

Omura Hama and English Lessons

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I. Introduction

English teachers are language teachers. Language teachers should love their target language, try to develop it, and be ready to accept it as it is actually used. English teachers in classrooms, however, tend to forget the nature of their target language as often as English learners do just because they are teaching or learning it as a foreign language.

It is Omura Hama, a Japanese language teacher, who helps English teachers realize such a wrong attitude toward the language they teach. It is true Omura Hama's teaching of Japanese includes something exceptionally good only a master of the Japanese language can achieve, but it is the construction of a knowledge-building society, advocated by Bereiter and Scardamalia (1993), that language teachers, English or Japanese, should aim at. In fact, Omura Hama herself seems to have aimed at such a society while teaching any individual student she had met in her classrooms.

With this assumption in mind, this paper is to try to describe briefly language lessons Omura Hama gave her students through the observation of three people close to her, then to analyze her lessons in terms of expertise elaborated

by Bereiter and Scardamalia, and to present samples of the writer's attempts in which he tried to apply insights he gained from Omura Hama's lessons to his own classroom teaching.

II. Omura Hama's Lessons in Terms of Two Scholars and One Former Student

In his comments on Omura Hama's lessons (*Jyugyo o Tsukuru* [Creative Lessons] 2007, pp.170-193), psychologist Kanji Hatano described them in the following three ways: 1) She organized any lesson of hers so that children could find an assignment of their own; 2) She helped children feel they discovered something on their own; and 3) she was strict with herself as a professional teacher. This last fact is clearly demonstrated in her own words: "The composition teaching I have been used to should be totally changed... Otherwise, I cannot make any innovation!" (*Ibid.*, p.192)

Educational sociologist Takehiko Kariya analyzed Omura Hama's lessons in *Oshierukoto no fukken* [Revival of Teaching] (2009, pp.171-179), as follows: 1) She defined her main job as teaching Japanese; 2) She always gave specific instructions so that her students could find something they really wanted to express or talk about in their own words; and 3) she made herself a role model for her students as she taught and used Japanese effectively.

As a student in Omura Hama's later years, Natsuko Kariya, who is currently secretary-general of Omura Hama Memorial Japanese Language Education Society, made her own description of Omura Hama's lessons in a monthly magazine for English teachers (*The English Teachers' Magazine*, January 2009, pp.28-33), which reads like this: 1) She always tried to set up a situation in which children could not help doing their best as they were immersed in something. Omura Hama was quoted as saying, "Children, no matter what they are doing, should be encouraged to absorb themselves in it.

Otherwise, they cannot learn to think on their own, develop their language skills, or remember anything important.” 2) She made a careful look at what was going on in her classrooms. According to Omura Hama, teachers should not ask their students with such a question as “Did you understand?” As a professional teacher, each teacher is strongly recommended to observe individual students, recognize what they have understood and how much, what they have failed to understand and what has prevented them from understanding what they were supposed to know. And 3) she gave various opportunities for her students to learn to express themselves clearly. Students must have something they want to express by all means. “Understand me, or I will be in trouble. So understand me please, please and please!” Only words students utter with such a desperate need in mind will have wings to fly to the other party. Each lesson must have such an inner pressure to build up in students.

The writer has made a brief sketch of the way Omura Hama has been observed and analyzed by two scholars and one former student who knew her well, and now he goes on to refer to Bereiter and Scardamalia, who have studied the process of writing.

III. The Theory of Expertise in Learning

In *The Psychology of Written Composition* (1987), Bereiter and Scardamalia introduced two concepts: knowledge telling and knowledge transforming. If someone can do what he or she is told to do, reproduce or produce in a certain pattern what he or she has learned, he or she is in a phase of knowledge-telling. Many exchanges of words in our daily life pertain to this phase. If someone is able to transform as freely as possible to his or her own taste what has been learned, he or she is in a phase of knowledge-transforming. And one ultimate case of knowledge-transforming can be found in the following example of a rewriting process made by such a novelist as Aldous Huxley.

Generally, I write everything many times over. All my thoughts are second thoughts. And I correct each page a great deal, or rewrite it several times as I go along... Things come to me in driblets, and when the driblets come I have to work hard to make them into something coherent. (Aldous Huxley, cited in *Writers at Work*, 2nd series, 1963, p.197)

Novelists are one example of experts in writing, but such experts in learning, if they exist exceptionally, make little or no contribution to the whole society. Especially in schools, where learning is the main activity, “If schools are to become more effective in developing expertise, they need to become communities in which the process of expertise is normal rather than exceptional” (*Surpassing Ourselves* 1993, p.222). Bereiter and Scardamalia refer to such a community as a “knowledge-building society”, which is characterized by the following five features (*Ibid.*, pp.225-227):

1) Ideal goals

At every level of society there would be ideal goals that are not ultimately attainable but that permit demonstrable progress.... In an expert society, goals of the professions would be goals of the society, no longer the special province of the professions.

2) Work as contribution

Individuals see their work as contributions to progress on these goals. Henry Adams, reflecting on the construction of the great gothic cathedrals, supposed that a stone mason, asked what he was doing, would not have replied, ‘I am carving a stone.’ He would have said, ‘I am building a cathedral.’

3) Intrinsic rewards

Contributing to the production of a play is rewarded by artistic satisfactions, esteem of fellow cast members, and, one hopes, by income from the box office that is a direct consequence of progress that has been made toward

ideal goals of the production.

4) Emergent goals

...progress itself provides the higher-level goals or problems that guide further progress...

5) Sharing of expertise

Ideally, in an expert society everyone would be regarded as more or less of a colleague and thus would come under the sharing part of the norm rather than the withholding part.

VI. Omura Hama's Lessons in Terms of the Theory of Expertise in Learning

Omura Hama is a Japanese language teacher. As she learned to teach Japanese, she developed her teaching expertise further. In other words, she made continuous efforts to improve her way of teaching Japanese. And what Omura was most enthusiastic about was the study of teaching composition, as was clearly expressed in her own words (*Hyouden Omura Hama* [A Critical Biography of Omura Hama] 2010, p.221): “What’s wrong with a study of writing?” So she said, “The composition teaching I have been used to should be totally changed...” That is, she set up *emergent goals* in her usual lessons, and continued to search for her *ideal goals* until she died at the age of 98.

Here is one thing which calls for a special notice. That we teach a language on a regular basis does not necessarily mean we can become an expert in teaching the language. Bereiter and Scardamalia made a distinction between experts and experienced nonexperts in the following manner.

The difference between experts and experienced nonexperts is not that one does things well and the other does things badly. Rather, the expert addresses problems whereas the experienced nonexpert carries out practiced routines. Often these routines are carried out very well and are effective in a majority of cases. It is only when the

routines fail, ..., that the difference between experts and nonexperts becomes manifest. (*Surpassing Ourselves*, p.11)

This explanation suggests that those who teach a language, even if they are not true experts in their teaching, can do their job well and effectively in many cases. And it is only when students encounter problems they could not possibly solve by themselves that those who teach the language will turn out to be true experts or not.

What did Omura Hama actually do to create such a situation as could demonstrate the true nature of an expert language teacher? On December 22 in 2012, the Chubu Chapter of Japan Association of College English Teachers (JACET) invited Natsuko Kariya as a lecturer, who introduced one sample of Omura Hama's instructions aimed at enhancing writing ability. This sample suggests that students were recommended to insert their own comments on any part of their writing. Those comments vary from a choice of words to the appropriateness of expressions or sentences. Various kinds of comments are labeled from A to G, each of which represents a problem and the way the problems were treated was fully recognized by both Omura Hama and her students.

- A Do you think I should have written this more simply, more briefly
- B Do you think I should have written this in more detail, more precisely?
- C I had no difficulty in writing this part.
- D I had much difficulty in writing this part; I stopped sometimes, but tried to go on.
- E I think I wrote best here in this part.
- F I do not think I wrote well here in this part.
- G I chose this word here for this part, but I am still unhappy about it. I tried hard to find a better one, but in vain. So this word is just tentative.

After reading his or her own essay again, each student was instructed to comment on any part of the essay by underlining it and putting such a label on it as C or G. The teacher in turn responded to such a label. If she found C in a part, she was expected to put a circle (○) when that part turned out to be as good as her student said it was. This means the teacher's agreement and the student got some *intrinsic reward*. If the comment was G, however, it means a problem the student faced in trying to write a better essay. On such an occasion, the teacher was expected to read the problem part and its context seriously and suggested a solution to the problem. Among the problems the students faced, there were some which faced many other students as well and some of them could be solved easily by the teacher's long experience of teaching, for their solutions could be found in her "practiced routines." If Omura's class could be defined as a learning community, these common problems and their solutions could lead to a treasure trove of the teacher's successful tactics and each individual student could *work as some contribution* to the building of a better learning community. Other problems, however, were unique to particular students who had particular experiences. It was those unique problems that only experts in learning could help to solve. Omura Hama is said to have always been enthusiastic about solving those unique problems.

An attempt to solve one of those unique problems is a committed exchange of opinions carried out in trying to find the best word or expression between a teacher and her student. In other words, that exchange can be regarded as true communication between a teacher and her student. Such an attempt, however, does not necessarily mean it is the teacher who makes the best suggestion. Sometimes, the student has a better sense and can make the best proposal. In such a case, the distinction between the teacher and her student disappears, and both people involved in this kind of exchange of opinions can *share* their respective levels of *expertise*.

The writer of this paper has made an analysis of Omura Hama's lessons in terms of the theory of learning expertise, and he is now about to introduce one sample of his attempts to follow the example of Omura Hama in teaching language, but it seems to be good at this point to try to see English teachers as they are now in Japan.

V. English Teachers as They Are

1) Many English teachers forget they are language teachers

In an English lesson, when the writer dealt with a slightly difficult matter, he was sometimes asked by his students whether it was an "English lesson" or not. That was when he gave some current English news to his students in his lesson. Some even suspected it was a lesson of politics and economics. On another occasion, when he talked about current English news, some fellow English teachers of his said what he did was beyond "what he was supposed to do as an English teacher".

The writer believes this is a wrong attitude toward an English lesson, which should be changed. English teachers should be aware of the fact that they are language teachers, who should help their students deepen their understanding of subjects of various fields they study through their target language and learn to express their own opinions in that language. This is the essence of what they should do as a language teacher.

It does not necessarily mean, however, that students whose native language is Japanese are expected to think in English as a foreign language. It is quite natural that they should develop their thinking in their native language, but those students should be encouraged to read as exactly as possible what is written in English, and when the amount of reading they do has increased to some extent, they should be able to express in English what they have thought through in their native language. Ideally, they would start off by translating

a difficult part of an English text into Japanese, but when their learning has advanced, they would be able to understand the English text as it is without trying to translate it into Japanese all the time, and finally, when the amount of their reading has tremendously increased, they would have a strong desire to express everything in English, “communicate better and express themselves better,” as many students did in Omura Hama’s Japanese lessons. English teachers should join Omura Hama in organizing their English lessons in such a manner.

2) Many English teachers seldom find it necessary to continue to learn

Becoming an English teacher does not mean they can continue to improve their English. Usually, Japanese English teachers, whether they work for a public or private school, have to take an examination to become a registered teacher, and it is when they have passed it that they become English teachers. Even after they have been offered a place to teach English, it does not automatically mean they maintain a high-level of English proficiency. Unless they are constantly required to test such proficiency, they find their English on the way of gradual deterioration. The writer wonders how many English teachers are making constant efforts to improve their own English as language teachers.

There are some circumstances, however, under which they are allowed not to make such an effort. If they are junior or senior high school teachers, it seems all they have to do is help their students pass entrance examinations to high school or university. In the case of university teachers, they are required to deal with TOEIC for a higher rate of success in employment and give a TOEFL course for those who want to go abroad to study. Whether they are English texts in entrance examinations, TOEIC or TOEFL, the English introduced in those kinds of tests is nothing wrong. It is high-quality English material, but the problem lies in the fact that English teaching at the levels of junior and senior high schools or university is geared to tests, and not language education aimed at by Omura Hama.

This suggestion is made for native speaker teachers working in Japan as well. They should be more acutely aware of the fact that they are engaged in language education. Listening to them speak English, many students wish they could speak the way native speakers of English do, but very few of those teachers, unless they make any serious effort to learn to use Japanese even after having lived in Japan for many years, will ever be able to recognize what their students have failed to understand in their study of English, much less able to join their students in finding a proper word in writing an essay, in a true two-way communication between a teacher and his or her student (s) aimed at by Omura Hama.

3) Many English teachers find it more difficult to identify what English they aim at

The writer was once asked by some students of his whether his English was American English or British English. At that moment, he responded to such a question spontaneously like this: “My English? It is Kimura-ya English, of course!” (Kimura-ya is the founder of a bakery famous for its *an-pan*, or a piece of bun with bean paste, and the writer used this term jokingly as his family name is the same as this bakery’s.) The writer still believes this response was right.

The writer went to Britain twice to study. While he was studying there, he was asked: “Why do you speak American English? You are Japanese, aren’t you?” Later, he joined a bus tour in Europe, which was participated in by many American tourists. One of those tourists asked him why he spoke British English although he was Japanese. It is true we are influenced by people around as far as our pronunciation is concerned.

On another occasion, when the writer gave a lecture in English, one of the listeners commented on his English like this: “You spoke genuine British English, didn’t you?” Although he was not unhappy about this comment, the

writer believes it is his own English, not British English or American English.

Before an English speech contest is held, the writer is often asked to help a participant write his or her manuscript. He always tries to make the smallest number of corrections, but he was embarrassed to know one of his students had his original manuscript corrected totally, even its beginning and main parts, by an American teacher of English, in a preliminary training session before the contest. The student was told that his original speech was not like that based on an ordinary “American way of writing.” This is one of the things any English teacher, whether native speaker or Japanese teachers, should be more careful about. Even in an English speech contest, Japanese students will speak in front of an audience made up of Japanese students. Is it necessary for those students to write their speech manuscripts which should reflect the American way of thinking? The writer believes it is totally all right for a Japanese student to think and speak in his own way, even if it turns out to be genuine Japanese English. All he has to do is to express it in English. This can also be said of any international occasion on which a speech a Japanese makes and delivers should reflect his or her own way of thinking.

VI. An Attempt in an English Lesson to Practice Omura Hama

(1) Texts to be used for students of the Department of Global Business

The writer is in charge of Business English B (writing), and decided what to use after thinking over what is most suitable for business students. It should not be too easy or too difficult, but it should contain something challenging which needs deep thinking on the part of a teacher as well in preparation for his lessons. He chose *The Daily Drucker*, a collection of English texts from various sources of books written by Peter F. Drucker, which can be read each day for 366 days. The writer reads seven texts including the one for the lesson day, and chooses four texts for each lesson. The biggest reason for this choice is that the

writer found Peter F. Drucker a life-long expert in learning like Omura Hama, as is clearly demonstrated in the following passage:

Whenever people ask me which of my books I consider the best, I smile and say, “The next.” I do not, however, mean it as a joke. I mean it the way Verdi meant it when he talked of writing an opera at eighty in the pursuit of a perfection that had always eluded him. Though I am older now than Verdi was when he wrote *Falstaff*, I am still thinking and working on two additional books, each of which, I hope, will be better than any of my earlier ones, will be more important, and will come a little closer to excellence. (*The Daily Drucker* 2010, p.301)

Sure enough, the texts are not so easy for the writer himself. But now, when half of the second term is over, he enjoys each text and even takes pleasure in preparing for each lesson. He hopes as many students as possible will join him in learning to understand the gist of each text by themselves.

(2) Assignments chosen and translated by students

In each lesson, the students first read parts of four texts, and are instructed to read those parts aloud as they tried to pronounce some new words by themselves, and finally asked to choose a certain part of one of the texts not dealt with in the lessons, which seems to be useful for themselves. As homework, all students are asked to try to put that part into Japanese. As they do this “self-made exercise” at home, they can refer to every kind of reference, including an English-Japanese dictionary. One passage chosen by a student is shown below as one such example:

If a manager does not take care of the next hundred days, there will be no next hundred years. Whatever the manager does should be sound in expediency as well as in basic long-range objective and principle. (*Ibid.*, p.296)

This assignment will be commented in three phases: First, the assignments of

all students are examined, one sample of assignment is chosen for the teacher's revision, and the revision is presented to all students; second, the first two steps are the same, while the last step is presented in a slightly different manner, namely with the teacher's corrections; and third, to follow the example of Omura Hama (see IV), each student is expected to comment on his or her own translation. The writer hopes that all students will have learned to some extent through the first two phases how to comment on their own translations. One example of the second phase is shown below:

Today, I believe it is socially and morally unforgivable when managers reap huge profits for themselves but fire workers. As societies, we will pay a heavy price for the contempt this generates among middle managers and workers. In short, whole dimensions of what it means to be a human being and treated as one are not incorporated into the economic calculus of capitalism. For such a myopic system to dominate other aspects of life is not good for any society. (*Ibid.*, p.319)

This passage is chosen by one student, who tried to translate it into Japanese. The Japanese translation will be corrected by his teacher as follows:

(学生和訳の添削例) 今日において、(私は) 経営管理者が自分は多額の利益を得(ると同時に) ながら、労働者を解雇するのは社会的にも道徳的にも許されざる事だと思ふ。社会として、(そ) このよう行為は中間管理者と労働者の間に (で憤りとしらけ) 軽蔑を生み、そのために高い代償を支払うことになる (必ず高いつけとなって返ってくる)。要するに、人間 (として生き) であること、また人間として遇される ということが何を意味するのか (の意味は)、そのすべての側面が資本主義の経済的計算の中に組み込まれることはない (金銭的な計算では表せない)。(金銭などという) そのような近視眼的な (基準) 制度が (人生と) 生活の他の側面 (全局面) を支配することはいかなる社会にとっても良いものではない (などといこと許されざることである)。() 削除、下線部は追加

(3) Assignments created and translated by students

In a traditional writing class in Japan, a sentence or passage is usually

provided by the teacher, but in the writer's lesson, each student is asked to read a certain part of a text and create his or her own sentence or passage. The following passage was created by one student:

デズニーリゾートの従業員は、約90%がアルバイトである。しかし、最高の顧客満足度を維持している。ディズニーのホスピタリティーは「相手に対する主体的な思いやりだ」と言われている。また「アルバイトにも job satisfaction (JS) が浸透している」と言われている。

This passage was translated into English as follows:

About 90% of Disney Resort employees are part-time job workers, but its customer satisfaction is maintained the best. The Dinsny hospitality is said independent consideration toward guests. Also JS—job satisfaction—is penetrated among part-time job workers (Original).

In the first phase of teaching, only the revised version of the student's translation is shown below:

About 90 percent of Disney resort employees are part-timers, but their customers' satisfaction is best maintained. Disney hospitality is said to be the result of "positive consideration for others" shown by each individual employee. It also seems true that "job satisfaction (JS) is penetrated even among the part-time employees."

When the writer presented his revised version, he told all students that he was still unhappy about the choice of the term "positive" for *shutaitekina* in the original passage, suggesting he will continue to search for a better word. This suggestion can be labeled as G in Omura Hama's instruction.

VII. Conclusion

Now the writer is engaged in a study (project number: 24520717) with the Grant-in Aid for Scientific Research (C): Toward the Construction of An

English Writing Center for Japanese Students. One result of a survey of his research team on the writing centers across Japan was disclosed in *The Journal of the School of Contemporary International Studies* (No.9, 2013), and another presentation on the direction of our research was made at the International Convention of JACET in September of the same year, and still another in the Symposium of Second Language Writing in October. And our immediate concern is what kind of service should be provided if our writing center at Nagoya University of Foreign Studies (NUFS) opens.

What has been presented here in this paper may be one specific example of the services of our writing center. By developing our research further, the writer hopes his research team will be able to clarify what should be included in the services of the writing center at NUFS.

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