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TOWARDS PRACTICAL ENGLISH TEACHING AND LEARNING IN JAPAN: USE OF ENGLISH FOR SPECIAL PURPOSES

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ANNOUNCEMENT

2016 INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON QUALITY OF LIFE
FRIDAY AUGUST 19TH TO SUNDAY AUGUST 21ST
KYOTO, JAPAN

We invite like minded researchers to come aboard and join us in the search of knowledge and wisdom through enlightened discussion and brainstorming. With inspired vision and a shared mission we can all create a better quality of life for all.

This event is an inclusive interdisciplinary research and publishing project that aims to bring together researchers from a wide variety of areas to share ideas and explore ways to improve global Quality of Life which are innovative and exciting.

We are proud to be holding this year's event will be held in Kyoto, Japan, a city whose living traditions integrating nature and human activity perfectly complement the themes of the conference. During their trip to the conference, we will support all participants as they enjoy all the timeless beauty, sights, and attractions, suitable for all tastes and interests, that this year's event venue has to offer.

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**Wisdom (Philosophical) Note:
As I was passing ...**

Towards Practical English Teaching and Learning in Japan: Use of English for Special Purposes

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In the 21st century, as English continues to be increasingly important as the so-called *lingua franca* of business, academia, and international relations, English communication skills have been in ever greater demand among people from all over the world. With the largest sporting event in the world, the Olympic Games, coming to Tokyo in 2020, many people from other countries are expected to descend to Japan, and they will primarily use English to communicate amongst each other. In other words, Japanese people are going to interact with foreigners, and be exposed to many more opportunities to use English, even for those Japanese with little or no English-speaking ability. Now, the question arises, are we really proficient enough to keep pace with growing demands in English communication? Unfortunately, the answer is not affirmative. Japanese tend to get extremely nervous when speaking to foreigners, especially when it comes to speaking English. It is sad to know that, despite receiving English language education for 6 years or more in secondary schools (and for the average Japanese university students, at least eight years), Japanese people cannot communicate well enough in English. Why is it that Japanese encounter so much difficulty in speaking English? This essay offers some plausible explanations, and some consequences of this handicapped situation for English teaching in Japan.

To begin with, there are fundamental differences between the Japanese language and the English language. Historically, these two languages do not share the same roots or development: English belongs to the West Germanic family of languages, which include German and Dutch, and which are partly derived from the Indo-European family. The Japanese language, on the other hand, derives from a few isolated languages first spoken in Japan (including the Ryukyu languages spoken in Okinawa), and these are not related to any other languages on earth. The fundamental difference in origin is reflected in various aspects of the language. Here are some examples. A typical sentence in Japanese follows the SOV (Subject-Object-Verb) structure, as in *watashi-wa ringo-wo taberu*, while in the case of English, the structure is: SVO (Subject-Verb-Object) as in *I eat apples*. Likewise, the difference can be easily found in written and spoken forms of both the languages. The Japanese language uses three different basic systems for writing: *hiragana* and *katakana* (which make phonetic sounds like the English alphabet) along with *kanji* based on Chinese characters. English has an al-

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phabetic writing system, which is a specific type of Latin-derived alphabets containing 26 letters. Japanese EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners struggle to pronounce English sounds correctly because there are many sounds in English that need to be distinguished from one another as well as in combination forms, as compared to the single pronunciation for each syllable in Japanese: e.g. Japanese people have much trouble perceiving the / r / and / l / sounds as distinct. Thus, in addition to pronunciation, Japanese and English have many different linguistic aspects. And furthermore, from the culture point of view, the fact that Japanese tend to express themselves with little confidence in English may be due in part to a quality in the nature of the Japanese culture and people, beyond the differing grammatical aspects of the two languages. Japanese has an expression, *ishin-denshin*, denoting communicating without talking through mutual understanding. This concept, a form of a non-verbal communication to foster better human relationships, is frequently put to use in everyday human interactions even in the modern Japan of today. In Japanese culture, silence is highly valued. Through silence, we convey various emotions such as sympathy, comfort, sadness and so on. For this reason, even young Japanese EFL learners – not to talk of adults and seniors - are possibly too shy and less likely to speak up about what is on their minds.

The reasons given above could all be given to account for Japanese people's hesitancy to speak the English language or any other foreign language for that matter. However, the best possible reason for this language disorientation is that we seldom have a strong need to study English without a particular circumstantial force or needs: most of us do not need to use it outside of the homogenous environment of the Japanese EFL classroom, as long as we remain in Japan. Even though learners get used to speaking English inside the Japanese EFL classroom, all their efforts are in vain unless they stay motivated to keep studying it and using it outside the classroom. Motivation can trigger effective language learning. Therefore, an effective incentive is needed to make Japanese ESL learners more motivated to become autonomous learners; and we need to take the most advantage of school hours, which can get every student involved in learning English. Of course, the Japanese government has proposed various reforms for the Japanese English education system in order to help students acquire authentic and practical English for effective real life communication. However, we have yet to see practical, useful and productive results.

Traditionally, the Japanese classroom was long dominated by the ineffective “grammar-translation method”, which unfortunately led to EFL learners becoming fed up with studying English under their own initiative. This classical method is embodied by concepts such as memorization of grammar rules and vocabulary, back-and-forth translation between the target and native languages, and explicit instruction about errors in constrained contexts. It is true that Japanese cannot cultivate their language ability without knowing the rules; however, too much weight has been placed on this structure-based and teacher-centered method for too long a time. The remembering of rules and memorizing of sentences can be counterproductive, and often deprives students of opportunities for speaking practice, and may consequently blow off kindling flame to speak up. As a reaction to this, a more and more communicative-functional approach has been incorporated into the English-learning curriculum by the Japanese government, such as task-based instruction including a meaning-based and student-centered approach. However, it is doubtful whether this kind of method can really engender learners' continuous motivation and engagement outside the classroom, leading to further autonomous learning.

Although which is the proper kind of system for English education in Japan is a highly controversial issue, there must be more effective and efficient ways of developing more productive learning styles, such as adjusting the level of teaching according to the age of the students, and using a more flexible and useful method for increasing motivation and teaching productive communication. In the case of university students, they urgently need to be armed with improved English skills and resources for global communication, in order to become full-fledged members of Japanese society and the international community. Recently, one of the most prominent parts of EFL instruction, English for Special Purpose (ESP), has gained increasing attention, especially when provided in tandem with English for General Purposes (EGA).

While EGA provides the base for the basic constituents of English and use of certain common vocabulary, ESP demands specificity with objectivity using specialized vocabulary and expressions. ESP contents for economics are different from those for chemistry, and the former and latter again are different from those for pharmaceutical and medical sciences. The call for ESP teaching requires training teachers

with specialized skills to handle the teaching contents: viz., an economics lecturer teaching ESP for business and economics has to have training and has to have knowledge of economics. An art graduate cannot teach ESP for pharmaceutical sciences or medical study merely because the lecturer will be dumbfounded when students ask questions of specialty demand. The need for specialized lecturers for specific subjects and fields of study is a prerequisite for teaching students to communicate in the respective ESP contexts of their chosen fields of study, although a science-based lecturer can handle most of the sciences as a whole. It is a part of the long-term development of any nation to develop appropriate staff able to teach students in certain fields of study when the basics are taught at the secondary level: This the government of any nation must understand for the good of future generations. ESP education cannot be expected to develop by merely using a relevant text written in EGA and taught by non-specialist lecturers to medical students. Otherwise, it will be like a blind man telling another to describe an elephant, where holding the tail, one says to the other: "the elephant is like a hard but slight flexible rod; while another holding the task says: "No, an elephant is more like a hard piece of plastic," and so on. A proper system with the appropriate staff (better still with proper training) for the designated students is the only way to teach ESP; any other system of just experimenting – like what is done in many Japanese universities - is doomed to lead to failure and disappointment.

Students who enter university have their own objectives and 'dreams' they strive for during their school life (we hope); they realize that their chosen field of study connects with their future dreams, and ESP is a vital part of every major subject with specialty. They know that if they succeed at mastering it, the knowledge learned will yield practical benefits for them in their future careers, including global engagement. Generally speaking, people enhance and sustain their motivation when they feel what they are learning is necessary. To further their career goals, they will need to keep studying and communicating in English throughout their life in their specific area, to keep abreast of and adapt to international developments. We are still in the process of exploring and trying out various methods, out of a recognized need for drastic improvements. Beyond any doubt, emphasis on ESP could be the vital key to effective language learning of specialty subjects.