

Something Wrong in Japan

Hi, this is A.J. your English teacher and today I want to tell you a story, a story about one of my early experiences as a new English teacher. The reason I want to tell you this story is that this story really shows why I developed the Effortless English System. It was one of the key experiences in my life that led me to search for better teaching methods for teaching spoken English.

So, this story begins several years ago, many years ago actually, at one of my early jobs as an English teacher. In fact, I was not a full English teacher I was just an assistant English teacher and I was teaching in Japan in a small village in northern Japan and I was helping to teach middle school students.

So there was a Japanese English teacher, so a Japanese person was the main teacher. She was the main teacher and I was the assistant teacher and mostly I just sat there and watched her teach and smiled a lot and sometimes she had me, you know, read something from a book or something like that. So, I really didn't do very much teaching, but I remember the first day of class.

So the Japanese teacher of English and I walk into this class of middle school students and because this was a small town the students were really, really sweet, very, very, very nice, kind, wonderful students. So we walk in and we go to the front of the class and I look out and I see all these young middle school students and they're sitting at their desk very eagerly. They all have little notebooks and little pencils and pens arranged very neatly on their desk and they're all looking up at the teacher and at me with these big eyes, smiling.

And, of course, they're very curious about me because I was, you know, this strange foreigner from America and because it's a tiny little village in Japan they didn't usually see foreign people. So here they have this blue-eyed foreign guy in their class and they're all very excited and they're looking at each other very eager and excited to start English class.

So the teacher, the main teacher who was Japanese, she stood up and, you know, said some stuff in Japanese and all the kids stood up and they all bowed to us and then, you know, we bowed back to them. They sat down and then they picked up their pens and pencils to take notes and the teacher grabbed a piece of chalk and wrote an English sentence on the board.

I don't remember what the exact sentence was, but let's say the sentence was the boy gave a pen to the girl. She writes this on the board. The boy gave a pen to the girl or to a girl. So the students, they're all looking up very eager, oh. Then they all grab their pens and they write the sentence in their notebook. Ah, they're ready for English, right? Ready to learn English, they're smiling and eager.

So then the Japanese teacher turns and begins talking in Japanese to the students. So she's saying blah, blah, blah, da, da, da, da, da, da, da, da, da. I can't speak much Japanese, so that's my impression of Japanese. So she's speaking in Japanese. Blah, blah, blah, da, da, da, da, da, da, da, da, da, talking in Japanese, talking in Japanese and I'm sitting to the side just watching not understanding anything.

So as the teacher is talking the kids are taking notes. They're writing very fast in their notebooks. They're all looking down very serious taking notes, taking notes, taking notes and this goes on for, you know, several minutes. Then the teacher walks over and grabs like a blue piece of chalk and circles the word "the", right, "the boy", just circles the word "the" and then she writes something above it in Japanese characters. I don't know what it was.

Then the students oh, the students, you know, write down more in their notebook and then the teacher starts. She says the da, da, da, da and then she starts talking in Japanese again, blah, blah, blah, da, da, da, da, da, da, da, da, da, da, Japanese, Japanese, Japanese, Japanese. Japanese, Japanese, Japanese, more Japanese, more Japanese, Japanese, Japanese, Japanese, Japanese, Japanese. The students are writing and writing and writing and taking notes, writing some more, writing some more, writing some more.

The teacher just keeps talking in Japanese, talking and talking and talking in Japanese and I'm sitting on the side just watching all of this and thinking I don't understand anything. What's happening? What is she saying? It's only one word. What could she possibly be saying about this one word talking for such a long time, but she continued and continued and continued.

And then, finally, after, I don't know, five minutes, 10 minutes, she stopped, grabbed another piece of chalk and underlined the word "boy". She says boy, boy, boy, desu. Desu is Japanese d-e-s-u, it's a Japanese word. So she says boy, boy, desu and she says boy -- subject -- and then da, da, da, da, Japanese, Japanese, Japanese, Japanese, Japanese, Japanese, Japanese, Japanese, Japanese, Japanese and she talks and she talks and she talks. She points to the word boy, Japanese, Japanese, Japanese.

Then she grabs a piece of chalk and she draws an arrow from the word "the" and then pointing to the word "boy". Then she writes something in Japanese above the arrow and then she continues talking more in Japanese. Japanese, Japanese, Japanese, Japanese, Japanese, Japanese, Japanese, Japanese.

Japanese, talk, talk, talk, talk, talk, talk, talk, talk, talk, talk, talk, talk. Talk about Japanese, ah! And then, finally, the kids are taking notes, taking note, taking notes, filling pages of notes. Whoosh, next page, they're still writing and writing and writing looking so serious and eager.

So I'm just sitting there not understanding anything and then, of course, the teacher grabs another piece of chalk of a different color and she underlines the word, let's say...what did I say it was..."gave", gave, gave and she draws a little "v", right, for verb. She says verb – desu. So she's saying this is a verb and then she starts talking in Japanese again. Da, da, da, da, da, da, da, da, Japanese, Japanese, Japanese, Japanese, Japanese, Japanese, ah, Japanese, Japanese, Japanese, Japanese, Japanese, Japanese, Japanese, on and on and on and on and on and on and on and the kids are writing notes, writing notes, writing, writing, writing, writing and I'm looking totally confused.

She circles "the" and "boy" together and draws an arrow to the verb and she keeps talking and talking and talking and this goes on and on and on and on and on for the whole class. The whole class about one English sentence and, of course, this whole class was in Japanese. It was 99% in the Japanese language and maybe one percent, one little sentence, in English.

Here I was a native speaker of English, meaning I was born in an English-speaking country. I learned to speak English as a baby. All of my life speaking English, totally fluent in English, an English teacher and I could not understand the English class. I couldn't understand it because the whole thing was in Japanese. So I was totally confused and bewildered by this.

Now, unfortunately, I wasn't the only one. This is kind of a funny story when you think of it, right? This woman is talking and talking and talking in Japanese and writing and all the students are taking pages and pages and pages of notes on one sentence. I mean the woman talked for like 10 minutes about the word "the". I'm thinking, what could she possibly be saying about that one word? How can she talk so long about just one word? What is she saying? I had no idea. I still have no idea. Why would you need to explain that one word for 10 or 15 minutes? I don't know.

But here's the tragic part because, well it's funny, it's also a tragedy, because what happened was that every single class every day was just like this. Every class was in Japanese most of the time. The teacher would draw a new sentence and then she would draw all these circles and arrows and lines and she'd write in Japanese all over the board. The students would take notes and notes and notes and notes and notes, most of them in Japanese, about this English sentence.

As the days went on and then weeks went by the kids were not eager any more. They didn't seem so happy any more. They lost that. Instead they became more and more confused, more and more frustrated and more and more stressed and then I watched

as their stress level became higher and higher and higher, especially when the teacher started to give them tests.

Of course, these tests were mostly grammatical so that they would be given these English sentences and they would have to analyze them and discuss the grammar and write all this stuff in Japanese and have to memorize long, huge, lists of vocabulary, translate it into Japanese and back into English and the kids became bored, confused, frustrated, shy and stressed, very, very, stressed and I watched them, over time, I watched them lose their natural eagerness and curiosity to learn.

Because the first day their eyes were wide open, they were happy and they really were curious and wanted to learn and when they saw me they really wanted to talk to me. Here I was this interesting, strange, person from another country. They were excited about the idea of learning to communicate with me in English on the first day, but then they became more and more frustrated.

They would try to talk to me sometimes, the ones that were not shy. Most of them were very, very shy, but a few who were a little more bold would try to talk to me but they couldn't and they would be so, so frustrated because, of course, in class they got almost no English input. They almost never heard me speak. I mean I was never used really as a teacher in that class. I would read a couple sentences or something, but I never really did much. Most of the class was the Japanese English teacher speaking in Japanese analyzing the English language in super tiny detail and so these kids never really learned to understand spoken English and certainly not to use it in any way.

The tragic part for me and this is what affected me so much and where I really began to feel that something was wrong, that's the feeling I had by the end of that semester watching that class and a couple other classes, it was exactly the same in all the classes, I'm sitting there watching these children's natural love of learning and curiosity crushed and destroyed.

That's what the school system did to them. That's what their English class did to them. It destroyed their natural desire to learn, their natural curiosity and their natural ability to learn because if taught in the right way those kids would have improved and learned English very, very well. They would have improved their speaking very fast and their understanding very quickly because, you know, kids at that age especially can learn quite quickly with languages. Adults sometimes have more mental blocks and it can sometimes take a little longer, but for kids, if you teach them in the right way, it's very, very effortless and easy for them, but that didn't happen.

And so I watched this. I watched their eagerness be destroyed. I watched their happiness be destroyed. I watched their curiosity destroyed and instead what happened is, what they got instead was they learned to fear mistakes. That's one of the first things that the school system did to them in English class; other classes too, but I was watching the English class.

They learned to fear mistakes because they had to take all these tests and analyze the grammar and if they got a mistake, what happened, the big red “X”, right? They lost points on the test. They got a bad grade on the test because they couldn’t analyze the grammar properly, which is a useless skill for real English of any kind. It’s useless in the real world, but it doesn’t matter that’s what they were tested on. And so what they learned was I have to avoid mistakes. Mistakes are bad. If I make a mistake I’m going to lose points. My grade is going to go down. My parents will be unhappy. The teacher will be unhappy.

Sometimes they would have to stand up and give an answer in the class and if they made a mistake, you know, the teacher would say no, no, that’s wrong. And she was a nice woman this teacher. I don’t want to make her sound like she was some horrible person. She was a friendly person. She really cared about the students genuinely, sincerely, but this is the way she was trained to teach and she was in a traditional, normal, Japanese school system.

It’s not just Japan because I’ve seen this same way of teaching everywhere in the world, more or less. So it’s not that she was a bad person it’s just that the method of teaching was bad and this had a strong affect on me as a young, new, teacher and I realized something is wrong. Something is wrong with our education system. Something is wrong with our schools because the students are not succeeding. They are not learning to speak English at all or if they do learn to speak a little bit they also learn to be hesitant and nervous and afraid when they speak.

They’re afraid to make mistakes, which is crazy. I make mistakes when I speak English. I make grammar mistakes all the time when I’m speaking. I’m just not thinking. I’m talking fast. I make a grammar mistake, so what. It doesn’t matter. And if I make a grammar mistake while writing that’s also not a big deal. If I’m writing something that’s very serious that must be perfect then, of course, I’ll write it and then I’ll read it again and again and again and check it for mistakes.

Maybe I’ll give it to another person and say, Kay, will you check this. Make sure there are no mistakes. And then if we find the mistakes we correct them. That’s normal for most people. Even professional writers who make millions of dollars writing books they make mistakes. They make grammar mistakes, spelling mistakes. That’s why the have editors, professional editors who check all their stuff and find the mistakes and then help them correct them.

So everybody makes mistakes, the problem is when you’re afraid to make a mistake it destroys your fluency. It destroys your ability to speak easily and automatically because you keep stopping yourself, checking yourself. Oh, my God, I’m going to make a mistake, ah-ah-ah, so then you start thinking, thinking, thinking too much. You no longer speak naturally.

And so if this happens to you in the school system it can become difficult to break and that's what I see so much with so many students all over the world is that they may know a lot of grammar, usually they know so much grammar, too much grammar, they may have memorized a lot of vocabulary, but when it comes time to speak, ah-ah, they're nervous and they have all these problems with speaking.

They also have lots of problems with understanding native speakers, people who are totally fluent and come from an English-speaking country. Because, of course, in school most students, just like those young Japanese students, never get to really listen to lots and lots and lots of English that they understand, that's easy enough for them to understand.

And so I saw all this and I realized something is wrong. The school system is destroying these students. It's killing their happiness. It's filling them with doubts. It's not making them confident it's doing the opposite. It's destroying their confidence and making them worried and full of doubt, afraid to make mistakes. Other students would just become bored. My God English is so boring. This is so boring, this teacher just talking and talking and talking and analyzing these sentences. What's the point? Why do I need to do this? It's pointless. It doesn't help me in any way.

And it's true, those students were correct. The ones that become bored they become bored for very good reasons. Others are just confused and frustrated. They actually want to improve their English, they want to speak English very well, maybe they need to for their future career or just personal goals, but they're frustrated because they don't know how because in school they were always taught in this way, always to analyze grammar, always to be obsessed about mistakes and worry about mistakes and try to be perfect all the time, always focused on memorizing, memorizing, memorizing and translating, translating, translating.

That's all most students know. It's the only method that most students know and so even when they get out of school as adults and want to improve their English speaking the only methods they know are the ones they learned in school so they try to imitate that same method. They go and they study more grammar from books. They go and they get vocabulary books and they study those and try to memorize more vocabulary. They go get test books like TOEFL preparation books and study those and take sample tests and, of course, they become very, very frustrated and confused. They're doing what they think they should do, but they're not getting very good results.

So even after all these years of doing this in school and maybe even on their own they're still not able to speak in an easy, natural, way and that's very frustrating. I understand that. This is what I saw as a young teacher. I saw it in those young, wonderful, students. I saw them go from being sweet and wonderful and eager and happy to being stressed, confused, frustrated and bored and, of course, I saw this too in many other students in many other countries and that's where I decided something is wrong with the school system and I will not teach this way.

At that time I didn't know another choice. I didn't know what I was going to do. I just knew that the normal way did not work. I saw that the results were terrible using that way, using grammar translation, using tests and grades, worrying about mistakes, correcting mistakes all the time, memorizing vocabulary. I could see that the results for those methods were terrible, terrible results. Terrible results for speaking and also psychologically those methods destroy confidence, create doubt, create confusion, create hesitation; bad results, bad results.

So that early experience was one of the main motivations for me to go out and find better methods and it took me some time. I started doing lots of research, reading lots of books, looking for other methods, other teachers, anything else that was different than the normal way and that got good results and so it was a search that took several years. I had to go back to school, get a Masters Degree. That's another story which I'll talk about later, but, of course, eventually I did find much better methods that do work that get great results with spoken English and that's the Effortless English System that you have now and that I'm teaching you with all of my videos and audios and, of course, that I use in my lessons.

So the point of this is that the school system crushes and destroys natural learning. So whether you get my lessons or not let me just warn you. Do not use the same methods that you learned in school. If you want to do all of this by yourself, you don't want to get my lessons and you don't want to buy anyone else's lessons, you're going to do it all by yourself that's fine, but just do it in a way that uses the Seven Rules of Effortless English that I teach in my email course.

Use those rules. Do not keep doing what you learned in school. Don't keep studying grammar textbooks. Don't keep taking sample tests from TOEFL exam books. Don't keep trying to memorize and translate vocabulary. You've been doing that for years. It has not gotten good results for you and continuing to do that will continue to get you bad results so try something different. Use those Seven Rules. You can take those Seven Rules and design your own learning plan that will be much more effective and you'll get so much better results.

That's why I created that Seven Rules Email Course because I want it to be available to everybody free so if you want to you can just design your own way and it will work and you'll have confidence and happiness and be able to speak in a natural, clear, way. And the reason I created my VIP Program and my lessons was just to make it more convenient. Some people don't have the time or focus or energy to create their own learning plan and they just want something convenient and say oh, you know, just give me something that you've already done. Those are my lessons and you can buy those. That works too, but whatever choice you make just don't follow that old system because it will just continue to frustrate you and it will destroy your speaking ability and confidence. Use the Seven Rules. Use the Effortless English System.

Okay, well, anyway, I love teaching you. I'm so happy that you are listening to my audios and using my method to improve and I hope that you'll be much happier than those poor middle school students in Japan were.

Have a great day. See you again, bye-bye.