

EDITORIAL

Japan's ambivalent English

The recent story about problems at an English school in Tokyo reveals perhaps more about Japanese attitudes to studying a foreign language than about the business practices of language schools. In Japan, signing up with enthusiasm too often leads to giving up in frustration. For many, learning to chat a bit or get ready for a trip might seem just another consumer option, but the nation's level of foreign language ability deeply connects to its future.

Many countries around the world have already benefited from knowing English and foreign languages. India, long one of the most fluent in English, has built an entire industry in computer services, all in English. From Manila to Caracas to Riyadh, products, information, investments and workers all move back and forth across global borders in English. But in Japan, English too often remains less a bridge than a hurdle.

While the grip of American influence worldwide may yet loosen, the reality of English as the most commonly used language will continue. No other lingua franca has yet to emerge. Around the world, everyone from account executives to restaurant staff show a comfort with English that, like it or not, is the clearest evidence of a willingness to interact with the world. In this global conversation, Japan all too often blushes and stammers.

Whatever the reasons for the start-and-stop attitude to learning, the typically self-effacing attitude of most Japanese is little help in the competitive world of tourism, business and communications. Speaking another language must become a cause for neither embarrassment nor pride -- but just an everyday thing.

Long known for importing a multitude of ideas and technologies from other countries, Japan's innovation and creativity have only rarely been applied to language study. People around the world know they need language skills to

perform their increasingly communication-based, international-oriented jobs. For most Japanese, though, using English at work or in life remains a romantic daydream, too tough to make real.

Japan's future standing in the world rests in large part on its ability to speak other languages. Too much really can be lost in translation. Countries with the best language ability will prosper most as globalization seeps more fully into everyday life. Regardless of how different Japanese may be linguistically from other languages, waiting for some magic computer translation program to solve all the problems is sheer fantasy.

That fear of losing some Japanese identity is at the root of most critics of early English education, and Japanese culture can arguably be considered more closely tied to language than others. Yet, many studies have found that a stronger sense of Japanese identity develops through contact with other languages and cultures. Awareness of one's cultural identity comes as much from comparison as from knowing oneself.

Japan must learn other languages, then, not only to understand other ways of thinking and feeling, but also to understand itself. Japan has too long remained an island linguistically. Geography is no longer an adequate excuse. Nowadays, language is what leaps borders with the greatest force and speed, and comes ricocheting back, whether via the Internet or trade policies or popular films.

The fear of speaking English less than perfectly is a peculiarly Japanese one. Most of the world speaks English less than perfectly, yet they struggle on regardless of grammar mistakes and bad pronunciation. The myth that native speakers speak always perfectly is also under scrutiny. The very definition of a native speaker is slowly collapsing amid international marriages, bilingual education and increasing chances to travel, work and live in other countries.

If anything, the luxury of speaking only one language will be an increasing rarity in the future. Only the poorest, or ironically, the wealthiest countries, will live monolingually. The poorest countries have trouble accessing the world through other languages, while the wealthiest too confidently assume others will learn their language. Dropping this monolingual myth is the first best step to truly make a change.

Japan surely ranks first in the world in sheer numbers of grammar books and electronic dictionaries, not to mention

English lessons, yet how often do these help to better understand how to live in the world? The diversity of languages is a testament to the beauty and ingenuity of the human species, but the future is likely to rest on humankind's ability to create an international culture of communication.

The age of the tower of Babel, where humanity was punished for its pride by being split into different languages, may just be coming to an end. No country can afford to relish its uniqueness at the expense of working with others in a common language. In fact, the two go together.

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