The death of film legend Tony Curtis last year led to a discussion in my family where my mother-in-law informed us that she had been a big fan of the handsome Bronx actor. While I preferred his darker performance in *The Sweet Smell of Success*, her personal favourites included the cross-dressing comedy *O Atsui No Ga O Suki*(Some Like It Hot), and the historical drama *Spartacus*. Cue the inevitable re-enactments of the film’s most memorable scene, when the Curtis character instigates a display of solidarity, with each surviving slave standing up in turn to proclaim that he is Spartacus, the leader of the revolt.

I couldn’t help but smile as this led my chain of thought to the words “I’m Kewpie!”, its corresponding doll logo, and one of the seminal moments in my decade of teaching English in Japan. This occurred a few years previously, with a class of six-year olds. Given that it was the very first English class for the majority of the students, we began with the customary greetings and self-introductions. Of the 25 students, perhaps half a dozen had been attending *eikaiwa* for a year or two, and were obviously already quite comfortable with the day’s target language, so there was no shortage of volunteers willing to model the conversation in front of the class. But, perhaps because of the confidence of the ‘elite’ group, the others were very reticent. Finally, one of the boys took the plunge, and raised his hand. I went over to him: “Hi! My name is Andy!”

“Hi! Mayonnaise is Taro! Nice to meet you!” The class erupted with laughter as I smiled and shook Taro’s hand. Several of the ‘English-speakers’ loudly berated Taro for his mistake, and the crestfallen boy began to slump in his chair as his face reddened. Less than ten minutes into his first class, and this lad was going to be scarred for life by the horrors of language learning. I felt that I had little option but to stop the class and highlight all the merits of Taro’s first steps in English: the loud voice, the warm smile and the clear eye-contact. His only error was an ‘s’ sound in place of an ‘m’. Indeed, it was probably only because he had enunciated his words with such clarity, that his error was so obvious to his peers.

Thankfully, my gentle admonishment seemed to have the desired effect. Taro recovered from his ‘sticky’ moment. He became more and more confident, to the point that he regularly made jokes about that initial incident, and one day (much to the confusion of my Japanese colleague), hollered in the hallway: “I AM KEWPIE!” The atmosphere of that class was excellent for the rest of the year, with the advanced learners playing a far more productive role, supporting rather than ridiculing the others.

After the final lesson the following March, I received a picture of the class which had been taken during our Christmas lesson, along with a binder of letters from the students. I was touched to read Taro’s comments about that first day, and how he appreciated the support. But what surprised me most was the number of other students who also made reference to that first class: “Machigatte mo daijobu da, to wakatta” (‘I learned that it is OK to make mistakes’). “Mina saisho wa waratta kedo, kare wa sugoi to omotta” (‘Everyone laughed at first, but he was great’). “Eigo no hanasu koto wa kowakunai yo, to wakatta” (‘We don’t have to be scared of speaking English, I realised’). One little
girl went so far as to end her letter with a single, carefully written block capital English sentence: “I ≡ MAYONEIZU!!!”

Fluency

There is a multitude of ways to define ‘fluency’. Crystal (1987, p. 421) talks of fluency as being “smooth, effortless use of language”. Brumfit (1984, p. 56) goes for “natural language use whether or not it results in native speaker-like language comprehension or production”. These seem to imply that fluency is all about getting a stream of words pouring from the mouth. But it is far more complex than this. I prefer to follow Lennon (2000, p. 34) and avoid an actual definition: “a good touchstone of acceptable fluency is the degree to which listener attention is held”. This touchstone of fluency appears to echo much of the recent work of Michael McCarthy, which has been focused on the *English Profile* programme (seeking to incorporate empirical evidence of the spoken language into the increasingly influential CEFR). McCarthy refers to fluency as one of his key concerns, and attacks the ‘monologic bias’ of our current approach to spoken fluency. He prefers to talk about ‘confluence’, a flow of communication which is produced jointly, across turn-boundaries.

In light of this, Taro fulfilled all the objectives of his task with distinction. He responded appropriately to my initial speech-turn. He conveyed the crucial content (i.e. his name), and did so in such a warm, convivial manner that he created an excellent (and unquestionably memorable!) first impression. In my current position of employment, I no longer teach such young students. But every time I meet a new class, whether they are 17 or 77 years old, I tell them this story. I also throw in a few L2 howlers from my own extensive catalogue (such as the time at the Bonnenkai that I had intended to laud my supervisor for his English skills in front of all his colleagues and superiors, but critically confused ‘pera-pera’ with ‘bara-bara’). This really does make a difference, acting as a genuine ‘ice-breaker’, and emphasising the need to take ‘risks’ in the target language.

If a class of 6 year olds can learn to understand the value of fluency over accuracy, then adults and more advanced speakers should be able to as well. And this includes the teachers. There is a place for error correction, but not if we fail to commend the communicative achievement of our student’s linguistically imperfect utterance. We cannot expect our students to throw caution to the wind if we are afraid of looking foolish in front of them. So, time to enact your own version of that climactic scene in the Stanley Kubrick epic. Stand up! Confront your fears! Remember the words of that brave young warrior, and shout it with conviction: “Mayonnaise is Taro!”

References


