

# The World is a Language Lab

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One of the things that surprised me when I first arrived in Japan was the number of recorded announcements on trains and buses and even in stores.

As I listened to the information about the next arriving train or the great deals on bananas in the fruit and vegetable section, I naturally began to repeat what I heard. Sometimes I could not catch all the words. I would ask my friends what the announcements had said, but many times, they would not have heard. More often than not, their response was: "What announcement?"

I realized that many people did not hear the announcements. For them, it was just background noise. For me, however, it was an easy practice opportunity.

By listening carefully and trying to mimic announcements, I was doing a form of language calisthenics. Without knowing it, I had created an easy way to improve my pronunciation and turn an otherwise wasted moment of waiting on a platform into a learning opportunity.

Of course, I did not aspire to become a station master or a public announcer. I will probably never have the need to say: "This special express train serves all stops between Shinjuku and Toyoda." And yet, by listening to the announcements and mimicking them, I have been able to improve.

Many station names have difficult sound combinations and repeating them was good practice. We often use tongue twisters in language lessons to have a bit of fun with pronunciation. For me, names like Minami Urawa, Ryogoku and Bubaigawara were tongue twisters.

Some might question the futility of this exercise. Why not repeat more useful words that are actually needed in everyday life, they might ask. Of course, the bulk of my studies has been focused on practical vocabulary and grammar that will help me to communicate better in Japanese. When I am standing at the station or sitting on the bus without a textbook, however, I can easily turn a

moment of down time into a practice activity.

The other benefit of this type of activity is that there is no pressure to be perfect as I am talking to myself. My "listen and repeat on the street" technique is a very stress-free activity. No one corrects me and no one knows if I make a mistake. I am, however, able to compare my attempts with the original and if there is a difference, I have lots of chances to practice as the announcements never end.

This might not be for everyone, but the point I would like to make is that learning opportunities are where you find them. The world is like a giant language lab where we can listen and repeat and do language drills any time we want.

I always encourage my students to have fun with language and sounds by trying to mimic what they hear. In lessons, I often give students a minute to practice the target words by mumbling them under their breath. Or I advise them to watch an English movie with subtitles and try to speak along with their favourite character. They can even try my train announcement trick as these days there are lots of bilingual announcements.

My self-directed pronunciation practice could be seen as an example of "private speech". We have all, for example, had one of those moments when we are looking for something and we say aloud: "Now, where did I put that key?" We know that the key cannot hear us and there is no one to answer, but we are verbalizing our thoughts to help us focus on the problem and solve it.

Repeating what we hear to ourselves, however, is a much more basic and mechanical process. We are essentially experimenting with sounds and rehearsing for the day when we might have to produce these sounds to communicate with others. And when that day comes, we will be all the more confident and comfortable.

The next time you are on a train, give it a try. Be careful not to mumble too loudly though as you might get some odd looks as I occasionally have.