



Title	The English Around Us
Author(s)	Connor, Suzy
Citation	長崎大学言語教育研究センター論集, 4, pp.59-66; 2016
Issue Date	2016-03-01
URL	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10069/36382">http://hdl.handle.net/10069/36382</a>
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This document is downloaded at: 2019-09-18T18:14:53Z

## The English Around Us

Suzy CONNOR  
Center for Language Studies, Nagasaki University

### 私たちの周りの英語

コーナ・スーズィ  
長崎大学言語教育研究センター

#### Abstract

The English that is written on signs, posters, t-shirts, etc. often has spelling and grammar mistakes, or at least is awkward in style. It is sometimes entertaining for native English speakers, but the effect on Japanese students is unclear. Do they notice it? Try to understand it? Notice errors? Students were asked these questions. They also were asked to give examples of English they did notice. The results and implications for teaching are discussed.

Key words: Language education, motivation, advertisements, English,

"Always being with you for your pizza life." "What's a Naughty? Jumping Number 54." "Safety Driver". The English seen in Japan has provided countless hours of amusement, confusion and (sometimes) frustration for native English speakers. Almost every student uses the expression "safety driver". It used to be on the Japanese driver's license cover. (Did the government decide that teachers were enjoying using this in their lessons too much and so remove it?) But what about Japanese speakers? Do they notice the English they are surrounded by? Do they try to learn from it? More importantly, does it affect the teaching and learning of English in the classroom?

In many places in the world, signs, travel information, and other documents are often translated, often into English, for the convenience of foreigners who do not

speak the local language. The translations are not always perfect, but they are usually understood and appreciated. In Japan, however, it is very popular to use English in advertising in addition to the usual translations for foreigners. English can be seen on signs, posters, T-shirts, on TV and in music. However, the English in advertisement is used more for effect than real communication. It is also targeted to Japanese consumers (Simon-Maeda, 1995.) Colleagues who have translation businesses are often puzzled by the fact that the Japanese companies insist on using English that is awkward or outright wrong. It's obvious that the English is not meant to be *read*, but perhaps it is felt that the layout of certain letter/word combinations is appealing to consumers.

Adding to the confusion of awkward English is the use katakana for loan words. Students recognize the word as a loanword but are familiar only with its colloquial meaning and usage in Japanese (Simon-Maeda, 1995.) Many of the author's students tend to think of katakana as not only the actual foreign word, but as English. Many students use the word "arubaito" when speaking English to refer to the term "part-time work". They are surprised when they are told that it is from a German word, not an English word and is not used when speaking English.

A popular concept in language teaching is that of "authentic texts". Exactly what constitutes an authentic text is open to interpretation. Here are two definitions:

Written or oral texts which were created for a purpose other than language teaching. (Brinton,1993)

Some people have defined *authentic materials* as those items that are "produced by members of the culture for members of the culture." Included are such sub-categories as physical objects, ...advertisements of various sorts, and other writings... (Christensen, 1993)

It may be a slight stretch of the imagination to suppose that the English used in advertising in Japan constitute authentic texts. However, if the above definitions can be accepted, then the English seen in Japan can be construed to be authentic texts, and perhaps it is possible to use these texts in the English language classroom.

To find out how students experienced the English around them, they were given a simple questionnaire about the English around them. Most of them are low-level; a few are high beginner. Therefore, the questions were in English and Japanese. Some

of the students study in Fukuoka city, where there is an abundance of English signs. Others study in Kurume city and Nagasaki city, where there are some English signs, but fewer than in Fukuoka. In a rural setting, it is likely that there would be even fewer examples of English.

There were six questions on the questionnaire:

- 1) Do you notice the English that is used in Japan  
(e.g., signs, T-shirts, media...music, etc.?)
- 2) Do you pay attention to English used in Japan?
- 3) Do you try to understand the English used in Japan?
- 4) Do you ever try to use the English used in Japan?
- 5) Do you ever notice mistakes in the English used in Japan?
- 6) Please give an example of English you've seen in Japan.

The first question, "Do you notice the English around you?" may seem a bit strange. However, at the beginning of every school year, when students fill out an introduction sheet, someone invariably writes something like, "I'm from Hukuoka City". One might say, "Well, that spelling fits with the romanization of the katakana "フ" (written as "fu" or "hu".) However, anyone who's been in Fukuoka for only a few minutes will probably notice the word "Fukuoka", in romaji (alphabet, or Roman letters), many times. In fact, some of the buildings of Fukuoka Bank have very large blue signs that read "**FUKUOKA BANK**". It's almost impossible to miss! Still, the author, when first in Japan, tended to ignore a lot of the kanji because of a lack of understanding of it. It seemed plausible that Japanese students, especially low-level ones, would ignore English signs, etc. Therefore, the question can be considered to be a valid one. As a matter of fact, that very answer of "I'm from Hukuoka" was the inspiration for this project.

The questionnaire, with Japanese translations, was given to the students. As it was anonymous, and not a terribly controversial topic, there was no reason for them not to answer the questions honestly, but there was the possibility that they would rush through them without careful consideration. This seems to have happened, as two students circled "No" to "Do you notice English around you?", but "Yes" to "Do you notice errors in the English around you?"! Also, there was the possibility that students tried to come up with the "right" answers, despite reassurance that there was no "right" answer. The responses can be seen in Table 1, below. Question six asked for

examples of English that students have seen. Students were reminded that as English does not use any of the Japanese syllabaries and there are many loan words in Japanese, words written with katakana were to be considered Japanese, and not English (for example, メニユー). Some students began writing "examples" in Kanji!

After piloting the questionnaire, it became apparent that these words could have been words students already knew and not words that they had seen. So the questionnaire was modified slightly to point out that they were to write only the words that they had actually seen. The vocabulary since then has not differed very much.

Table 1

n=288	YES (%)	NO (%)
Do you notice the English that is used in Japan?	88	12
Do you pay attention to English used in Japan?	64	36
Do you try to understand the English used in Japan?	61	39
Do you ever try to use the English used in Japan?*	80	19
Do you ever notice mistakes in the English used in Japan?	41	59

\*3 students left this blank

Students were not asked for examples of errors; that may have been too difficult for them to remember. One student did provide a short one: "3nd" vs. "3rd".

Table 2 shows some of the more common words that the students wrote down. Some students wrote only a few words, other students wrote quite a lot of words.

Table 2

<b>Transport</b>	<b>City Signs</b>	<b>Food</b>	<b>Entertainment</b>	<b>Shopping</b>
subway, taxi, local, parking, express, train, airport, non-reserved, bus, priority seat, station, "Next stop, Hakata",	stop, toilet, no smoking, men, women, Japan, open, close, in, out, exit, city, enter, police, keep out, bank, information, welcome, entrance, university	banana, tomato, McDonald's, hot, drink, cold, menu, coffee, juice, tea, beer, orange, pizza, Seven-Eleven, Family Mart	PC, karaoke, TV, movies, music, hotel, radio, book, CD, DVD, MD	Best, super, T-shirt, new, camera, sale, shoes, shop, sold out, pull, push, store, order here, price down

It was interesting to note that many of the words fit into the categories Transportation, City Signs, Food, Entertainment, and Shopping. Some did not fit into the chart, for example, "chalk", which a student saw on the teacher's lectern. There was an occasional phrase, such as "All for one and one for all." This is useful to know as these are words that students are exposed to and more likely to already know. It is especially helpful with planning low-level English classes and scaffolding vocabulary. As Japan's English language education tends to focus on grammar, students tend to worry more about grammar than vocabulary. However, as Folse points out:

One of the first observations that second-language learners make in their new language is that they need vocabulary knowledge to function well in that language. How frustrating it is when you want to say something and are stymied because you don't know the word for a simple noun!

(Folse, 2004)

For the first step in applying this information, the students were given as homework the task of finding three samples of English. For the purposes of this study, the English on t-shirts and in music was not included (although they would certainly be interesting to study.) At this point, they did not need to determine whether or not the English was correct. As an aside, checking this homework is quite enjoyable! The samples are sometimes very funny, and students who did not do their homework are frantically checking their makeup cases or the insides of their shoes.

Next, students are shown some samples and students work together to determine whether or not the English is correct. If the English is not correct, they try to correct them. After having done a few samples together, the students work in groups and look at their own samples. Some simple samples, such as a bottle of nail polish remover that reads "Nail Remover", are quite easy for the students to correct. Others are a bit more complicated and require discussion amongst the students. A sentence from one student, "Let's enjoy the flowers with me" is not difficult for native speakers to correct, but students often use 'let's' and 'with me' in the same sentence. At times, the task of correcting the samples is not possible if they are completely nonsensical (see the second sentence in this paper...) Students seemed to enjoy this activity and appeared more engaged in the activity than usual.

Each sample only takes a few minutes to correct or to decide that the sample is already correct. The next section is a demonstration showing that brief study periods

are more effective in learning. (Opaloch, 2006) A list of 20 two-digit numbers are read off. After the last numbers read, the students must write down the numbers that they remember. Many of the students remember more of the beginning and the end of the list of numbers. The point made to the students is that spending a few minutes to study is useful and that looking at samples of English need only take a few minutes at a time. Opaloch refers to this as distributed practice:

Distributed practice refers to the principle of using relatively short study periods broken up by rest intervals. It can be more efficient than massed practice for the following reasons:

- 1) Physical and emotional fatigue are reduced.
- 2) Motivation and concentration are higher with short term blocks of time.
- 3) The brain processes of learning seem to continue working during the rest periods.

(Opaloch, 2006)

Evaluating samples of English can be done anywhere, perhaps, for example, while riding public transportation. It can also be more enjoyable than studying from a textbook. Besides doing assigned homework, it is not always easy to get students to engage in language learning outside the classroom:

For many students, language practice comes to a halt once class is over. One reason is that students are unaware of how to use their English, German, Japanese, or Russian, outside the confines of the classroom... Obviously, the more language activities students are engaged in beyond the classroom, the more confident they will become in communicating in English.

(Davis, Armstrong, 1995)

Not every student notices the English around them, but enough do to warrant bringing it up in class at least once. Students need to be aware that the English around them may not be correct English. Noticing it and evaluating it can be engaging and useful. It also need not take too much of the students' time. It is hoped that students will take advantage of this resource in order to help improve their own English language ability.

## Appendix

### THE ENGLISH AROUND US

#### 私たちの周りの英語

1) Do you notice English that is used in Japan (e.g., signs, T-shirts, media, notices, advertisements, music, etc.)? (Circle one)

→英語が日本で使われていることに気づいていますか？（たとえば看板、T-シャツ、報道、警告、広告、音楽、等々。）（どちらかに○をしてください）

Yes (はい) No (いいえ)

2) Do you pay attention to English used in Japan? (Circle one)

→日本で使われている英語を気にしてみてもみた事がありますか？（どちらかに○をしてください）

Yes (はい) No (いいえ)

3) Do you try to understand the English used in Japan? (Circle one)

→日本で使われている英語を理解しようとしていますか？（どちらかに○をしてください）

Yes (はい) No (いいえ)

4) Do you ever try to use the English used in Japan? (Circle one)

→日本で使われている英語を自分でも使ってみたことがありますか？（どちらかに○をしてください）

Yes (はい) No (いいえ)

5) Do you ever notice mistakes in the English used in Japan? (Circle one)

→日本で使われている英語の間違いに気づいたことがありますか？（どちらかに○をしてください）

Yes (はい) No (いいえ)

6) Please give examples of English you've actually seen. Write only English words which were written with ROMAJI. (Katakana is NEVER used in English, therefore, for this survey, words written with katakana are considered to be Japanese!)

→あなたが実際に見た英語・英単語の例をおしえてください。カタカナ語ではなくローマ字を使って書かれた英単語を書いてください。（カタカナで書かれた言葉は、日本語だと考えます）

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