

Why Do We Talk Like a Book?

by Chihao Sun

The taxi stopped at the entrance of a well-designed Japanese hotel encircled by mountains. Yawning, I got out of the car and looked around the completely dark surrounding with lights of road lamps flickering in thick fog. Evening in Hokkaido didn't give me any feeling of summer. Trembling in the cold wet wind, I was considering the travelling route for the next day, when the taxi driver came up to me with my heavy luggage, wearing a big smile. In Japanese he said: "You speak Japanese really well! I enjoyed talking with you!" I took my overloaded bag from his hand, and replied in Japanese: "Thank you! Actually I don't study that much. I just watched too many Animations." We waved to each other, and I followed his taxi with my eyes until it diminished in the heavy fog. I take pride in myself when recalling the praise from that taxi driver even now. Before that day, I had always considered myself as a poor foreign language speaker and didn't expect that I could speak Japanese so fluently.

At first, the taxi driver had not expected that I could speak Japanese and didn't try to talk to me. When we left the urban area and started driving on the long and twisted mountain road, heavy fog spread quickly and deprived our sight. "*Nanimomienai.*" (I can see nothing at all.) I broke the silence with this sentence, the first complete sentence I had ever said in Japanese.

I found the way I managed to start the conversation very interesting, as I hadn't received any formal language education in Japanese. In fact, the big fog that time made me think of a frame of a famous Japanese animation called "One Piece", a story about pirates and sailing. In that frame, the ship happened to sail into an extremely foggy area. The hero stood at the prow, looking through a wooden single-hole telescope, complaining. I came up with the hero's lines in that scene and said exactly the same words as him to the taxi driver.

I felt like I had built up a huge warehouse in my mind by watching animations, storing all the colloquial words and sentences that appeared in animations under particular circumstances and situations. That night, the taxi driver and I chatted about many things to eliminate the boredom of the long trip. We talked about delicious Japanese food, colorful fireworks at the nights of Summer Fest, the winter of Hokkaido, in which rivers and lakes completely freeze, and pure white snow covers all cities and towns, and the life pattern of Hokkaido people in different times of a year. We talked and laughed throughout the ride, and I didn't even want to get out of the taxi when we had arrived the destination because I felt that I still had lots of things to share with him. Since then, I view the "Japanese warehouse" as one of my best treasures, where I can find suitable words, phrases and sentences to talk to Japanese. To me, travelling abroad never only means sightseeing. Instead, I value the communication with local people as well, which enables me to learn about the place more deeply, and teaches me culture different from mine. Unlike beautiful sceneries, which fade with time in our minds, knowledge lasts forever. Therefore, it will be really frustrating for me if I cannot understand the words of foreign people when travelling. Languages are powerful tools for us to break down the communication barrier between people from different countries. Therefore, managing to speak foreign languages is crucial to all people who want to know the world better.

However, sometimes our language "warehouse" may fail to give us sufficient support when talking. Since I have learned English for over ten years through primary school to high school, I have constructed an "English warehouse" much bigger than the Japanese one, storing abundant vocabularies and various sentence structures in it. Despite its abundance, I usually found it not as user-friendly as my Japanese one. Later, I realized that the problem lay in how I have constructed it. In other words, the traditional approaches to language learning in China cripple Chinese students when they face actual speaking situations.

In 2013, I went to Britain with five Chinese classmates to take part in an International student program held by the University of Cambridge. After ten days of struggling with our research program, we finally got a day free to go shopping in a local outlet. At the entrance of the shopping mall, our mentor said to us: “hey guys, every one of you has ten pounds from me for today’s lunch, but I won’t give you the money right now in case some of you want to save this money and eat nothing, which does harm to your stomach. Take your receipts back with you, and I’ll check them before giving you money.” We nodded, and stepped into the mall.

We had a joyful time doing shopping; the outlet consisted of dozens of cute and beautiful European style houses. I enjoyed taking photos of the wide flagging and retro road lamps beside it under a pure blue sky. Several hours later, we were sitting in the food court, having Mexican rolls and chicken sandwiches together, when one of my classmates suddenly stood up and walked straight towards the counter. Looking at his back, I saw him doing some exaggerated gestures to the assistants. Knowing he had a hard time communicating, I walked over to him.

This crisis of oral communication in English often happened during our stay in Britain, which I found very strange. My classmate was a distinguished student with outstanding English writing ability in my high school, whose work attained the second prize in our campus writing competition. I didn’t know why a person who could write with a variety of rhetorical devices and abundant sentence structures couldn’t handle daily English conversation.

Wondering about these questions, I came up to him. I saw him pointing at the cash register vigorously with an anxious face, saying: “I forget to..., I want the, the ...” The two confused assistants stared at him, waiting for him to complete his sentence. Soon, I realized that we forgot to take our receipts, and that I needed to take my classmate’s place to explain

the situation to them. However, my mind got stuck as well at the moment I opened my mouth. I forgot the word “receipt.” But since my mouth opened, I had to say something. I said: “We need a paper that can prove that we have bought food from your restaurant, which is very important for us.” I used three subordinate clauses in one short sentence! The air froze for several seconds, until one of the assistants finally understood my words, and shouted to the other: “Oh, they want the receipt!” Then he bent down and looked for our receipt in the trash bin. Handing the creased receipt to me, the assistant said: “Here you are. You are a very interesting person, because you really talk like a book!”

But I knew I didn’t, because no one writes books with such clumsy and stupid expressions. On the bus back to campus, my classmate asked me: “Did I look stupid?” “No you didn’t.” I replied, “But it’s very kind of them to not mistake you as a robber, since your face was so distorted and scared.” Then I closed my eyes, thinking about why I didn’t manage to produce a better sentence. Whenever I tried to speak English, all the textbook grammar and vocabulary emphasized in school jumped out in my mind, such as active sentence, passive sentence, attributive clause, object clause and so on. I didn’t have time to seek simple, conversational modes of expressions; instead, I just arbitrarily picked one of those complicated sentence structures to translate what I thought into English, thus giving others a very strange feeling.

Although I had learned English far more seriously and comprehensively than the way I learned Japanese, I could not communicate in English as fluently as speaking Japanese. I found this strange reality very unacceptable. Therefore, in order to figure out the reason, I carefully compared the difference between ways of outputting I used in two languages. Instead of directly taking something out from a warehouse, my course of speaking English is more like the process of production in a factory, which searches in the text book I memorized

for suitable words, assembles them to form sentences and eliminates grammatical mistakes. These redundant processes adds a heavy burden for me.

In the next two years, I went to great lengths to train my spoken English. Although I gradually became capable of handling brief communication with English speakers, I still unconsciously gave excessive thoughts to grammar and vocabulary, which caused unnecessary nervousness. And this discomfort with English became more obvious after I went to study abroad, exposed to a variety of English daily conversations on tons of different topics. I can make myself understood in restaurants, cafes, classrooms and the student counseling center, but I have an uneasy time “outputting” English. The “factory” in my mind doesn’t have enough time to complete all its work before I have to say something. Hence, instead of producing correct English sentences, more often than not, my “English output factory” produces only discomfort and embarrassment. Sometimes I really want it to shut down for a while, but it seldom does.

Based on observation of my peers who come from China, I realized that this situation doesn’t only apply to me, but to lots of Chinese students. And I fully understood how serious this problem is when I reflected on things I used to take for granted: I cannot recall anyone of my high school classmates who could speak English fluently. Maybe some of them could, but I had never had a chance to know during the past three years’ time learning English together. Thinking this way, “why talk like a book” is no longer a question private to me. Perhaps all Chinese students need to think about this important problem seriously, and ask ourselves: “What on earth is wrong with our English?”

As many people have already pointed out, the whole education system of China could have done a better job in teaching children English. It lays too much emphasis on reading and writing skills, ignoring the training of spoken English. As a result, we became able to write an English essay with hundreds of words, but do not know how to ask for receipts abroad.

“Don’t ever trust your kids when they tell you that they watch foreign movies and TV series to improve English. Let them take their homework seriously, that’s all it takes to succeed in English.” So teachers always stated in every parent meeting. Their idea only works because English tests in China don’t include flexible spoken English that lack standard answers. Movies, TV series, and animations are useful resources for learning a language, as my experience with Japanese had proved.

But the problematic way of teaching in Chinese schools doesn’t thoroughly account for my failure in spoken English, as I have long escaped from all these classes, exercises and tests as a student intending to study abroad. Instead, I needed to take TOFEL, which has a whole section out of four to test one’s speaking skills. And I got a fairly high score in that section. I used to view it as a proof of my command of spoken English, but now I hold a different perception of it. The speaking section of TOFEL requires people to keep talking to an emotionless machine with a time limitation. Every time I took the speaking test, I couldn’t help shivering with anxiety when watching the time bar get narrower and narrower. In addition, my TOFEL tutor suggested that I follow particular textbook methods to attain higher scores in the speaking section, such as how to take notes, what kind of sentence structures and words to use and so on. I can still recall her words: “Remember to use different kinds of sentences in your answer. Replace the words you learned in high school with the TOFEL words to show them your abundance in vocabulary.” There were so many things I needed to pay attention to before I could allow myself to speak out a English sentence in front of a cold computer and the narrowing time bar. I had always imagined the officers who listened to my answers as hungry lions shadowing antelopes, hunting for my grammar and pronunciation mistakes behind the screen with test standards in their hands. Such a test environment reinforced my habit of using the “English output factory” in my mind, and didn’t really help me to improve my communicative skills.

Comparing all my experiences with English to the ride with that Hokkaido taxi driver, I can start to explain the reasons why we Chinese students talk like a book. I didn't know I could talk in Japanese so fluently until I met that taxi driver, sharing with him so many interesting things. His friendliness encouraged me to say all I came up with without hesitation. I didn't need to worry about his not understanding my words, because unlike the TOEFL, he always gave me time to try again and again to change and improve my humble pronunciation and expression, until he could understand. And then smiled to me, saying: "Wow, I get what you say. How interesting!" That evening, his words sounded like a warm candle in the heavy cold fog. Why do we talk like a book? Because unlike animations and other things that interest us, the boring reading and writing tasks on test papers and textbooks seldom leave us anything that we can recall and use after completing them; because the cold computers and time bars only bring us nervousness. They won't encourage us, share anything with us, try to understand us, or just speak to us tenderly: "Sorry, I didn't catch your words, can you say it again?"