

## A Study of English Language Learning through Interview & Questionnaire: For Seeking Pedagogical Implications under EFL Situations

EFL 状況での英語学習方法についての一考察  
—帰国子女インタビューと学生アンケートから—

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### Abstract

ハワイからのリターニーの母親のインタビューと大学2年生、短大1年の英語学習に関するアンケートに基づき EFL 状況に基づく英語学習法の示唆を得ることが調査目的である。結果として、リターニーのインタビューからは、インプットの機会の少ない EFL 状況での英語の保持には文法の習熟度が影響する事、大学・短大生のアンケートからは、英語学習の好感度には学習開始時期より文法導入が影響する事があった。これから EFL 状況下では、①文法学習が大切であると共に、②文法導入時には興味を引き出す配慮が必要であるという示唆が得られた。

**Keywords:** returnees, early English learners, grammar

### 1. Introduction and Background

The purpose of this study is to obtain some implications of English language learning under EFL situations in Japan through a case study based on an interview with a mother of three returnee children and a questionnaire among college students inquiring about their early English language learning experiences.

So far, studies for returnees have been conducted in various aspects. Uematsu (2006) states that returnees' studies are divided into three views. The first is related to one's mother tongue (Ono, 1994; Sato, 1997), the second is on retention of foreign languages (Yoshida, 1989; Tomiyama, 1999; Taura, 2005), and the third concerns bilingualism (Yashiro, 1995; Yukawa, 2000). The present study focuses on the second view, while seeking for pedagogical implications of English language learning under EFL situations.

Among studies on retention of foreign languages

by returnees, Nakazawa (1988) and Hattori (2006) refer to the periods of their stay and their ages. Nakazawa (1988) maintains that there is a tendency that the longer those stay overseas, the higher the level of local language abilities they retain. At the same time he states that the younger they go there or they come back, the lower their foreign language skills are. Under his research, returnees are divided into two groups, lower and higher, based on their foreign language abilities retained after coming back to Japan. Regarding results, it is found that 48 percent of the lower skills group (LSG, afterwards) account for almost half of those who come back before 6 years old, while among the higher skills group (HSG, afterwards), it is only 7 percent. Among the LSG members, 36.4 percent of them have an experience of attending only kindergarten during their stay overseas, while with the HSG members, it is only 2 percent. Through those results, he concludes that the

stage of children development is considered to be one factor for determining the degrees of foreign language competence which can be retained.

Similarly, Hattori (2006) argues that returnees who return to their home country at the stages of kindergarten or lower grades of elementary school do not have enough grammatical knowledge. The language used by children at kindergarten is highly contextualized, while that by children attending elementary school begins to become less contextualized using textbooks, in accordance with which grammatical knowledge increases. Hattori says this grammatical knowledge helps children to preserve their foreign languages skills. Therefore, the elementary school-level children's language can be preserved well. However, fluency and vocabulary skills acquired by very small children can easily decline, he continues. He emphasizes it is necessary for them to enforce grammatical knowledge through continuation of studying by reading or writing in order to retain their skills.

Among recent studies conducted on a large scale pertaining to junior high school students, a study of Sakai (2010) shows that about 60 percent of his examinees don't understand the contents of English class, followed by the result that 78.6% of them respond that grammar is difficult. The study also reveals that students come to dislike English between the latter half of the first grade and the beginning of the second grade at junior high school.

## 2. Case Study

The following are statements based on a telephone interview with a returnees' mother living in Kobe, which was conducted on November 20, 2010. The family went to Hawaii because of the father's job related transfer. Two daughters of the family, one aged three and the other aged seven, were sent to '*genchi-ko*', which is a school for the local children. After moving there, the couple had another boy.

### 2.1. Case 1

Their youngest son was born in the State of Hawaii in 1992. He spent three years and ten months there, where he started going to pre-school, at the age of two and ten months. 'Pre-school' is the Japanese equivalent

of a 'nursery school', where infants aged zero to four go. After one year, children are supposed to go on to kindergarten, followed by elementary school.

Before he was sent to pre-school, it seemed that he did not have many opportunities to obtain English skills through his everyday life with the reason that his Japanese parents were using only Japanese language at home; besides, he had no English speaking friends then. The mother stated he had chances to hear English sounds when he was taken shopping or while watching English TV programs, but he did not vocalize them.

His mother stated, however, soon after she sent him to pre-school, he seemed to understand his teachers' instructions such as "go to the bathroom" and "wash your hands". His class had three Japanese children being cared for by two teachers without knowledge of Japanese. At home his mother did not intentionally teach English to him, so he picked up English words in everyday activities in pre-school. There were no textbooks and the classroom had only a calendar on the wall as a teaching material. Among activities, his mother said, was "Show & Tell", where he showed his favorite toy, for example, while giving some explanation about it. By the time he left Hawaii at the age of three, his speaking skills and listening skills were developed to the extent that he used such expressions as "what are you doing here, Mom?" or "wake up, Mom" in English.

When he moved back to Japan with his family and started kindergarten at the age of three years and ten months, he used half Japanese and half English. Because three-year-old children are increasing their vocabulary, he used Japanese words which he had memorized first in Japanese and then used English words in the opposite case.

Now he has turned eighteen years old and is studying for entrance examinations to university. His mother says he seems to have forgotten almost all the English that he had obtained in Hawaii because his English abilities are not higher than his classmates' who have no experiences of staying overseas.

### 2.2. Case 2

The second youngest girl was born in Japan in 1985. When she arrived in Hawaii, she was three years old and spent eight years there. She attended

“*genchi-ko*”, where she had Japanese friends with communication in English. After school, however, she used only Japanese with those friends. She watched Japanese speaking TV every day in Hawaii, so her Japanese language competency was not lost at all.

She left there for Japan at the age of eleven years old as a fifth grader in elementary school. And then immediately she passed the second grade of the Step Test, “*eiken*”, followed by her passing the pre-first grade of the same test when she became a sixth grader. She was sent to high school with no special class for returnees. She became a university student majoring in law and scored over nine-hundred on the TOEIC Test as a sophomore. Since she came back to Japan, she has never used English among other Japanese people because of her shyness. She tries to keep the fact that she is a returnee a secret, according to her mother. Now she is twenty five years old and working for a top-ranked company in Japan. She understands English spoken in movies and on the news without Japanese subtitles.

### 2.3. Case 3

Their eldest daughter was born in Japan in 1981. She started her days in Hawaii as a first grader at the age of seven, and left there at the age of fourteen as a ninth grader in junior high school. She went to “*genchi-ko*” with no Japanese students. She also attended Saturday school from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. every week where she studied four subjects—math, science, social studies and Japanese language—using Japanese textbooks. She had to go through one topic, multiplication, for example, only for one day with a lot of homework as her preview. She studied those subjects in Japanese at the same pace as her Japanese counterparts in order to keep up with them after coming back to Japan. There were times when she studied the same things at the same time both in Japanese and English. She didn’t watch Japanese speaking TV programs in Hawaii.

When she came back to Japan at the age of fourteen and half years, her language was half English and half Japanese. She spent the latter half of the year as a third grader at junior high school in Japan, during which she passed the pre-first grade of the Step Test, ‘*eiken*’ followed by passing the first grade of the same test as a first grader at high school. She went on to

university having special classes for returnees where she had to eagerly studied using the same level of textbooks as her counterparts in America. Reading and essay writing were taught by native speakers of English and grammar by Japanese teachers. She was placed in the top-level class based on her academic performance. At the age of twenty-seven she gained a qualification as an interpreter for foreign visitors by passing a guide test, which is supposed to be one of the toughest English tests in Japan. Now she is thirty years old and is working for a world-famous electronics maker in Japan. Her mother says her English is more native-like than her younger sister’s, the person in Case 2.

## 3 Questionnaire

### 3.1 Procedure

The questionnaire was conducted during English class at the beginning of the fall term in 2010. They were not required to write their names but their genders. There were 66 of college sophomore students and 99 junior college freshman students, which brought the total number of participants to 155. The questionnaire consisted of the following four items:

1. When did you start English language learning?
2. Did you enjoy English language learning in your childhood?
3. Do you like English language learning?
4. When did you come to dislike English language learning?

Concerning Q2 and 3, the answers were graded four levels from “very much” to “not at all”, each of which was scored from 4 to 1.

### 3.2 Results

The following is the results of the questionnaire. For the statistical analysis, *SPSS 15. OJ* for Windows was used.

#### 3.2.1 When did you start English language learning?

The first question asks about when they started learning English. The results show that 65.8%, more than half, of the participants start before entering junior high school (see Figure 1). Some gained early English learning at elementary schools, others at private English

schools, “*jyuku*” (cram school), for example.

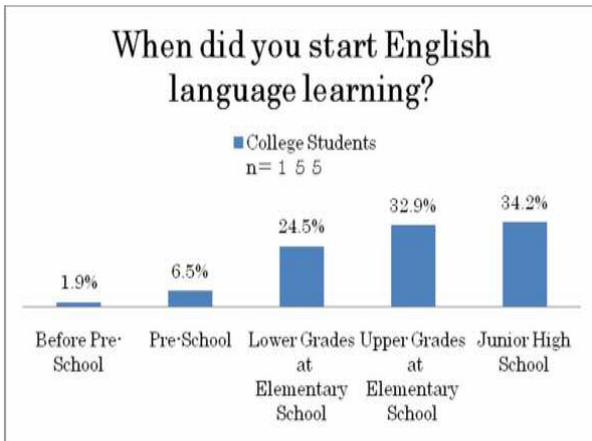


Figure 1 When did you start English language learning?

### 3.2.2 Did you enjoy English language learning in your childhood?

The second question addresses their likes and dislikes of English learning in their childhood. The results show that 70.6% of them enjoyed learning (see Figure 2). There is a tendency that caretakers hope their children just enjoy English while desiring they become favorable to English which will be a core subject later on. This is the reason why English instruction for small children is inclined to create a pleasant learning environment and the present study results are considered to reflect such a tendency.

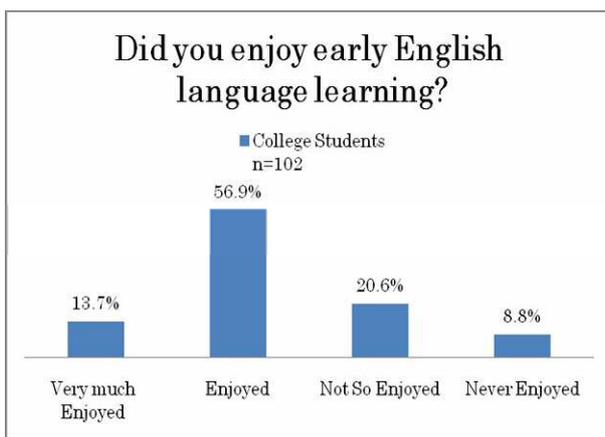


Figure 2 Did you enjoy early English language learning?

### 3.2.3 Do you like English language learning?

The results show that about 55 percent of students don't like English including 21 students saying “I don't like English at all” (see Figure 3). In order to

investigate the difference between early learners and non early learners, *t*-test was administrated ( $t(153)=1.41, p=0.16$ ). However, there is no significant difference between them (table 1). Even among early learners, 51% of them don't like English study. This figure is considered high given that as many as 70.6% of the early English language learners responded that they enjoyed learning. The next question to arise was when did they come to dislike English?

Table 1 Comparison between the Numbers of Early and Non-Early English Learners who Like English Now

Participants	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Early English learners	102	2.46	0.86
Non- early English learners	53	2.26	0.74

*n.s.*

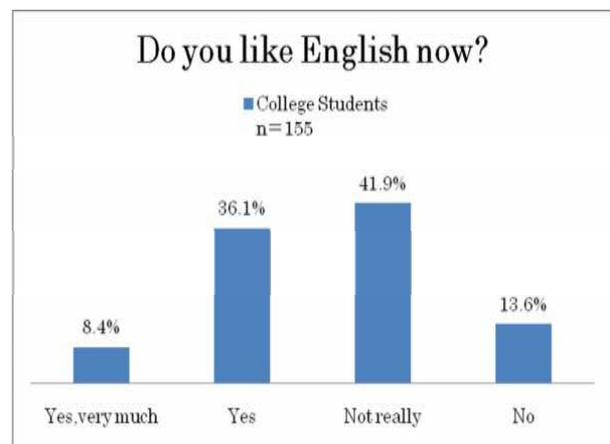


Figure 3 Do you like English now?

### 3.2.4 When did you come to dislike English language learning?

The results reveal that over half of the respondents not partial to English come to dislike English when they became first graders or second graders of junior high school (Figure 4). In other words, they lost interest in English language learning when grammar instruction started. As quoted earlier, Sakai (2010) says that about 60 % of his junior high school examinees don't understand the contents of English class, 78.6% of whom feel grammar instruction is difficult. It is safely said that the present ways of grammar instruction administrated in junior high schools have to be revised so as to induce more interest.

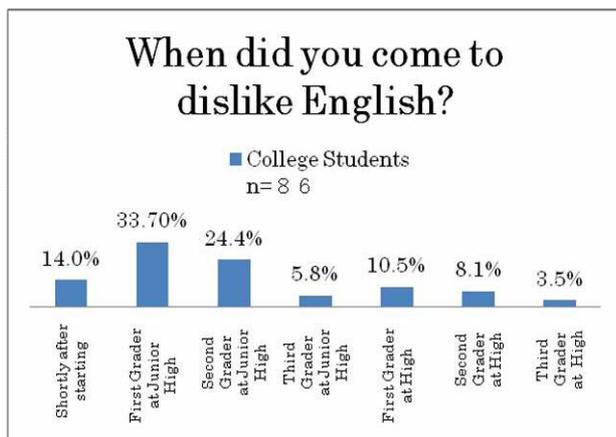


Figure 4 When did you come to dislike English?

#### 4. Pedagogical Implications

In the former part of this study, the youngest boy lost his English skills after coming back to Japan, while the older two girls retained them to the extent that they gained jobs at the top-ranked companies in Japan thanks to their bilingualism. This difference among them reflects the above-mentioned studies of Nakazawa (1988) and Hattori (2006). That is, the stage of children's development can affect their foreign language abilities as returnees. In other words, whether they have obtained grammatical knowledge or not matters.

Related to the questionnaire completed by college students, the means of grammar introduction could be considered to be a factor in determining their future preference towards English.

Pedagogical implications are that grammatical knowledge is imperative for preservation of English under EFL situations in order to compensate a lack of input, and at the same time teachers have to induce interest in introduction of grammar instruction.

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