

# Language Acquisition in Japan : A Sociolinguistic Context

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# Language Acquisition in Japan: A Sociolinguistic Context

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**Abstract** : This paper examines theories, such as Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), in first language (L1) and second language (L2) acquisition (SLA) and their relation to English as a foreign language classrooms (EFL) in Japan. These concepts are given general explanations which are later framed with Japanese EFL considerations. This article also attempts to connect said theories to a sociolinguistic context relevant to Japanese English language learners (ELLs). Examples that are unique to Japan such as specific differences between the L1 and L2 classroom environments and Japanese ELL traits are discussed. It also encourages to EFL and English as a second language (ESL) practitioners to link theory to their classroom context and practice.

**Keywords** : English as a foreign language, second language acquisition, sociolinguistics,

## Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills, Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency

It is true that there is a similarity between first language (L1) and second language (L2) acquisition. Early theories, such as B.F. Skinner's behaviorism led to the opinion that they were almost the same. However, today most would agree they are very different processes. That is not to say that they are isolated from one another. Without a doubt, the L1 holds a strong influence over the development of the L2. A student who did not fully develop their skills in their L1, will face added challenges when encountering similar or equivalent skills in the L2. That is not to say there is a one to one correlation of skill transfers, and some languages might not share the same skills for varying cultural factors. For example, academic discourse styles can vary between languages and cultures (such as discussion driven classes in Western countries and lecture oriented lessons in Japan). An understanding of the relationship between L1 and L2 acquisition can shed light on this dilemma. Yet it needs to be viewed through the correct cultural and environmental context. Geeslin and Long (2014) note,

"Learners face variation in the input they receive, which is constrained by the characteristics of the speaker, the geographic location of the interaction, and the context in which the interaction takes place" (p. xix). This paper will deal specifically with Japanese English as a Foreign Language (EFL generally refers to English taught in non-English speaking majority countries) learners in their home country, but hopes to encourage other EFL and English as a second language (ESL, generally refers to English taught in English speaking majority countries) teachers to consider factors unique to their specific environment.

To put things in perspective, it is necessary to anchor the sociolinguistic differences of Japanese into the common understanding of second language acquisition (SLA). Hummel (2013) provides a clear description of both L1 and L2 acquisition, along with an easy to follow description of their similarities and differences. In understanding the relationship between L1 and L2 acquisition, it is best to start by examining the differences. Obviously, L1 acquisition begins early in one's life and starts to develop along with all the other essential cognitive functions. Yet, L2 learners

already possess the notion of metalinguistic awareness. In other words, they have the ability to understand and reflect on implicit and/or explicit grammar instruction. For example, an English language learner (ELL) is capable of understanding that the irregular past tense of “go” is “went.” A toddler still might like to use “goed” even after multiple corrections. The L1 might help or confuse an L2 learner depending on whether structures are similar or different between the languages. When it produces errors, it is known as interference. A common error by Japanese ELLs is to omit or misuse articles since they are not present in their L1 (Thompson, 2001). Typical errors from a Japanese ELL are as follows, “We went to store yesterday. I bought the coat.” Lastly, an important distinction is that L2 learners have already mastered the usage of their L1 (or to a greater degree than the L2). H.D. Brown's (2007) Language Ego Principle best describes an important aspect of this situation:

As human beings develop a new mode of thinking, feeling, and acting—a second identity. The new “language ego” intertwined with a second language, can easily create within the learner a sense of fragility, a defensiveness, and a raising of inhibitions. ( p. 72)

This is a crucial difference for EFL instructors in to remember. Consider the ELL's perspective. They are an intelligent human being capable of fully expressing their thoughts in their L1, but lack the means to do so in the L2. Compound this sentiment with the social pressure put on an L2 in a formal setting like school. L1 learners are given ample chances to practice the L1 in the comfort of their home before even reaching school age. Imagine how unsettling it must be for an ELL to usually have their emerging L2 “on display”, since they might only have the opportunity to use English at school. This is a general situation experienced by many ELLs in many different environments.

In Japan, this situation is further exacerbated by sociolinguistic aspects present in the language and the differing nature of academic discourse in the L1. First, the education system is still very teacher centered. It is considered bad form to question or challenge your *sensei* (Maftoon & Ziafar, 2013). Traditionally, rote

memorization and direct translation with very little critical thought is emphasized in the Japanese English classroom. Mostly because of the “juken” system, which emphasizes high stakes entrance exam preparation over other proficiency and skill areas (Kikuchi 2009; Otaka 2011). Second, the environment also amplifies the “on display” anxiety, since Japanese students are prone to use reticence as a defense strategy across the curricula. Mistakes can also be met with intense internal criticism as perfection is a highly important cultural value (Maftoon & Ziafar, 2013). Last, western instructors can misinterpret or grow frustrated with the “silence” of Japanese ELLs. They come from educational backgrounds that value active participation in class discussions, and were used to readily offering answers in class during their formative years onto university (Delaney, 2012; Harumi, 2011). Native English-speaking instructors (natives) have learned under these methodologies and are often urged to use them in their own practice (particularly the Communicative Method). However, they meet resistance from a student body that is more comfortable and familiar with a differing approach. Thus, it is easy to create a classroom environment that does not acknowledge these differences. It is not usual for natives in Japan to go to extremes in overly clashing or bending to the local practices without trying to navigate the middle ground.

In terms of similarities, both L1 and L2 learners need target language as input for the acquisition process. Frequent repetition are necessary for both L1 and L2 learners as well. Both groups use common expressions learned as whole blocks of language without actually being able to use some of the words of the phrase independently. Another similarity is the ability of both groups to comprehend way more language than they can actually produce. Now it important that these blocks come from context and use or reflect authentic language. Although current practices are changing, many Japanese who went through compulsory English education in secondary (now starting from primary) school learned “This is a pen” and “I'm fine thank you, and you” as said blocks. It is also important to remember the phenomenon known as overgeneralization. It can occur in both L1 and L2

acquisition. Consider the earlier example of the toddler saying “goed.” They understood that adding “-ed” to the end of the word can produce the past tense, but have yet to master the irregular forms of words. Similarly, an ELL might make the same overgeneralization about the rule as well. Japanese does not have plurals. Beginning Japanese ELLs often struggle with this concept, as it is not present in their language. Overgeneralizations of plural forms are quite common, and it is not rare for even an upper intermediate user to still utter “clotheses”.

Even within a language, there exist specific levels of acquisition. Jim Cummins (2015) introduced two levels of language acquisition known as Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). BICS, the first level of acquisition, is what a person needs to function in most day to day social interactions of a language. The second level is known CALP, the second level, is what a student needs to function in an academic setting. Many ELLs may appear to have fluency do to their mastery of BICS in English, but struggle as they have yet to develop the necessary CALP skills. In other words, an ELL might appear to have a high level of English competency peppered with colloquialisms, yet still lack the necessary skills for academic performance in the L2. It may seem that time is stacked against the teacher, but Cummins (1981) offers another theory that mitigate some of lag between BICS and CALP development. Between the L1 (first language) and L2, there might be a common underlying proficiency (CUP), which is a transfer of skills from the L1 to the L2. A student that has not reached CALP in their L1 are unable to benefit from a CUP skill transfer. Furthermore, they face the added challenge of developing their initial academic skills and language in their non-native L2.

Thomas & Collier (2002) found that the strongest predictor of L2 achievement is the amount of L1 schooling. Luckily in Japan, the literacy rate is rather high, and generally considered to be at 99%. (Admittedly, this rate might be slightly lower as rates among several minorities in Japan remain unconfirmed (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2013)). However, since memorization of pictograms, kanji, is

required to differentiate meaning in more advanced texts, measuring CALP in Japan might prove to be elusive. In terms of anecdotal evidence, many are unable to read a newspaper until after knowing the high school level of 2,136 “regular use” kanji (Tamaoka, Makioka, Sanders, & Verdonschot, 2017). As stated before, the academic discourse in Japan is quite different than that experienced in most English-speaking countries. Although, Japanese students will struggle less with literacy skill issues, they may be unfamiliar with the skills needed in a western style class. Cline and Frederickson's (1996) work with BICS and CALP suggests a gradual building of contextualized tasks from lower to higher cognitive demand as the ELL's skills increase. For example, a student on the lower end of the spectrum should be given simple matching and recognition tasks. Krashen (2004) stresses the importance of extensive reading for academic success, since academic language is predominantly found in text. Reading also provides fuel for class discussion and group collaboration. However, verbal output can sometimes be difficult in an open Japanese EFL classroom. Smaller groups and pairwork are a suggested bridge to build confidence in larger group context for Japanese ELLs that are overly silent during whole class discussions (Cutrone, 2002; Maftoon & Ziafar, 2013). Reading also provides input for academic language that can be a catalyst for the output of academic language in writing. Students should be encouraged to express themselves in writing. ELL writing also provides a wealth of assessment information and clues into their understanding of the language system. Not to mention that can apply a sense of ownership by using their command of English to construct their thoughts and opinions in a written record. Writing in a Japanese classroom can have a similar reticence as the students' verbal output. As with speech, students fear making mistakes. Unlike speech (unless recorded, but which is often not), writing creates a record of student output frozen in time. Although it may seem discouraging for the fledgling ELL writer, it can be spun as a positive when compared with their later writing. Students can assess for themselves their own progress when comparing their recent writing with their past

attempts.

Sociolinguistics and SLA are two very broad fields that lend many theoretical implications to teaching ESL/EFL. It is important for instructors to have a good background knowledge and understanding of theory. However, the utility of this information is lost if it is not understood within the teaching context and made relatable to practice. Obviously, this paper is by no means an exhaustive list of theory, but an invitation for EFL practitioners in Japan to reflect on how it relates to their work. Most natives already understand their side role as a “cultural ambassador” for their English-speaking country of origin. The role needs to go further in that they should be “classroom culture negotiators.” The “terms” (expectations, learning styles, relationships, roles etc.) have already been drafted in the Japanese L1 classrooms. It is the natives' (and Japanese EFL teachers familiar with western classroom culture) duty to negotiate a different classroom culture with new terms that better aid in SLA, but work with an understanding of the L1 learning context.

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# 日本における第一言語および第二言語習得

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## 要 旨

本論文では、第一言語（L1）および第二言語（L2）習得（SLA）における基本的対人伝達能力（BICS）および学習言語能力（CALP）などの理論ならびにこれらの理論と日本における外国語教室（EFL）としての英語との関係性を考察する。これらの概念には一般的な説明が与えられており、のちに日本のEFLの考察の中で論じられる。またこの論文は、日本人の英語学習者（ELL）に関連して、同理論を社会言語学的コンテキストの中で関連性を考察する。L1およびL2の授業環境の間の具体的な差異ならびに日本人ELLの特性など日本特有の事例が議論される。また本論文はEFLおよび第二言語としての英語（ESL）の実施者が理論と授業内容および練習とを関連付けるよう奨励する。

キーワード：第二言語としての英語、第二言語習得、社会言語学、基本的対人伝達能力、学習言語能力