

POINT OF VIEW / Mineo Nakajima

Globally speaking, Japan needs English for tots

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The time is right for a bold and steadfast decision to introduce English in the curriculums of Japan's elementary schools. If such a step is not taken now, the move to teach English at the grade school level would most likely be pushed back by another decade or more.

The 21st century has brought the swift advance of globalization in countless domains. Without effective links to the world at large, it will soon be difficult for us to carry on our everyday lives.

In no uncertain terms, the ability to use the universal language of English has become imperative.

The debate over elementary school English reflects this. Japan's position as an economic superpower has been shaken of late, prompting a sense of crisis that the country will lag behind.

I frequently attend international conferences in Asia. At these gatherings, the inability to speak English prevents participants from getting their messages out.

While I see people from Singapore, China and other Asian nations chattering away in English, the Japanese in attendance almost always sit around in silence. This is not the way it should be.

In South Korea and many other countries, children are taught English from elementary school on. In contrast, at its current pace Japan is doomed to become the non-English speaking orphan of

Asia.

I am not making this recommendation from an international perspective alone. Language, like listening to music, is mastered by ear, meaning that the earlier the learning process begins the better.

As a historical example, both artist Okakura Tenshin and diplomat-educator Nitobe Inazoe, renowned figures living from the mid-19th to early 20th century, entered the Tokyo School of Foreign Languages (the current-day Tokyo University of Foreign Studies) at age 11.

As another case in point, among the traditional rules handed down by *Tang tong-shi*, the families hereditarily in charge of interpreting for and coordinating commercial dealings with Chinese merchants in Nagasaki during the Edo Period (1603-1867) of Japanese history, was that Chinese be taught to their children from a tender age.

Many elementary schools have already introduced English-language activities in their "general learning" class time. I must add, however, that the courses are only available from the third grade. As long as the language is going to be taught, I support starting earlier.

This new educational challenge will naturally cause anxiety.

The first question is where to find instructors. But I see no reason for great concern



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on that point. Just think of how many people know English in this big wide world. Specialized-course teaching certificates could be issued to persons with experience studying abroad or other credentials.

Scrimping on the budgets, however, is not the way to succeed. It will be critical to earmark ample outlays for the education of competent faculty and the development of effective teaching aids.

There are also some who fret that teaching English so early on will jeopardize children's identity as Japanese. To counter that concern, I recommend the use of teaching materials that deal with Japanese history and culture.

In the introduction of such programs, the priority should be placed on the use of English as a practical tool of communication. The el-

ementary school English teaching activities used at present are generally designed to provide enjoyable contact with the language through games and similar means.

While I fundamentally support that approach, it will also be important to treat foreign-language learning as a key subject ranking with Japanese, mathematics and other parts of the curriculum.

There is also a need to revamp English education from the junior high school level on. The curriculums that have been so scattered and disorganized over the years must be integrated into unified programs with the stress on practical subject matter.

In junior high school, greater weight should be placed on the significance of encounters with other cultures.

Also, if university and high school programs can be better aligned, major changes could be made in the "entrance exam" English now taught at the high school level.

After that, the problem is college. There, we can no longer tolerate the type of education in which instructors specializing in English literature devote an entire year to having students read the same novel in English.

Because students naturally enter university with different levels of English proficiency, instruction geared to those specific skill levels

is a must.

At my own Akita International University in Akita Prefecture, we have adopted a methodical skill-specific teaching system. The results have been positive. Even at the basic class level, for example, our students are able to discuss issues such as Iraq after only about three and a half months.

One group studying the introduction of English at elementary schools is the foreign language expert's subcommittee under the curriculum committee of the Central Council of Education. Through that body, various pros and cons are being aired on the issue.

As chairman of that subcommittee, it is my role to coordinate the numerous themes at hand, and plot a feasible course for the future.

However, one of our primary goals must be to discourage parents from shoving their kids into English cram schools just because English has been added to the regular school curriculum.

The ultimate objective, of course, is to provide English education that encourages all children to open their eyes to the world around them from an early age on.

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