

## What Makes a Good Learner? Some case studies of students and their learning strategies

Michèle LE ROUX

### 英語学習者の要件

— 実際と工夫 —

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This analysis of the language learning of students I have taught is based throughout on my impressions, and not on any exact data about speed of learning, or on error analysis.

I begin by talking in general about the language learning of Japanese university students, with whom most of my teaching experience has been gained. My analysis deals with the slowness and inefficiency with which most Japanese learn English, and I try to suggest reasons for this. Because so many Japanese have the same sort of problems, I do not discuss individual students at this stage, but I do go on to detail some particular problems I encountered in individual students and to discuss general issues relating to these problems.

I then describe some Japanese students whom I see as exceptions to the general pattern I have described. Considering their strengths as learners, I move on to try and generalize about productive and successful learning strategies and situations.

As a coda, I discuss briefly how my experience teaching in China made me doubt the universal validity of these conclusions.

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Analysis of Japanese Learners (University Students ; aged 18-22 ; mainly female ; studying in Japan) :

1) Learning Environment :

a) Japan :

Japan is a monolingual and culturally homogeneous country. Despite its major role in international affairs, many Japanese people have little or no contact with foreigners in Japan, or indeed abroad, as Japanese tend to travel in groups with Japanese-speaking guides. Most of the Japanese students I have taught had no real communicative need for English. Though English was felt by most of my students to be useful or even necessary, because it is perceived as the language of 'internationalization' (a buzz-word in Japan), they had no immediate need to learn it. Such instrumental motivation as there is to learn is perhaps so vague as to be almost totally ineffectual. For many of my female students, English was perhaps an 'accomplishment' which might loosely benefit them in their career, or, more probably, the marriage market, but few of them were likely to enter careers where English would be necessary (with the exception of those intending to become English teachers).

For many people in Japan, it is, I think, hard to perceive English as a living, functioning language. The English-speaking world is, both geographically and culturally, very far away from them (by comparison with, say, learners from EEC countries).

Japan is, of course, in many ways westernized. Japanese people do actually receive quite a lot of input in English, or at least in Roman letters. But this input is so fragmentary, and usually so meaningless, that it can have little effect on learning. It consists of shop-names, advertising, and the slogans which are found on everything from bathmats to pencil cases. I sometimes wonder if this input of garbled English is not an actual impediment to the learning of correct English. I have had students who produced close imitations of such slogans under the impression that they were natural and appropriate English utterances.

I think that the westernization of Japan, and in particular the Americanization of Japan since World War II, has perhaps produced a very ambivalent subconscious attitude to America and therefore to the English language. Japanese people often express a gratitude to the United States for its role in the post-war reconstruction of Japan, and a continued desire to emulate American fashion, lifestyles and manners. Yet the Japanese are a nation who evince an intense awareness of their own uniqueness -- their 'Japaneseness' -- and an anxious watchfulness lest that uniqueness be eroded. Many Japanese are very proud of their language, and believe it to be peculiarly difficult (eg. the different levels of politeness in speech ; the writing system, especially 'kanji'). Do some Japanese fear that in being westernized and in learning English they will suffer a loss of identity ? Littlewood summarizes this general problem, which I think may have a particular relevance to Japan :

There is a close link between the way we speak and the way we perceive our identity and the world. When we try to adopt new speech patterns, we are to some extent giving up markers of our own identity in order to adopt those of another cultural group. In some respects too, we are accepting another culture's way of perceiving the world. If we are agreeable to this process, it can enrich us and liberate us. If not, it can be a source of resentment and insecurity.

William T Littlewood, *Foreign and Second Language Learning* (CUP ; 1984) p55

In Japan, it is generally felt to be a bad thing to be noticeably different from others. A Japanese proverb goes: 'The nail that sticks up will be hammered down'. Among university-age students, particularly males, I observed that speaking English that was noticeably more fluent than that of one's peers was felt to be a kind of stigma. Some male students would (deliberately?) perform worse when speaking in front of large numbers of other students than when speaking in small groups or to me alone.

Another cultural factor which I think may make it difficult for Japanese to learn English is the kind of paralinguistic communication used by Japanese, especially women. The Japanese seem to me to use gesture and facial expression less (or certainly in a very different way) from most Europeans and Americans. Also, a non-committal silence, or a brief 'So desu ne...' (Yes...Oh...) is a perfectly acceptable communication strategy in Japan. It can express a range of meanings from uncertainty, through unwillingness to respond, to positive disagreement. English often requires a less ambiguous kind of response. For the Japanese learning English, they not only have to cope with a language totally unrelated to their own (eg. every vocabulary item is pure learning), but they also have to learn a lot of alien paralinguistic strategies in order to communicate successfully.

#### b) Academic :

Although the situation is changing, there are still many features of the environment and teaching methods in Japanese schools and universities which are not conducive to effective learning. Much English teaching is still conducted largely in Japanese, and follows the grammar-translation method. Sometimes audio-lingual methods are used, with much language-lab drilling and practice, not always well supervised by qualified teachers. Recently, great expense and effort has been devoted by the Ministry of Education (Monbusho) to the introduction of native-speaker teachers, but these people are often young, inexperienced and sometimes more attracted to Japan by the salaries they will receive than by a desire to teach.

Particularly negative features of the academic system in Japan that I would single out are as follows :

i) Katakana : foreign words in Japanese, of which there are many, are transcribed into katakana, a syllabary designed for this purpose, but which contains only the phonemes of

Japanese (it lacks, for example, a true /v/ or /l/, and most of the vowel sounds of English). When learning English, Japanese students are allowed, if not actually encouraged, to write new English vocabulary in katakana. This leads, I think, to the students always perceiving English, as it were, *through* Japanese, and produces a great number of errors in spelling, and, more importantly for communication, pronunciation.

ii) Grammar Neurosis : Much English teaching in Japan focuses on the teaching of grammatical rules (often explained in Japanese and with reference to Japanese translation). Students sometimes develop an ability to manipulate the grammatical forms of English, under controlled circumstances, but acquire very little real competence or fluency in the language. In the Japanese classroom, there is often almost no input in English, but a great deal of talk about English grammar. This leads to most Japanese students being grammar-obsessed, and overusing what Krashen calls the 'monitor', to the extent that some students are physically incapable of producing the simplest utterance without several minutes' silent consideration.

iii) Perpetual beginners : The failure to acquire any but the most basic competence in English leads to two possibilities as the student moves on through the academic hierarchy :  
 a) The teacher will go on using more and more advanced textbooks and teaching more and more grammar, and the students will understand less and less the further they go. b) a new teacher will realize that the students' competence is very limited and they will go back to the beginning. This is the tactic that most native-speaker teachers use. They feel that they have to use very low level materials, because that is the level of the students' competence. But, although unable to use the language, the students recognize that they have 'done all this grammar before'. The students become, in effect, perpetual beginners, constantly being taken through Book One of various courses. This has disastrous effects on motivation. Many of the students I have encountered in Japan have, actually, 'given up' on English for this reason, and hold little hope of ever getting beyond a very basic level.

iv) L 1 Interference : Because of the situation outlined above (being 'further on' in the book than they 'really' are), many students are asked/told to produce utterances that they do not actually have the competence to produce. Insecurity in English leads to L 1 interference. Some common errors (usually L 1 interference) are in fact not recognized as errors by many Japanese English teachers, and have thus become enshrined as part of the English actually taught in Japan (eg. 'going to shopping').

v) Classroom Atmosphere and Etiquette : Besides being often bare, impersonal and institutional, the Japanese classroom is often a very unrelaxed place ; there is a huge gulf separating students and teachers. Questions and interruptions are not encouraged, and many language classes take a lecture format. Desks and chairs are often fixed to the floor in rows. Often, all errors are strictly corrected and sometimes punished (this does not necessarily include pronunciation errors, which often go unnoticed by Japanese teachers). There arises a

situation in which the student finds it safer not to *risk* an answer ; silence will be tolerated, whereas an error will not. Students are often too afraid to speak, even when they have the 'correct answer'. They do not have the strategies or the opportunity to elicit help or express incomprehension.

vi) Exams : Up to university entrance, the Japanese education system is exam dominated. Students study for exams, rather than to be able to communicate in English. Exams are heavily biased to test knowledge of grammar, obscure syntactic and lexical points, reading and writing. Given this exam pressure, even those teachers and students willing to try other teaching and learning techniques do not always have time within the curriculum to do so, because exam preparation must take priority. These exams are competitive, and this, I think, adds to the tense and anxious atmosphere of many Japanese classes. Yet, interestingly, students are not often overtly competitive ; good students avoid revealing their superior knowledge. Japanese students have a very interesting and complex series of mutual self-help strategies in the classroom which are, sadly, often misdirected to keeping the teacher satisfied (getting the right answer) rather than to helping each other to really understand and progress in their language learning.

vii) Compulsory English : English is compulsory for six years at High School, and virtually compulsory for all university students in their first two years at university. Understandably, a lot of these students do not want to study English at all, and even those majoring in English at university may be doing it because their parents applied pressure, or because they couldn't think of anything better to do. At university level, with exam pressure removed, motivation can be very low, especially since so many students have had such bad learning experiences in the past, and associate the study of English with profound feelings of failure and frustration.

## 2) Learning Strategies :

Given all the above, it is not surprising that so many Japanese students are trapped in a vicious circle of anxiety and slow or non-existent progress in language learning. The one, of course, reinforces the other. Many of my students have been very unhappy about learning English. Because of the vague pressure to be 'international', they constantly tell me, 'we want to be more fluent in English', but many of them, I suspect, were they able to see it or admit it, would say that they don't really want to speak or listen to English ever again. Those whose motivation remains relatively intact seem often overcome with feelings of helplessness when confronted with the problem of 'becoming more fluent'.

Many Japanese students believe that by learning about grammar and repeating drills they are learning English. They are very resistant to the idea that English may be acquired by less formal means. Rote learning and memorization play a large part in all their learning at school (perhaps because of the large number of ideograms which have to be memorized in

order to become literate in Japanese). It is an alien idea to them that language is perhaps not best learnt in the same way. Most students, even when engaged in communicative activities or real communication in English, tend to overuse their monitors, fret about accuracy and focus on form rather than meaning.

Most students receive very little comprehensible input in English, and many lack the communicative strategies (linguistic and non-linguistic) to control the input that they do get. It is often very difficult as a teacher to discover whether you are being understood or not. There is a tendency among Japanese students to 'switch off' from even comprehensible input (teacher talking, other students talking, listening activities) unless they are under immediate *threat* of being asked a question, or unless there is some specific task attached to the listening. That they see communication as a threat says a lot about their past learning experiences.

In general, I think, Japanese students don't (or can't) take responsibility for their own learning processes. For various reasons, their affective filter is so strong that much potentially comprehensible input is simply 'noise' to them. For many, English remains a mystery, and using it (in controlled or free contexts) is seen very much as a hit or miss process. Their natural ability to internalize language, form hypotheses and experiment with the language has perhaps been inhibited by the various factors discussed above. They feel that by *being taught* English they are learning English. Thus they are often very teacher centred learners. Keeping the teacher satisfied is more important than actually learning anything. Hence the phenomenon noted above, that students will cooperate to get the 'right answer' to give to the teacher, but cannot see that they might help each other and themselves to achieve a greater competence in English.

I want now to mention three particular problem cases, and to discuss the more general issues raised by a consideration of these students' learning difficulties.

1) Kaori : (3rd year English Major) Kaori was basically completely out of her depth. She understood almost nothing of what went on in class, and constantly resorted to asking classmates (in Japanese) to help her, and to copying others' work when given written homework. She was, simply, in the wrong level class. The input she was getting was incomprehensible, so she could not reasonably be expected to make any progress at all.

Kaori was in a class of about 50 students ; I could not teach the whole class at her level, nor could I devote time to setting her quite different work. Within the system operating at the University, I could not ask to have her moved, or tell her to leave the class. There were no remedial classes available. Kaori was taking third year classes, and there she stayed... We entered into an unspoken agreement that I could not teach her anything and she could not learn anything in that class. Conclusions : How many students in schools and universities around the world are in this situation ? The confines of main-stream education are such that

many students must be caught in this trap. It would be terribly demoralizing (and probably totally impractical) to put such a student 'back' two years or more. But absolutely nothing is achieved by keeping a student in a class where she understands nothing.

As for my tacit agreement with Kaori, how many teachers and students are involved in similar conspiracies? This is not, I think, an idle question, because for a teacher or student to admit that little or no learning is taking place, or that the cosmetic ritual of 'successfully' completed grammar exercises and drills is being allowed to conceal the absence of any *real* language acquisition, is simply to knock the foundations out from under what goes on in many classrooms all over the world today.

2) Junko : (1st year student not majoring in English) The class were writing horoscopes. Junko had written "you will receive good information". After discussing with her what she meant (in English and in Japanese), I suggested that "news" was the word she wanted, and watched her erase "information" and substitute "news" in her notebook. As this is a lexical error I often encountered in Japan, when we were doing a round up at the end of the activity I asked Junko to read out what she had written, which was "you will receive good information"! She had changed it back while I was attending to other students. I was, I admit, angry. I could have understood if she had made the same error the following week. Error-correction does not necessarily result in the student immediately restructuring her internal competence in the language. But the learning problem here was that Junko simply didn't believe what I had told her. What does a *deliberate* error tell us about language learning? Do learners become, as it were, sentimentally attached to what they consciously know to be errors?

Conclusions : This is a peculiar and isolated case, but it suggests to me connections with other learning problems I have encountered. Those problems arise from what I think of as a certain lack of *humility* before the target language -- or, perhaps, better put, an ability to accept that one is not going to understand everything about the language at that particular moment in one's linguistic development, that one is simply going to have to take certain things on trust.

Some Further Instances of this Type of Problem :

Michael : (a bad learner) When I was studying Japanese, there was a man in my class who would often take up most of the lesson by asking (in English) questions about complex areas of grammar which we were by no means ready to learn. He also refused to utter the normal Japanese word for money (okane) on the grounds that -o is a polite prefix, and he did not think that money should be dignified by being prefaced by a polite prefix.

Two good learners : i) Pascal : In a class of advanced, argumentative and very confident

European students I taught briefly, there was one much quieter French student (university age). Pascal listened attentively to me and all the other students ; he noted down vocabulary from the board ; he often came and asked me questions at the end of class... He was at the same level as the other students, but was generally much readier to be corrected, and appeared to listen and think hard when I did correct him or another student. I was impressed by the fact that Pascal, although already an extremely competent and fluent speaker, was still ready to recognize his errors and work towards improving. The others in the class, by comparison, seemed to feel that there was nothing more for them to learn. ii) Yukako : Teaching Composition to 3rd year students in Japan, I repeatedly tried to get them to write only English which they felt confident in using, and not to be over-ambitious and try to write in English what they would in Japanese. Most of the students continued to write over-ambitious and error-filled essays, relying too heavily on dictionaries to supply unknown vocabulary. Yukako did not. She gradually tailored down her writing until she was producing a series of excellent, clear, simple and yet expressive essays on a variety of subjects. She had, I think, considered and analyzed her limitations, and discovered ways of expressing what she wanted to say, working within those limitations.

These are very varied examples, but I think they all exemplify the ability, or lack thereof, to recognize that one has only got so far in a language and that one has limitations, but that there are ways of communicating nevertheless. I think also that it aids learning if one treats the target language with a certain degree of respect. It is not a monolith ; it is, of course, a living and changing thing which has a use only in communication, not as an abstract form. But there will be things in any language that the learner finds odd, illogical, irritating or perplexing, and a certain tolerance for these aspects is a necessary part of language learning. I believe that this tolerance (which is NOT to be interpreted as passivity) is an important part of what Krashen means by 'openness' to the target language. It is, perhaps, at root, a willingness to have one's preconceptions and mental categories challenged and altered, and an ability to accept that one does not know everything. This is not easy, especially for adult learners. That is why I think of it as 'humility'.

3) Yoshie : (3rd year English Major) Yoshie wrote quite accurate and expressive English, but she was literally incapable of speaking one word in class. The most she would do was repeat items in pronunciation drill. She was an extreme example of the lathophobic aphasia which many Japanese students suffer from. Yoshie was a rather overweight unattractive girl ; unlike most Japanese young people, she did not seem to be interested in fashion and her appearance. She was very shy, a loner and was rarely to be seen interacting socially with her peers out of class. I never investigated her background closely (nor am I sure it was my place to do so, though I did mention my worries about her to the Head of Department), but



I feel that here was a case of personal problems, quite separate from language learning, so great as to radically inhibit the learning process. However, Yoshie's case perhaps supports the theory of Krashen and others that language can be learnt quite successfully for some purposes without the student ever producing orally.

Conclusions: There may be factors inhibiting the learner, cultural, personal or physical, which are simply beyond the teacher's control or competence to deal with. All the teacher can do is to try her best not to exacerbate these problems and make the student with personality problems even more withdrawn and anxious by using inappropriate teaching strategies.

I shall now move on to consider some good learners, three Japanese and one Spanish.

1) Mariko and Tomoko (both 3rd year English majors) Both these students behaved in a way noticeably different from their peers. They were bolder and more decisive in their gait, gestures and speech, and did not conform to the rather young and girlish dress-style of most Japanese females of their age. They also both had noticeably low-pitched voices (in Japanese and English), compared to the characteristic soft, high-pitched, polite 'feminine' speech style which tends to carry over from Japanese into English.\* Perhaps this non-conformity to Japanese stereotypical roles made it easier for them to move into the styles of speech and manner which should accompany the learning of English.

Both were confident, outgoing and sociable people, with a sense of humour and high self-esteem. Both sought out opportunities to speak and use English: talking to native speakers, asking questions in class, corresponding with pen friends. Mariko had been to Canada for a home stay and later won a scholarship to study in California.

Interestingly, others noted their behavioural non-conformity too. One Japanese teacher warned me against Mariko, telling me that she was too pushy, rude and arrogant and that I should not flatter her by spending time out of class with her. She was a demanding student, but certainly never rude (to my mind). Perhaps a certain pushiness is needed (especially outside the target language community) in order to get opportunities to use the language.

Both these students had what I would call a high level of general intelligence -- they were 'bright' -- and both were interested in a variety of things; they were curious and well-informed about the world. Thus the range of material which they found interesting or relevant was much larger than that of many of their peers, who would tend to switch off if the topic was not fashion, shopping, marriage or food.

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\* I am assuming here that voice pitch is not only biologically determined. Japanese women will speak considerably higher in formal situations; many of my students had two quite distinct pitches (in Japanese): one for superiors and one for peers. I know that when I speak Japanese my voice pitch becomes considerably higher than that I normally use in English.

Both were attentive in class and would use such tactics as repeating silently and listening to and correcting other students. They were clearly thinking about what they were being taught, analyzing and processing it, asking questions for clarification, and moved quickly into trying to use and apply new rules and language items.

Both had an interest in language, and would make perceptive and intelligent comparisons between Japanese and English. They were interested not just in the grammar of English, but in its expressive potential and nuances of meaning, colloquialisms and idioms. Both had low anxiety levels and were not afraid of making mistakes. They would accept correction willingly and think about their errors constructively.

2) Tomoyuki (aged 22 ; student of Chinese and Chinese History) I became friends with and taught Tomoyuki very informally in China where he was studying. He was one of those people who just has a gift for languages. After only three and a half years of studying Chinese he was frequently taken for a native speaker by Chinese people (though perhaps the wide variation within Chinese accents and dialects makes this more possible than it would be in the case of English). Unusually for a Japanese student, he had not only good Chinese, but good English too. He had an excellent ear ; after knowing him for only two or three months, I became aware that he was using many of the idioms that I use and that his pronunciation was moving closer to mine. Such talents are given only to a few.

But there were more readily analyzable factors in Tomoyuki's learning. His mother worked for an international exchange organization and all his life he had had contact with English speakers. He was, like Tomoko and Mariko, intelligent, extrovert, intellectually curious, had high self-esteem and was very sociable. English clearly had a *reality* for him ; in his background and in his career plans for the future 'internationalization' had a concrete meaning, and was not merely an abstract ideal.

Tomoyuki was also an excellent listener for gist. He could cope with discourse in which not every word was comprehensible, and would rapidly absorb and begin to use new language. He was also a good communicator ; despite some grammatical errors and a limited vocabulary, he would get his meaning across by using gesture and paraphrase, eliciting help and asking questions.

Unusually for a Japanese, his speaking, reading and listening skills far outstripped his written skills. I was surprised by how hard he found it to write in English, but suspect that this was only through lack of practice.

Conclusions : There are some people who simply have a gift for language. Even for the less gifted, the learning of more than one foreign language may aid learning, as the general procedures for successful learning are transferred from one language to another.

3) Marta (Spanish ; aged 22 ; student of Economics) I will describe Marta's learning because,

besides having many qualities in common with the Japanese students mentioned above, she had some very productive classroom learning strategies. Marta played a very active role in class, being always ready to speak, answer and ask questions. She had sufficient English to be able to articulate her hypotheses about language and to ask questions designed to elicit specific information about the language. She displayed an impressive willingness to partake in all classroom activities, even those which, because of the topic or the type of activity involved, she did not find immediately appealing. She seemed willing to accept that language is learned in a variety of ways, and appreciated the need for both fluency and accuracy developing exercises. She switched well between the two. She was always interested in what others were saying, interacted well with all the other students in the mixed nationality group, and also was ready to correct other students tactfully and helpfully. She was a natural leader and could always be counted on to help direct and control group work so that all the students in the group participated and worked productively. It was almost like having a second teacher in the room! Marta was perhaps in a class that was rather below her level, but she found ways of using that situation to do much useful language learning and practice.

Conclusions: The classroom cannot be the outside world, but a good learner will use and understand the procedures of the classroom and the kind of practice it can offer in order to aid learning.

#### General Conclusions:

From the above case studies, I would highlight three factors that I consider to have a great effect on language learning. I feel that many of the most important factors are extrinsic to the classroom.

- i) Personality, Intelligence and a wide variety of Interests.
- ii) Motivation, especially Integrative Motivation, and, as a necessary precondition to integrative motivation, a sense of the Reality of the Target Language and its Community of Speakers.
- iii) Desire and Ability to Seek Out, Create and Use Language Learning Opportunities both within and outside the classroom. (This depends to some extent on the level of language ability already achieved.)

Together, these factors add up to a realization that English exists beyond the classroom and that the function of the classroom is to prepare the student to move beyond it. Thus learning is a thing for which the student is responsible. Good students become more independent and take the skills they acquire and practise in the classroom out into the world to be used and extended as they see fit.

Coda : China :

From my experience of teaching quick and efficient learners, and from my own experience of living in Japan and studying Japanese, I had come to the conclusion that integrative motivation is very important in language learning. Those students who have been to, or want to study or work in, or just visit the target language community seem to do better than others ; such students have a desire to take their language skills beyond the classroom.

I was therefore rather perplexed when I went to teach at Liaoning University in China. Most of the students there had had little contact with native speakers, and had limited prospects of using English in their careers. Though curious about life in Britain and America, they had little idea of what it could be like. It is very unlikely that any of them will ever be able to travel abroad. They had been taught mainly by grammar-translation methods (using pirated textbooks with Chinese translations added), with Chinese as the language of instruction in large lecture-type classes.

But, although most of the students had very poor pronunciation, their spoken language was surprisingly fluent, their grammatical competence and their lexical knowledge extensive. Many would read in English in their spare time and their receptive skills were generally good.

What was motivating them? I'm still not sure. Maybe their instrumental motivation was high (the hope of being allocated a better job on the basis of their English ability). Some, I think, found intellectual satisfaction in tackling English as an abstract system, rather than as a means of communication. The more advanced students found in English a route into a world of fiction quite different from most Chinese fiction (though acceptable topics for Chinese novels have diversified considerably in the last ten years) ; novels such as *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights* and *Pride and Prejudice* were enormously popular among my students.

I offer these rather inconclusive remarks simply to point out that the current stress placed on oral skills and communication in language teaching perhaps ignores the political, social and economic constraints placed on learners in some parts of the world. Such students, despite very limited opportunities to learn, materials and prospects for using the language, contrive nevertheless to find motivation. They learn despite the methods used, the cultural barriers and what might seem to outsiders the sheer pointlessness of studying English. The situation is in some ways akin to the studying of Latin in 19th century Europe.

I remain puzzled, while at the same time respecting the dogged perseverance of many of my Chinese students.

This essay was originally written as part of the course work for the RSA Diploma in TEFLA which I took in England in June 1989. In the week in which I took my final exams, the Chinese Government sent troops into Tien An Men Square where they not only murdered many students and citizens but also destroyed the hopes and aspirations of an entire generation.

I would like to dedicate this essay to all the students whom I taught, to all those who have been murdered and punished and to all who continue to hope for intellectual and political freedom in China.

(1989年 9 月30日受理)