

Princess Takamado English Essay
Contest

The Potential of English Education

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1. The impending crisis of English education in Japan

As an English student, I have a sense of an impending crisis about English education in Japan. The results of the TOEFL internet-based test, which includes a speaking section, show that Japanese who took the test performed poorest among all language groups worldwide in the speaking section in 2006. In the test which has no speaking section, Japan ranks second lowest in all of Asia based on test performance, just above Afghanistan, but well below its rivals of South Korea and China. Also in TOEIC, Japan found itself 25th among 27 countries and regions. To further illustrate this trend, there was only one successful Japanese candidate admitted to a 27 student English discussion seminar at Waseda, one of the top universities in Japan in 2011.

From an economic point of view, big Japanese companies have globalized rapidly and become multinational. Employees are required to have English skills. Honda marked the top in foreign sales in 2008, with 87% of its sales overseas. It is estimated that the dependence of company's foreign sales will be higher. For example, the big Japanese company Panasonic, First Retailing and Rakuten employed only 20% Japanese of all its new employees.

2. Two differences in Japanese and English

Adult shyness is not tolerated outside Japan. In Japan, shyness is often regarded as a personal character, but it can be taken as incompetence in the worst case in foreign countries. It is said that Japanese people are not used to asserting themselves and presenting their opinion logically. According to Takashima (2005), the Japanese language focuses not on what is told (content), but on how (manner). It is more

important for Japanese people to express their feeling with a language than convey logic. Students solely read a piece of literature and understand a character's emotion in the class of Japanese. Japanese people originally regard language as an insufficient thing, but the term of "word" in English came from "logos" in Greek which means discussion, judgment and reason (Inatomi, 1978). People using English can tell what they are thinking of not like Japanese which tends to be ambiguous. Thus, Japanese must gain the skill to ask, refute and persuade with logical thinking to make their presence in the international community.

The second difference between Japanese and English is the word expressing respect for superiors. There are comparatively few terms expressing respect in English. We cannot discern the age and social position of someone talking in English, compared to someone talking in Japanese. Younger Japanese are not expected to insist on their opinion to superiors, as the Japanese proverb says that "those who stand out are likely to arouse opposition". However, as the English proverb says "the squeaky wheel gets the grease", people using English are not interested if they do not assert their opinion. Now, we can gather a lot of information and knowledge on the Internet immediately. We are required to integrate the information, exchange views with others who have different opinions, and bring the discussion to a conclusion. It will be essential to learn that attitude through English education.

3. The acceptance of differences

We tend to think that our opinion, values, and way of thinking are common to others'. Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, hereafter MEXT, sets up the objectives of English education in elementary school. It is to deepen

international understanding through activities using English and interaction with foreign people and ALT (Assistant Language Teacher). MEXT believes that language and experience are important for children to foster their fundamental ability (*Ikiruchikara or Ningenryoku*). I think MEXT intends not only to advance students to study English but also to gain receptivity to something they are not involved through learning a foreign language. People cannot realize their identity without the existence of others.

The cultural anthropologist, Koeping (1998) insisted that we indirectly perceive our uniqueness by comparing others who have a different culture and background. After we are aware of another culture, we try to come in touch with it. We cannot gain flexibility and tolerance for something different from us unless we notice that we do not stand in the center of the world. English education in Japan should not teach only language skills. Students will realize their originality through encounter with different cultures and people. People say that Japanese increasingly shut themselves up in Japan, but English education should contribute to increase their potential by opening them up to the outside world.

4. The validity of peer support on future English education

As mentioned above, we considered the significance of English education in Japan from different communication styles in Japanese and English and acceptance of others. There are several things we can do to succeed in an international age. There are four important factors to measure international adjustment potential: (1) self-esteem and self-acceptance (2) tolerance of ambiguity, (3) creativity and critical thinking, and (4) openness and flexibility (Matsumoto, 1999). As we consider the above, Japanese

students have low intercultural adjustment potential. It is because Japanese students are passive in their education. There are few chances to demonstrate their leadership because the relationship between teachers and students follows a top-down system. Students must take on creative roles in their learning, as well as actively seek opportunities to overcome their passivity, and cross cultural barriers in their learning. In order to solve this problem, it is necessary that students work in leadership roles, that is, students' empowerment project.

According to the *Ningenryoku* (fundamental ability) requisites of the professional world (Benesse, 2007), English discussion skills are sufficiently acquired by merely 12% of university graduates, followed by presentation, writing and reading skills. In addition, contrary to the corporate requirements, Japanese lack leadership, creativity, and critical thinking in both their mother tongue as well as in foreign languages.

I was appointed as a leader of a students' empowerment research group. I will lead the peer support team. I completed all four English discussion seminars. These classes have the objectives to achieve all of aforementioned skills. There are many students who are eager to study English, but some of them need academic and social support. The lack of communication is a prime reason. I had the opportunity to meet Norasakkunkit, an American researcher on Japanese youth. He pointed out that cultural difference is one explanation of youth problems and how students' attitude changes to positive or negative feedback. Japanese students are likely to be motivated by positive feedback. It could explain the fact that they cannot accept even constructive criticism which can make them better. It indicated that students do not accept opinions with which they disagree, and fail to compensate for their weakness. They cannot foster their self-esteem because they do not sublimate frustration into their motivation to success.

It will be important to have consultation discussions with students. As a mediator, I intend to discuss the difficulties about a class with students, which they cannot tell a teacher directly. I hope that I can help students improve their skills gradually by optimizing constructive criticism. My role as mediator is to maximize academic learning and social interaction.

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