment criteria lists and / or excessively wide assessment scales (eg. 0 to 5 points, rather than 0-3 or 4 points) and / or they must interview and assess a larger number of OC students rapidly, within a relatively short period of time;

L) Some OC teachers choose not to video or even audio-record OC student lesson and / or any exam. time performances when the opportunity arises, usually in large part for the following reasons: a) known or perceived time constraints preclude comfortable operation of recording equipment and / or the editing and archiving of recorded content; b) even comfortable, leisurely operation of recording equipment might on occasion distract teachers from their primary task of making 'immediate', 'live', 'real-time' assessments; c) teachers fear - with justification - that (necessarily visible) video and / or audio recording equipment may serve to seriously distract or spook students during their OC exam. (interviews and / or presentations); and d) some teachers fundamentally doubt the benefits likely to flow from producing digital archival records, especially if very experienced and consequently confident about the likely accuracy of their own 'immediate', 'live', 'real-time' assessments; e) some teachers contend - entirely plausibly - that even 'light', let alone 'heavy' scrutiny of recorded video and / or audio records is potentially liable and / or likely to reduce the accuracy of their own ('one-off', 'immediate', 'live', 'real-time') assessments. Whatever the merits of that stance, it appears to be less than a compelling argument against recording. The fact remains that every time they themselves refrain from making or referring to video or audio archival records, they risk producing less rather than more accurate assessments. It is worthwhile to note that just

because one makes recordings, does not mean one has to refer to them. That said:

M) While video and / or audio recording of student OC lesson time and / or exam. performances appears to be a useful, common-sense policy, it is itself not necessarily risk-free. Some OC teachers may - for whatever reason(s) - as a result of opting to record, sometimes, usually or always neglect and downplay, if not reject outright, the very real importance of 'immediate', 'live', 'real-time' OC student lesson and / or any exam. time assessment. Excessive or exclusive dependence on video and / or audio archival record content when assessing OC student lesson and / or exam. time performance is something that can lead to general over-familiarly and perhaps 'nit-picking' with all or - worse still - only some student performances. As stated elsewhere, radical variance in the amount time spent assessing OC students is likely a bad thing if taken beyond certain, necessary and acceptable parameters;

N) Some students (deliberately or otherwise) perform altogether less competently and impressively in OC lessons than they are currently (consciously) able, for social and / or 'group' psychological reasons that can affect outlook or at least behavior;

O) Some students perform altogether less competently and impressively in OC exams. than their lesson-time performances indicate will likely be the case, as a result of them becoming adversely affected by unusually elevated or high levels of nervous tension / stress... stress which may or may not be fully or even at all OC-related.

P) Some students perform altogether more competently and impressively in OC exams. than their lesson-time performances indicate will likely be the case (even when the OC exams. are no easier or harder than the preceding coursework), because they prepare for exams. so effectively that (as they hope) they are then able - come exam. day - to perform more competently and impressively than has usually been the case and thereby secure (higher than normal) marks and grades that serve to

inflate rather than accurately reflect / signal their actual overall OC skills and competency / capability; Furthermore, efforts of this kind frequently lead less currently skilled students to attempt (with varying degrees of success) to develop memorized, stock answers rather than real, fresh spontaneous ones. Needless to say, this is far from ideal if not always wrong or disastrous; something that out not be encouraged... or ignored when marking and deciding grades;

Q) Students should - but often or generally - do not themselves ensure that they gradually acquire and / or then retain (eg. from year to year) an at least roughly accurate (i.e. elementary or better) appreciation of the amount of progress which they have actually managed to make to-date, regarding their general effort to improve their foreign language OC skills, and thus overall competency / capability. Students should attempt this - and are technically free to do so - through honest, objective self-analysis, appraisal and evaluation in response both to their own (recollected) in-class, in school / college / university and 'real-life' foreign language OC experiences and - above all - their exam. score results, plus tutor-supplied feedback information of all kinds. That said, it is very likely the case that a large percentage of OC students in Japan (even at university level) tend for the most part to feel very vague and uncertain about the extent of their OC progress at any given point in time. The same can surely be said about the other three core disciplines but students may well feel more 'at sea' regarding OC if they come to view it - erroneously - as being a somewhat less tangible, less comprehensible art;

48) Only a small minority of students opt to sit best-available, premium quality, OC examinations such as Eiken Speaking (Levels 1-3), TOEIC (Listening and Speaking) or TOEFL 'regularly' (eg. at least once every 12-18 months) or even 'occasionally' because they frequently view the majority of these tests (misguidedly or shortsightedly or not) as being a) too expensive; b) too difficult (and thus unlikely to enable

them to score highly); c) too nerve-wracking and stressful; d) too potentially disturbing and disheartening in terms of final, overall score results; e) too demanding and or inconvenient, effort and / or time-wise (i.e. when one considers what an optimal amount of preparation and revision time is likely to amount to); and f) insufficiently informative regarding (limited) post exam. feedback data that - were it more comprehensive - would shed greater light on examinee's probable strengths and weaknesses. Thus:

49) At least some students (and perhaps a majority) are likely to generally or frequently under-estimate their current OC skill and thus overall competency / capability at any given point in time;

50) At the same time, at least some students generally or frequently over-estimate their current OC skill and thus overall competency / capability at any given point in time, if only as a result of wishful thinking and lack of concrete data;

51) Statistically speaking, foreign language OC skills and thus overall competency / capability are of course likely to advance more rapidly and to greater overall extents outside one's own country (in states where the target language is the native language) rather than inside, including for both teenage and mature students. Therefore:

52) Statistically speaking - students who have spent even just very short periods of time overseas may be more likely to have superior foreign language OC skills and thus overall competency / capability than students who have never left their native land. Even if / when this is not the case:

53) Statistically speaking, students (certainly the more remotely located ones) who have spent even just very short periods of time overseas may be more likely to view English language learning, including - perhaps above all OC - as a vital or at least very advantageous (rather than just an extremely difficult and ambitious) undertaking - and thus a necessary, wise, and advisable activity - compared to students who have not yet travelled overseas... with obvious potential implications for

overall, long-term course motivation, effort and performance;

54) Overseas study and travel experiences, if nothing else, plausibly drive home to Japanese foreign language students the fact that foreign languages really are real, vital things that are of truly profound utility to millions of persons and thus of great utility to all their practitioners, etc.

55) Some students are in any given period of time more or less receptive to teacher instruction, advice and criticism than others, owing to variation in their current and potential ability, the current degree of their interest, focus, motivation, patience and satisfaction, etc they feel;

56) Of seemingly central importance, 'personality type' clearly appears to have far more significant and seemingly major impact on how well foreign language OC students advance / progress... than on how well students of Reading Comprehension, Listening Comprehension and Writing fare. The most austere and aloof people may be superb listeners and very eloquent, thoughtful and vibrant writers, etc. In any case, naturally chatty or chattier students with naturally more relaxed and self-assured, lively and extrovert, outgoing personalities are more likely to already possess, develop and publically exhibit / signal an enthusiastically constructive, proactive attitude towards OC practice than are less chatty or distinctly reticent students with less self-assured, less lively, less extrovert, less outgoing personalities. The latter are less likely - or simply unlikely - to generally or even ever adopt - or at least publically exhibit / signal - an enthusiastically proactive and constructive attitude towards OC practice. In the worst, most problematic cases, extremely shy, self-aware and bashful students may well, for psychological reasons, as-a-rule try, or rather feel compelled, to minimize and avoid OC practice, regardless of place, time circumstance and interlocutor identity. Whereas:

57) Regardless of current OC skill level, jovial, more care-free students who more often than not enjoy and even initiate 'a good chat' and 'a laugh' with their OC teachers outside lesson

times likely tend to be more far more predisposed to view the prospect and actual experience of entering jnto and maintaining OC practice conversation - including or especially with native target foreign language speakers - as being worthwhile and a potentially fun activity, not a somewhat terrifying, onerous and / or trying chore that preferably ought not be carried out more, or much more, than is absolutely necessary;

58) Probably all OC students (above a certain age and consequent degree of maturity) are surely likely to perform far better vis-à-vis foreign language OC advancement when they are able to study alone or (to a lesser extent) in pairs, as well as in small groups and full-size class groupings totaling between 15-35 persons. This is because the said students are far more likely to a) feel more obliged to do just that and less able to shirk doing so; b) be (at least) less distracted and thus (at least) more focused...; c) be (at least) less inhibited about doing so, given the absence (or far reduced salience) of real and / or imagined peer-pressure(s); d) be impressed with the closer, less formal, more immediate, dynamic, intensive, customized and longer-duration of two-way student-teacher OC exchanges that such 'private' or 'small scale' meetings immediately permit and tend to constantly foster. One-to-one OC teacher-student practice meetings should surely be a mandatory weekly event whenever feasible.

59) As described above, one major problem encountered by many if not most English language OC students in Japan appears to be authentic 'lack of articulateness' stemming from insufficient vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation and / or sentence construction / formulation knowledge / ability. These common fundamental shortcomings frequently result in delayed output (oral or oral and written), incorrectly constructed / formulated and sometimes nonsensical or garbled sentences, and a consequent tendency for students to err on the side of caution and favor playing-safe by relying excessively on simple, short and too often formulaic sentences, and the easier or easiest of tenses. Some students encounter and suffer

from this problem both in regard to Writing and OC while others encounter and suffer from it in only in regard to Writing or OC.

60) Also as noted above, a second - more 'respectable' - failing experienced by many or most English language OC students in Japan appears to an authentic 'lack of precision' and / or 'creativity', seemingly produced by the onset of a 'deer in headlights' type 'speaker's block'. This lack of creativity is certainly not confined to less currently (cap)able OC students with lower OC skills and thus overall competency / ability. On the contrary, it can adversely affect the performance of all foreign language OC students, including the normally non-reticent and some of the most skilled, accomplished and enthusiastic of speakers, even though such persons are the least likely to be affected or harmed seriously as result, (given their greater confidence, desire to be understood and superior 'recovery' capabilities). Despite having learned and still knowing at least an adequate / sufficient corpus of vocabulary, and possessing an at least 'acceptable' capacity for correct grammar, accurate pronunciation and sentence construction / formulation, many or most Japanese OC students nevertheless still often fail too to identify, select and / or employ (obviously) ideal or suitable words... including when they are entirely unlikely to be feeling in any way confused, intellectually over-loaded, worried, shy, embarrassed, bored, distracted, physically uncomfortable, tired or unhappy, etc... or deliberately 'coasting' performance-wise for 'social modesty' reasons. At root, excessive consideration and / or confusion over optimal word selection, and (perhaps) more importantly, an excessive concern to avoid 'stating the obvious' appear to be plausible, credible explanations;

61) A third, already discussed problem encountered by many or most Japanese OC students is 'insufficient' listening competency. Affected students too frequently misunderstand or fail to understand exactly what their interlocutor(s) actually say, tell and ask them;

62) OC student class-room ‘audiences’ need as far as possible to listen attentively to student speakers in order to practice their listening comprehension, formulate ideas, decide responses and be otherwise ready to engage with them, principally through questioning at the appropriate time(s). Yet all too often, some OC students (including advanced ones) give at least the impression of being insufficiently interested or uninterested in what some, most or, in the worst cases, all of their classmates have to say in the target language, when each student is required to make a presentation, give a talk, offer their opinions, respond, question, summarize, discuss, debate or provide opinions, one by one in pairs or small groups. Such students - assuming they have normal attention spans - either do not understand what their classmates are saying sufficiently well to maintain their interest - and recoil whenever they conclude as much - or, alternatively, feel that they do understand fully or well-enough, but sooner or later find listening to and communicating with their peers in the target language too demanding or tedious, and thus tiring or boring. Either way, the problem surely arises when students are simply not sufficiently motivated (leaving aside the unclear role of interpersonal ‘manners’) to bother to listen attentively and try to understand what is being said for the required period of time (which, of course, should never be too longer than necessary). This is a serious, potentially contagious problem which needs to be constantly watched for and strongly discouraged whenever observed, since it can become an ever more pronounced, even habitual, default tendency if not resisted and at least ‘contained’ by those afflicted. Students (and teachers) who fail to try to avoid and resist this kind of premature ‘switching off’, disengagement and withdrawal do so at their own peril. Most commonly, OC students who fail to concentrate sufficiently on what their peers have to say when they are asked to formally address their classmates collectively, may be suffering from what amounts in large measure to a form of OC lesson-specific embarrassment and / or fear, generated by the realization that

they are expected to communicate extensively in free, normal, natural, unscripted fashion for relatively extended periods of time, which may be a relatively alien and unnerving experience. However, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that this problem is frequently not solely a foreign language, OC-only phenomenon. It is often a more general problem observable in many, most or all subject lessons, and thus seems to arise from a general lack of awakened interest, motivation, drive and stamina, etc.

63) Healthy attentive, interested, motivated, engaged and initially good natured student OC audiences can, on occasion, quickly become overly excited, noisy, rowdy, boisterous, excessively critical forums (unless prevented). This can then cause shy, more introverted OC students with or without currently less advanced OC skills (who may already suffer from some degree of social exclusion / ostracization) to variously panic, ‘clam-up’ or at least become (more) distracted, hesitant, confused, embarrassed and reticent... and thus more likely to curtail their speaking, especially if interrupted to an extent that they themselves regard as excessive, unhelpful and inconsiderate;

64) OC class students - like students generally but perhaps more so, given the nature of OC study and practice - are susceptible to sudden and sometimes drastic mood swings / changes be they (justified or not), e.g. from illation to depression and excitement to boredom and from good to bad, and vice-versa, which can affect and indeed alter or even transform overall lesson atmosphere for the better or worse, with real impact on individual student OC performance and academic well-being. Small student minorities and mere single students are able, on occasion, to affect and shape (i.e. improve or harm / degrade) the overall atmosphere in any given classroom during any given lesson by influencing the thoughts, impressions, attitudes, and behavior of classmates. The behavior of any one student can be infectious and consequently engender convergent, like behavior among some or all of those exposed to it. Single students can

act as virtual opinion leaders and (wise or misguided) arbiters as regards whether a particular OC activity is interesting, motivating, fun, beneficial, valid and thus worthwhile for the majority of students or class as a whole. While overall student conduct and self-control in Japan likely tends to be excellent, comparatively speaking, many students can, and are likely, at least on occasion, of course, to be 'moody' (i.e. negative about their opportunities and need to study) and therefore to transition (often rapidly) from being 'satisfactorily' constructive 'good' or even 'excellent' workers to the exact opposite (and back again). Some students are frequently moody while others are rarely so. Some may perhaps be fairly predictable in this regard (assuming one gets to know them well enough), while others will remain wholly unpredictable. Needless to say, there are countless reasons why student mood and frame-of-mind can vary in an instant between being more and less compatible and conducive with effective study, practice and learning. Common reasons for the onset of unfavorable and adverse mood, frame-of-mind and attitude include feeling sleepy, tired, hungry, sick, dissatisfied, dismayed and dejected, unintelligent, lacking, hopeless, angry, worried and socially alienated. Some students generally respond favorably when urged, criticized, cautioned or reprimanded while others don't. The former are more likely to somewhat or markedly amend or positively transform their behavior. The latter are more likely to continue roughly in their present vain or - in the worst scenario - 'up the ante'.

3. Principal Conclusions:

The main observable deficiency in many or most English language OC lessons and exams. in Japan is most likely to be 'inadequate' / 'insufficient output' on the part of OC students. Many or most OC students often or generally do not 'utter enough words' or 'sentences' in the time available to them. They often or generally 'provide less information than they are, in fact, 'able to furnish'. Therefore, a main aim of English

language OC teachers in Japan must surely be to drive home to their OC students the vital importance of 'engaging' and 'communicating dynamically' and 'extensively' / 'sufficiently' enough, in public. This is an even more important requisite for 'effective' and 'efficient' OC than 'communicating correctly'. Serious English language OC students in Japan must be constantly urged to initiate, enrich via appropriate input, and prolong conversation exchanges that will otherwise likely be too short, basic, one-sided, barren, and lacking in utility. Serious Japanese OC students must try to output sufficiently, make themselves properly understood (and thus known) in terms of their ideas, views, opinions and feelings, etc as well as in the literal technical sense. They must therefore, whenever necessary, try to overcome whatever inhibitions they have that work against the realisation of these objectives... And they require to be assisted accordingly. However, teachers can do no more than maximally encourage and assist students in their own, personal efforts to acquire, retain and improve to the maximum extent possible, their range and depth of knowledge, understanding and skills (of all kinds), and to then use them as efficiently and effectively as they can, as often as possible. Teachers cannot 'make' or 'ensure' that students do these things. Each student is a unique, free individual, who constantly thinks and acts as he sees fit, for fundamental historic 'biologically' and / or 'environmentally' determined reasons that together dictate personal psychology, personality, mentality, outlook, dispositions and preferences, etc and collectively 'produce' specific aptitude. Rather, teachers must at all times attempt to honestly share their own knowledge, understanding and expertise with their students in ways most likely to successfully initiate, sustain and otherwise facilitate ongoing student self-discovery and self-enlightenment (which, of course, can and should always be an educational undertaking for teachers as well).

References

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