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Enriching Your Vocabulary through Active Listening

Masaki Ohtake

1) Self-introduction

Spent one year at a public high school in California on AFS program
Graduated from Sophia Univ. majoring in the English language
Joined NHK (writer & reporter for news programs in English)

Before I officially start my presentation, I have a little suggestion to make. I know I'm supposed to make this presentation all in English. But I would like to intersperse it with some Japanese explanations as I go along so that I can make sure you are with me and understand what I'm talking about.

I have attended meetings of this study group a couple of times before. I've noticed that some of you remained silent right after your self-introductions. Maybe you were shy and reticent. Or maybe you were just busy trying to translate your thoughts into English, and by the time you were ready to talk, people were discussing something else, and you didn't have the guts, or audacity, to say, "I don't mean to go back to the earlier subject, but what I think about this or that was blah, blah, blah."

But tonight, I don't want any single one of you to feel "left behind." So with the permission of the chief organizing member, Oda-san, I would like to share part of my thoughts with you in Japanese. After all, English is a foreign language to all of us, so give us a break. 「開き直り」ですね。

2) Vocabulary consists of two realms: (realm の発音 & スペル注意)

Passive Vocabulary: the words that you understand but don't use
Listening and reading (=input)

Active Vocabulary: the words that you use
Speaking and writing (=output)

Quite a number of Japanese say they have a fairly large English vocabulary because they will have studied it for at least ten years by the time they graduate from a college or university. But many of them shy away when they are asked to speak or make a comment in English.

You won't run out of reasons why the average Japanese is not good at speaking English. You can put the blame on the education system. But in the end, you only have yourself to blame. In the final analysis, the key is to **enrich your active vocabulary** – the words that you can use actively.

Here are some tips on expanding your vocabulary:

1) **When listening, try to visualize as much as you can**

Man has five senses – sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch.

The more of the five you use, the less you're likely to forget.

2) **Use English dictionaries (to allow yourself to think in English)**

FAQ: "What if I come across unfamiliar words in the definition of a word that I was trying to look up in a dictionary?"

You're so used to English-Japanese dictionaries that you may be afraid of making this shift. Yes, chances are you will find some words that are unfamiliar to you. You look them up and again find words that are beyond the boundary of your knowledge. If it's an open-ended quest for knowledge, you might as well enjoy the process. It sounds easier said than done, but it works. Using English-English dictionaries will help you think in English.

3) **Make your own dictionary (describe things using words of your own)**

Once you are used to English-English dictionaries, go on to the next stage: make your own dictionary. I don't mean that you should become a lexicographer. Deviate just a little bit from what is said in the dictionary and describe things in your own way in your own words. Be creative and add a little touch of your own. This is like pushing yourself to new heights.

At one time, I was listening to a radio news program and the commentator was saying that former U.S. President Bill Clinton is known as a **glib** talker. The adjective "glib" was a new one on me, and I looked it up in a dictionary.

glib: using words that are clever, but are not sincere, and do not show much thought

I found the meaning of this adjective very similar to one of the teachings of **Confucius** (孔子): 「巧言令色鮮仁」 That's what I scribbled in my notebook.

When I was listening to 「ビジネス英会話」, which was formerly known as 「やさしいビジネス英語」, I came across this proverb:

Better a big fish in a little pond than a little fish in a big pond.

What I jotted down was 「鶏口牛後 (鶏口となるも牛後となるなかれ)」.

I've given you three pointers on how to enlarge your vocabulary:

- 1) Visualize as much as possible
- 2) Use English dictionaries
- 3) Make your own original dictionary by describing things in your own way

But, if you have this one little thing which I'm about to tell you, you can forget about them all. I don't think you can teach this to people because it's not a method or a technique that you use, but it's rather an emotion.

What is it? It's **enthusiasm or wanting to know.**

It's an uncontrollable urge that you should feel inside.

How badly you want to know something is the driving force behind your quest for knowledge. (This one is my original) That's what gets you going.

Turn your mind into a sponge, make it ready to absorb anything.

Many have described this concept in a number of adages:

You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink.

God helps those who help themselves. (神は自ら助くる者を助く)

Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find;

knock, and the door will be opened for you. (Bible: Matthew 7.7.)

They all suggest that **you are the one who should take the initiative.**

It's time for me to give you a little quiz. 『頭の体操』

“Ally McBeal” or 「アリー・myラブ」 is one of my favorite TV series.

In one installment a few years back, there was this scene in which two bridesmaids at a wedding ceremony were talking to each other.

Fill the following blank with an appropriate verb:

Woman A) “I wonder why she's getting married to him.”

「彼女、なぜあんな男と結婚するのかしら？」

Woman B) “That’s because she () 30.”

「30の大台に乗ったからよ」

If you think you’ve got the answer, don’t say it out loud.
Just raise your hand and whisper it to my ear.

Answer: hit

Using the past tense of “become” or “turn” suggests nothing out of the ordinary. It’s OK to say, “She turned/became 30.” But the age didn’t have to be 30, then. It could’ve been 28, 34, or 37. But what you want to emphasize here is the fact that she reached what is considered as the socially and biologically “benchmark” age of 30, especially among marriage-conscious women. So, the verb “reach” could’ve been an answer, but actually what Woman B used was “hit.” So she said, “The bride is getting married because she hit 30.”

There is a good reason why I didn’t give you the answer sooner. I wanted you to think and feel this frustration building up inside you as you groped for the right word. That’s “wanting to know,” or the “urge.” That’s what I would call “a quest for knowledge,” and if you already have that, I don’t think I’ll have anything more to say to you because that’s what makes you tick.

Diplomatic Roles in the N. Korea Standoff

Two reasons why I selected this interview program:

- 1) It gives you the general picture of how China views its neighbors.
 - 2) The interviewee's choice of words were unique and noteworthy.
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Keep in mind the following points when listening:

- 1) How does China view the Korean Peninsula historically?
 - 2) What kind of a Korean Peninsula would China find acceptable?
 - 3) What China would (not) do to its neighboring country, North Korea?
 - 4) North Korea and which country should sign a non-aggression treaty?
 - 5) What is the biggest threat to China?(What is China's worst-case scenario?)
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Let's listen.

Two expressions that caught my attention:

- 1) "They are not gonna sell North Korea down the river."

sell sb down the river = (informal) to betray sb you have promised to help

Origin: From the custom of buying and selling slaves on the plantations on the Mississippi river in America. Slaves who caused trouble for their masters could be sold to plantation owners lower down the river, where conditions would be worse.

『日本昔話』風解説（語りは熊倉和男か市川悦子風に例えると）

「むか～し、むかし、あるところにお爺さんとお婆さんが住んでいました。

お爺さんは『ロッキー山脈』に柴刈りに、

お婆さんは『ミシシッピー川』に洗濯に行きました。

すると大きな『綿花』がドンブラコ、ドンブラコと川上から流れてきました。

お婆さんが綿花を開いてみると黒人奴隷が入っていました。

お婆さんは『ラッキー』と言って、代わりに一生洗濯をさせて、

楽な人生を送りましたとさ。」（おしまい）

In the sentence “Person A betrays person B,” the sentence itself doesn’t imply which of the two is superior to the other. So in a sense, A and B are on an equal footing. But in the sentence “A is not gonna sell B down the river,” what the phrase suggests is that A is superior to B or has B under its control. In the latter sentence, there clearly exists a pecking order. In other words, A is considered as being higher than B on the social strata or hierarchy.

A	B
master	servant
teacher	student
nagging wife	henpecked husband
China	North Korea
the United States	Japan

When you want to imply that China has the upper hand over North Korea, but would not betray its poverty-stricken, famine-plagued neighbor, this expression will come in handy.

Having checked the origin, I wondered if this expression carried any racist connotation or not. I decided to run it past a couple of native speakers of English in the office. They basically said that this is not a common expression to begin with and that people shouldn’t be misconstrued as being racist for using this metaphor. I didn’t mean to suggest Ambassador Lilley was a white supremacist. I do not intend to defend myself, but it’s human nature to connect the dots between disconnected bits of information to build one coherent story.

2) It’s Banquo’s ghost hovering behind you.

It took a while for me to get the meaning of this sentence because I’m not an English literature major. Banquo is the name of a Scottish general in one of Shakespeare’s tragedy plays, “Macbeth.” Macbeth, also a general, kills both Banquo and their master King Duncan of Scotland to become king himself. Banquo’s ghost appears when Macbeth is throwing a party. Macbeth then gets killed by Banquo’s son who has narrowly escaped a murder attempt.

It’s interesting Ambassador Lilley’s choice of words -- sell sb down the river and Banquo’s ghost -- have something in common – an act of betrayal.

The moral of my presentation, if there is any, is:

『木を見て森を見ず』 ”not see the wood/forest for the trees”

You don't want to pay too much attention to small details when somebody is trying to get across a message. But when he is emphasizing a particular phrase or using a metaphor unique to him, those phrases may be worth double-checking in dictionaries or other sources you can put your hands on. Paying too much attention to “the trees” may cause you to miss “the forest.”
But wouldn't it be nice if you could see both the forest and the trees?

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