

English Trauma

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There I was, in an English class in Japan. The Japanese teacher was standing in front of a class of middle school students. The students were young and eager. I sat to the side watching. The teacher wrote an English sentence on the blackboard. "John is taller than Mary." Then she began to talk in Japanese. As she talked she circled different words of the sentence. She circled the word John with blue chalk. She talked and talked and talked, in Japanese, as she pointed to the word "John". The students opened their notebooks and began writing. The teacher also began writing more on the board, in Japanese. . . long sentences in Japanese. Then she pointed to the word John again. I couldn't understand Japanese and I wondered "What is she talking about? How can she talk so much about just one word? It's just a name."

Finally the teacher circled the word "Mary". Then she started talking again in Japanese. She pointed to the word. She wrote long notes in Japanese. The students wrote and wrote and wrote in their notebooks. They looked serious and a little confused. The teacher continued talking, always in Japanese. Finally, after almost 10 minutes, she finished explaining the word Mary in Japanese. The students were now looking stressed and tired.

The teacher underlined the word "is" next, using white chalk. Then she did it again. . . talking, talking, talking, talking, talking and talking, in Japanese. Writing, writing, writing and writing, in Japanese. This continued for the entire class. She eventually circled "taller" and "than", with green chalk and talked for over 20 minutes about these two words. By the end of the class the young students were tired, stressed and totally confused. In 50 minutes they had heard only one sentence in English, repeated only one time. In that same time they had heard the teacher speak Japanese for nearly 49 minutes. I couldn't believe it.

However, the sad truth is that this was a typical English class. Every day the students listened to their teacher explain sentences in Japanese. After three years of English classes, none of the students could speak even simple English. All of the students hated English. The classes were stressful. The tests were complicated. Every day they analyzed very complex rules. Every day they memorized long lists of English words.

Unfortunately, many English students in many different countries have had similar experiences. Because they learned English this way, they believe English is difficult and complicated. They have no confidence with English. They feel stress every time they hear or try to speak English. One student called this feeling "English trauma".

The Causes of English Trauma

What causes English trauma? Why do so many students feel nervous when they try to speak English? Why do so many students have trouble speaking English? It's not the students' fault. English trauma is caused by

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schools, not students. Specifically, English trauma is caused by specific teaching methods. These methods confuse students and create stress. These methods damage students' ability to speak well. These methods are ineffective. They are failures.

Trauma Cause One - Analyze and Memorize

Traditional English teaching focuses on analyzing English grammar and memorizing English words. In the typical class students spend most of their time listening to explanations in their own language, not in English. During almost every class the teacher focuses on grammar points... complicated rules about the structure of English. These rules are very difficult to use and remember. In fact, during a normal conversation at normal speed, these rules are impossible to remember and use correctly. It simply takes too much time to remember all of these rules while listening and speaking at full speed. Thus, students learn to pass grammar tests. They sometimes learn to read and write well. But they rarely learn to speak easily and quickly.

Likewise, a lot of time is spent memorizing English words. Typically students must memorize long lists of vocabulary and translations. Students learn to efficiently memorize many words for a test. After the test they forget most of them. The result: students who do very well on grammar and vocabulary tests but cannot understand normal English speech and cannot speak easily and quickly. Because of this most English students feel very nervous about speaking. They have no confidence. They feel more comfortable taking a test than having a real conversation.

Trauma Cause Two - Speak Damnit!

Traditional teaching methods focus on output. What does this mean? It means that most schools want students to immediately produce English. In other words, they force students to write, to take tests, and sometimes to speak. For example, in that Japanese class, the teacher sometimes put the students in small groups. She then told them, in Japanese, "Practice using comparatives. Each student say a sentence in English comparing two other students."

The students always looked confused and nervous during these activities. This kind of speaking is unnatural. It is stressful. Of course, we all want to speak English. The problem, traditional classes force students to speak too soon, before they are ready. Also, they force students to speak in totally unnatural ways. Language research shows that understandable input is the key to speaking will. In other words, you need to listen to a lot of natural English before you can speak easily and quickly. The more you listen, the better you eventually speak.

There is also an emotional problem. When teachers force students to speak when they are not ready, students become very nervous. This feeling is repeated and strengthened again and again. Eventually the student feels stress every time they try to speak English. In other words, they get English trauma.

Trauma Cause Three - You are Stupid!

Traditional English teachers love to correct errors. You take a test and the teacher identifies your errors. You try to speak and immediately your errors are identified and corrected. In many classes, students are forced to speak while the whole class listens. Of course, this makes the student feel very nervous. However, it gets even worse. As the student speaks, the teacher will sometimes identify their errors and correct them while the whole class listens. Of course, this feels terrible. It's embarrassing. It's super stressful. It makes the student feel stupid. And it doesn't work.

Research shows that error correction has no effect on accuracy. That's right, absolutely no effect. For example, we divide a class into two groups. In group one, the teacher constantly corrects every error the students make. In group two, the teacher never corrects errors. At the end of one year we test both groups of students. The result, every time: there is no difference in accuracy; no difference in the number of errors that students in each group make. Error correction seems logical, but the truth is, it is totally ineffective. In fact, error correction is worse than ineffective. It actually damages the students.

There is another result we find when we compare group one and group two. They both still make the same number of errors, but group one speaks more slowly. In other words, error correction kills fast speech. Error correction causes students to think about English. Error correction causes students to always analyze and translate before they speak. These students cannot speak English easily and quickly. Bored, stressed and confused.

Here is the result of traditional English teaching. A student who is bored . . . who thinks that English is boring. A student who is stressed . . . who feels nervous every time they try to speak English. A student who is confused . . . who thinks that English is very difficult and complicated. A student who has good test scores but cannot understand or speak well. And usually, a student who quits . . . who believes they cannot and will not ever speak English well. A student who thinks, "I'm not good at English." In other words, a student with English trauma.