

The Significance of Attempts by Japanese Students to Learn in English from Foreign Diplomats

— Contemporary International Studies Special Lecture B —

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I. Introduction

Now in Japan, “teaching English through English” seems to be regarded as an ideal of English teaching, but I doubt any value of the mere practice of using as much English as possible in an English class. Is it so good? A special lecture two colleagues and I are in charge of consists of two parts: an English lecture which lasts for 60 minutes and a question and answer session in English which lasts for 30 minutes. This class can be considered an English class taught and learned through English and it can be regarded as an ideal of English teaching. In fact, almost all the lecturers we had invited from 29 countries from April 2014 to July 2015 said in different expressions that they were quite satisfied with active participation of our students, for they received at least more than 10 questions in English, which helped create an “international atmosphere” in each class.

The writer of this paper, however, did not feel those who took an “active participation” in each lecture by asking their questions in English were only the students who understood each lecture best and deepened their understanding of each country to the full. The purpose of this paper is, therefore, to review what

was done for each lecture given from April 23 to July 16, 2015, to observe how our students responded to each lecture by listening to their questions and reading their reports submitted after each lecture, and to try to make a critical analysis of what our students learned by looking over the exam papers and reports those students made on a subject of their own choice in or after the final class.

II. What was done for each lecture

A. Before the lecture

In the first term of 2015, we invited 11 countries: Latvia, Serbia, Ireland, Belgium, India, Ethiopia, El Salvador, Cuba, Bhutan, South Africa. One week before we invited a staff member of each embassy, we provided our students with two sides of an A4 paper on which brief information about each country in both English (from *The CIA World Factbook*) and Japanese (from *World Yearbook* by Kyodo News) was printed. Reading this handout, all students were supposed to write their questions, some of which were written in English and some of which in Japanese. Some of the English questions made sense, which were put as they were into a list of questions for each lecturer, but some were misleading, which were revised by the writer so that our lecturer could understand without any difficulty. All the Japanese questions were translated into English.

B. During the lecture

The number of questions ranged from 40 to 87 questions, and the students had this list of English questions on their desk which might help them to ask questions in English. Each lecturer, too, received this list so that they could refer to some or all of them in their power point presentation, which was shown on the screen as the lecture was given. Each lecture and the questions and answers between the students and the lecturers were all recorded by IC recorder with

the permission of each lecturer and copied it onto a CD so that the writer could listen to the lecturer and the students for later reviews if necessary.

C. After the lecture

All participants were expected to write their report in Japanese on each lecture. For this purpose, a sheet of A4 with 600 squares for Japanese characters were offered. Some students wrote this report and submitted it to the writer at the end of each lecture, but most did so later and put it into a designated box in the office of the School of Contemporary International Studies. These reports were divided into 5 groups, which were read and commented on by 5 different teachers, one of whom was a part-time teacher for the School. Only one of these five teachers participated in each class, but all the others were not present but asked to write their comment on each student report. All participants were told their report would be read by those who do not take part in the class, so they were instructed to write their report so clearly that those people could understand them.

The other two things our students had to do in this course were the open-book examination in which they could refer to any book, including their notebook or atlas, and a report in which they could write either in English or Japanese, about a subject they had chosen on their own. In the exam, the students were supposed to write both in English and Japanese five items of information on the 11 countries we listened to in the first term of 2015, in addition to one simple exercise of spotting each country in a global map. The writer suggested at the end of the 14th class that the subject for this report should hopefully be one each student wanted to study a little more when he or she was listening to the lecture.

III. How our students responded to each lecture

Each class consists of two parts: a 60-minute lecture in English and a 30-minute question and answer session. The lecture was conducted in English, although the lecturer's native language was not English. The first lecture of the first term of 2015 started like this:

Introduction

Good afternoon. It's a great pleasure to be here. Thank you for inviting me here and the possibility to talk about Latvia. I have to say that Japanese people or society knows our history quite well. So I am in a very well-informed audience, I hope. And not only do I hope but I am sure because I have received eighty or ninety questions. It could take the whole day to discuss all of them. Your questions came from various angles and aspects of life, which is good because it means that you have a keen interest in not only some formal aspects but also how Latvians actually live. I will go through my country' history in a very brief way and then I hope we can open the floor for discussion, for not all of your questions are answered during my presentation or discussion. Then please do ask and I will try to do my best to answer them.

I have been working as a diplomat with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for 23 years. During these 23 years I had the honor and pleasure to serve as the ambassador in London, ambassador in Moscow, ambassador in the United Nations in New York, and now I am here in Japan, in Tokyo. In August, it will be two years since I arrived in Tokyo directly from New York. I do enjoy my stay here. I have two daughters. One is 23 and in fact today is her birthday. And she is in Edinburgh. She is working there. She has graduated from Glasgow University. My youngest daughter is 12 years old, and she is with me staying in Tokyo and going to Seisan International School. So we are a family getting together during the summertime back in Riga, Latvia.

Location of Latvia. Situated in Northern Europe on the coast of the Baltic Sea. It's a small country, 64,000 square km, which is smaller than Hokkaido. The population of Latvia is 2 million. So it is much nicer populationwise because it is not overpopulated. It's beautiful and it's a nice place. Where is Japan? Where is Latvia? They are almost neighbors. It only one country that separates you from us. Although it is a big country, Russia, but still it is just one country. So we are almost neighbors (laughter in the audience).

This introductory part was revised, for the lecturer was not a native speaker of English. The original version (transcribed by Kevin Ottoson) goes as follows:

Personal introduction

Good afternoon. Um... What a great... It's a great pleasure to be here. Thanks the professor for inviting me here and the possibility to talk about Latvia. Which is really not that well-known but if I compare Japanese people knowledge in general of the history of the part of the world I am coming then I have to say that you stand out among many other nations. Uh, here you can meet the people who knows where the Latvia is knows little bit uh other countries and some very big, very important countries when you mention Latvia. Uh, they ask you, "Latvia, can you spell it?" or "Latvia, is that your name?" "Pleased to meet you, Mr. Latvia." (There are) all different kinds of stories. So I have to say that Japanese people or society knows our history quite well. So I am in a very well-informed audience, I hope. And uh, not only do I hope but I am sure because uh because I have received uh eight eighty or ninety questions. It could be I think uh for the whole day to talk and discuss. So it was uh impressed of the questions and the quality of the questions. It came from from various uh angles and aspects of life uh... which is which is good because it means that and shows that you have a keen interest to see not only some formal aspects but also something which is uh like uh... how do you live? Which is a simple but yet a very difficult question to answer sometimes. So Latvia, What I will do is I will go through my country' history in a very brief way and then I hope we can open the floor for discussion and those questions which you will realize that were not answered during the presentation or discussion. Then certainly please do ask and I will try to do my best to answer them. I, myself, I am a diplomat uh, with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for 23 years. During these 23 years I had uh the honor and the pleasure of to serve as the ambassador in London, ambassador in Moscow, ambassador in the United Nations in New York, and now I am here in Japan in Tokyo. In August, it will be two years since I have arrived directly from New York to Tokyo. I do enjoy it my stay here. I have two daughters. One is 23 and in fact today is her birthday. And she is Edinburgh. She is working there. She has graduated from Glasgow University. My youngest daughter is 12 years old, and she is with me staying in Tokyo and going to Seisan International School. So we are we are a family getting together during the summertime back in back in Riga, Latvia.

Location of Latvia. Situated in Northern Europe on the coast of the Baltic Sea. um it's a small country 64,000 square km, which is smaller than Hokkaido. The population of Latvia is uh 2 million. So it is uh a much nicer population-wise because it is not overpopulated. It's beautiful it's nice place Whereas Japan. Where in Latvia. It almost neighbors .It only one country that separates you from us. Although it is big country, Russia, but still it is just one country. So we are almost neighbors (laughter in the audience)

This non-native English seems to have helped some of our students feel relieved and even encouraged them to try to use English, not worrying too much

about making mistakes. In fact, one of the participants in this class in the first term of 2015 told the writer that he was much encouraged by the fact that such a person had served as ambassador to London, Moscow, to the United Nations.

The lecture lasts for about 60 minutes, followed by a question and answer session. With a list of questions at hand, how many students asked questions and which? The list of questions goes as follows:

Questions for the first Lecture in 2015 on “Latvia in Today’s Dynamic World” by Ambassador Normans Penke

1. How do Latvians feel about Japan?
2. I hear Latvia is famous for its production of amber. Does the climate of Latvia suit the production of amber?
3. Latvia had a lot to do with Russia, but how about the present day of Latvia? Does it still have good or bad relations with Russia?
4. How many Japanese live in Latvia? And why do they live there?
5. I have learned in a preparatory session that Latvians are very conscious of their ethnic identity. I wonder what kind of costumes and events they have to enhance such an identity.
6. Do you happen to know that Japanese singer Tokiko Kato sings “a million roses”, one of the most popular songs of hers? That song was originally derived from a poem composed by a Latvian poet. Is that right?
7. How has your country tried to establish its relations with neighboring countries? Have you done any joint effort to do something characteristic of your area?
8. Is there any sistership relation between your cities and Japanese cities?
9. How have your people’s lives changed since you became independent in 1990?
10. Is there any ethnic music in your country?
11. What do you use to go to school or work?
12. Since you came to Japan to live, have you noticed anything so different between Japan and your country?
13. Latvia is now taking the chair of the European Union. What is the honest opinion of your country people about the Greek issue, a country which is heavily indebted?
14. How many Latvians know Japan? And what impression do the average Latvians have of Japan?
15. What is the biggest industry of Latvia?
16. In case Russians invaded Latvia’s soil, what response do you think Latvians will have against Russians?
17. What are some of the main Japanese products exported to Latvia?
18. Do you have any regional dialects in your country? How many are there?

19. What letters does the Latvian language use?
20. What religion do many Latvians profess?
21. Do ordinary Latvians speak English? Do you think they are good at speaking it?
22. We know Russian was the official language of your country, but how about now? On what occasion do you use Russian?
23. We learned that there was a chain of people in 1989 among people of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, but I wonder if your government was behind their movement. Was not the government involved?
24. As I checked the Internet, Latvia is the most beautiful country in the world. Specifically, what is the most beautiful in your country?
25. What is the main business in Latvia?
26. What does your national flag represent?
27. We have learned that Latvians and Russians are in your country. Are those Russians living in your country are also supposed to use the Latvian language as a means of instruction?
28. What do Latvian young people do after their 9-year compulsory education? Do they go up to high school and then to university?
29. Are there any World Heritage sites in Latvia?
30. Please excuse me, but let me ask you a very personal question. Why have you chosen to become a diplomat, and then ambassador of your country?
31. Historically speaking, what relationship has Latvia had with Japan?
32. As a Latvian diplomat, have you found anything Japanese which you have wanted to adopt, especially in terms of cultural or economic aspects of Japan?
33. I would like to see the way ordinary Latvians live their daily life.
34. Are the three Baltic countries in good terms with one another? Estonia is closer to Finland, while Latvia and Lithuania are close to each other in a different way. I suspect there is some friction among the three. What do you think of the negative effects of your ethnic differences on their trilateral relations?
35. Under the Soviet system, Latvia was forced to educate its people in a language different from its native language, and since the collapse of the Soviet Union, things have changed totally. Have you had any difficulty in changing from one system to another, especially your means of instruction in your education system?
36. Who is the greatest person in Latvia? And why is he or she respected so much?
37. In Latvia, what is the most famous Japanese thing?
38. We now understand that the Latvian language is used as a means of instruction in all junior high schools in Latvia, but I wonder what language was used for the same purpose before 2004.
39. What is the education system in Latvia like?
40. The staple food in Japan is rice. What is the staple food in Latvia?
41. Which area of Latvia is most famous for its bacon?
42. In Europe, Japanese cuisine and animated films are popular, but I wonder what is a famous Japanese thing in Latvia.

43. Is “One million roses” sung in Latvia?
44. What are some of the traditional Latvian foods?
45. Will you tell us some of the differences between Latvia and Japan? And those between Europe and Japan as well?
46. Where do you recommend I should go for sightseeing in Latvia?
47. I feel Latvia has the same problems as Ukraine. Even now there are 300,000 Russians who have no nationality in the capital of Riga. What does the Latvian government think of this issue?
48. What is the traditional costume of Latvia?
49. What characteristics do Latvians have? Japanese are often regarded as a hard-working people.
50. What is the national sport of Latvia?
51. What do you think as a diplomat of the meaning of your country belonging to the European Union?
52. Japan has very delicate relationships with China and South Korea, but I wonder what relationship your country has with Estonia and Lithuania.
53. What is the main method of generating electricity in Latvia?
54. Japan is surrounded by the sea, but Latvia is near the Baltic Sea and shares the border with Russia. I wonder what relationship Latvia has had with other countries.
55. How did the “chain of people” start in 1989? Who initiated such a movement?
56. Your country was controlled by the Soviet Union. What merits and demerits did you have at that time?
57. Do you eat bacon every day? Rice is the staple food for Japanese, and we eat it almost every day.
58. What represents your traditional culture?
59. What is the most delicious food in Latvia?
60. What do you usually do on a holiday?
61. Japan has suffered from natural disasters such as earthquakes and tsunami. What natural disasters does your country have?
62. Does Latvia have good relations with Poland, Sweden and Russia? We do not have good relations with China or South Korea at the moment.
63. In Japan, we are worried about our society with more elderly people and fewer children. I wonder if you have the same problem in your society. What kind of welfare system do you have in Latvia?
64. What kind of music do young people my age (19 or 20 years old) listen to?
65. What is your favorite food in the Latvian cuisine?
66. What differences are there between Japan and Latvia in their cuisines?
67. Do you have any domestic problems in Latvia?
68. Do you have any religious problems in Latvia?
69. What is your food self-sufficiency ratio in Latvia?
70. Do you have any popular TV characters or toys in your country?

71. Is the Latvian language spoken in Latvia alone?
72. What kind of job is the most popular among Latvians?
73. What enjoys the highest popularity in Latvia?
74. Do you have any local delicacies?
75. In present-day Latvia, what kind of people speak good Russian?
76. How much is public safety guaranteed in Latvia?
77. What is the traditional Latvian costume like? And on what occasion do Latvians wear it?
78. What is the most famous holiday of Latvians in the world?
79. What is the biggest news in Latvia that attracts the attention of the whole world?
80. Do all Latvians speak Russian? If not, what kind of people speak it now?

The lecture lasted longer than expected, but with a video on Singing and Dancing Celebration, all participants felt they were satisfied with the whole lecture. After the lecture, only two students asked, but what they asked about had a lot to do with questions 6, 8, 13, 23, 27, 35, 47, and 55, and the lecturer took a long time in answering those two questions. Since this was the very first lecture and the two questions given were related to the politics and economy of Latvia, many other participants seemed to be reluctant to follow suit. In fact, some of the participants told the writer that they could not ask questions about lighter topics, such as food, music and fashions. For this first lecture, 80 questions were given, but only two students asked, so some people may say many questions were wasted, but they were not. The lecturer did refer to many more questions during his lecture and in many other classes, more students, an average of 10 students did ask a question, and they were using their questions, most of which were put in a list of questions prepared beforehand.

All participants were supposed to write a report on each lecture, and these reports were commented on by five different teachers (Mr. Akitomo Mori, Ms. Miho Moody, Ms. Yoshiko Shiroyama, Dr. Yumi Kondo and Dr. Takehiro Sato). Mori, who is teaching the other school of the same university, expressed some envy for the availability of this lecture, Moody suggested that there should be

a system through which many other faculty members could learn about what is going on in this lecture, Shiroyama noticed that some of the students had begun to be aware of different problems in different countries, and Kondo found out that some of the participants just copied some comments about countries they learned about through this lecture series from those they found in the Internet. Since we realized this kind of attitude in some students could lead to plagiarism, the wrong attitude toward writing a report was disclosed in the following classes and all of us coordinators urged all participants to write a report on their own. Sato wrote a general comment on the student reports, which was translated by the writer, like this:

My Report on Latvia

The first lecture of 2015 was “Latvia in today’s dynamic world” in which Ambassador Normans Penke talked about many facts of Latvia ranging from its history, the national flag and religions to its relations with great neighboring country Russia and peace demonstrations called “human chains” which led to its independence movement.

What seemed most interesting to our students was the video footage of a singing festival attended by so many Latvians in a stadium, which highlighted the second half of the lecture. This fact was mentioned in many a report written by the students. Many students also showed their special interest in the beautifully arranged streets of old cities, including those of the capital Riga.

Most students, however, expressed their honest feelings of disappointment with themselves because this was the very first lecture of Contemporary International Studies Special Lecture Series B and they were not used to listening to such a long lecture, not able to understand most of what Mr. Penke spoke about. In his lecture, the term USSR was not familiar to many of our students. Students of English tend to think the mere increase of their vocabulary can help them understand any English lecture, but this is not true. It was necessary to have some background information, so I hope our students were not so discouraged by their failure to comprehend today’s lecture, but will continue to try to improve their English while taking advantage of this kind of opportunity and increasing their vocabulary of English.

IV. A critical analysis of what our students learned

During the lecture, all of us coordinators listened to the whole lecture, and all the questions by the students and answers by the lecturers, and on the whole, each lecture was quite satisfactory and we felt not only the participating students but we teachers and even lecturer were in an English class taught by English. Except the first two lecturers, all the other lecturers had more than 10 students asking questions after the lecture, which helped all of us feel we enjoyed an “international atmosphere.” And some of the students seemed to be determined to ask questions about political or economic aspects of each country, so their determination made a great contribution to the making of a “high-level English classroom.” The final comment made by each lecturer and the fact that a great majority of students expressed their highest satisfaction in a university questionnaire on this class “proved” a good quality of this class. The open-book examination given on the final day of the first term and the 79 reports submitted, however, did not necessarily indicate the quality of a good class.

First of all, not all the students who actively asked questions in English, especially economic or political ones, did not get good marks in the exams or write good reports. One student even failed to submit his report and made several mistakes in spotting several countries in the world map. Another wrote his report in English, but it was too short to develop his idea. These two students asked questions almost always and on political or economic matters. On the contrary, there were many good exam papers and good reports among those who did not ask questions during the class.

Secondly, as has been already mentioned, a list of questions ranging from 40 to 87 were prepared so that as many students as possible could ask questions in English, but even in the most successful lecture, a little more than 10 students did. What does it suggest? K508 is a theater-type classroom, and not all stu-

dents are ready to ask a question, and in English, they do not have the courage to ask questions. Almost all students admitted this lecture can be useful if they go abroad to study, for in an English-speaking country, all students are expected to speak out in class, so they can use this opportunity to train themselves in speaking out in this class.

Thirdly, almost no questions developed into a dialogue with a diplomat. It may be good enough for more than 10 students to ask questions in English, but, ideally, it is best to exchange ideas in the question and answer session. Every lecturer is good at expanding any simple question to such an interesting topic as everyone else in the class would like to join in a discussion. For such an expanded discussion to be realized, preparation is inevitable. In a report submitted after each lecture, it was found that several students did study more in the Internet on the country they just listened to, so more participants are expected to join those students from now on.

Fourthly, as one report suggests that, although not all the countries invited to our lecture series were “major” ones, such as the United States, they were all interesting, for no such occasion would be found except this lecture series. Having said so, the writer of this report commented on three countries: India as a democratic nation, Chile as a friendly country to Japan, and Bhutan with the highest Gross National Happiness.

And last of all, the writer of this paper interpreted part of each lecture, but he should learn more about when he should do so and how long. We invited 11 countries in the first term of 2015, but he could interpret very few parts of the lecture on Serbia. The number of reports for each country goes like this:

Bhutan 19, Ireland 14, India 12, South Africa 11, Belgium 8, Cuba 6, Chile 4, Ethiopia 3, International views* 2, El Salvador 1, Latvia 1, Serbia 0.

Two students (*) wrote their reports in which they gave a general view and referred to several countries. And the writer felt a little guilty about no report on Serbia submitted because he could not interpret the lecture on the country. The lecturer for Bhutan was so clear and persuasive that the largest number of students wrote their reports on this small country, while India and South Africa became very attractive countries because of the compassionate or passionate speakers on respective countries. Ireland has the second largest number largely because half of the students of the Department of English and Contemporary Society spent one month in Ireland in their first year.

V. Conclusion

A total of 87 students registered with Contemporary International Studies Special Lecture B, of which 81 were second-year students and 6, third-year. Of the 81 second-year students, 45 came from the Department of English and Contemporary Society, 21 from the Department of Liberal Arts and Global Studies, 10 from the Department of Global Business, and 5 from the Department of British and American Studies. Of the 6 third-year students, 2 came from the Department of British and American Studies, 1 from the Department of Global Business and 3 from the Department of Liberal Arts and Global Studies. This number itself was encouraging to us coordinators, but we hope this class will develop into a truly international forum in which all participants, students, teachers and lecturers (diplomats) can exchange ideas, not being complacent about the mere use of English.

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commenting on their respective group of students.

References:

The CIA World Factbook

World Yearbook 2015 by Kyodo News