

International Herald Tribune 24 Nov, 2008 P20

POINT OF VIEW / Mineo Nakajima

Listen up to improve English language study

The Asahi Shimbun

Japan, South Korea and China are neighbors just two to three hours apart by plane. People living on the other side of the world often find it hard to differentiate those from the three nations.

Despite such geographical proximity, the languages used by these three countries are so different it is difficult for people to communicate with each other unless they are proficient in each language.

On the other hand, English is used around the world, allowing people to instantly communicate. This applies to countries in East Asia as well as elsewhere.

This is due partly to developments in information technology.

Given this reality, it is indisputable that English has established itself as a global language. Like gross domestic product and other indexes, eventually, English-language ability may become one of the yardsticks used to compare national strength.

Serious discussions and attempts to enhance English-language skills are advancing not only among East Asian neighbors such as China, Taiwan and South Korea, but also among non-English speaking countries in Southeast Asia and other re-

gions.

This summer I was invited to give a keynote address at an international conference in Bangkok. The theme of the conference was "Language in a Global Culture: Bridge or Barrier?" A discourse on Japanese and English entitled "The Fall of the Japanese Language in the Age of English" by novelist Minae Mizumura, published in the September issue of literary magazine *Shincho*, also delved deep into this problem.

Meanwhile, in Japan, there still seems to be controversy over the introduction of English education in elementary schools.

Some people argue that first consideration should be given to the Japanese language rather than English, and say if children are taught English, it could undermine their Japanese language skills. But we must move forward and depart from the mind-set that teaching English and Japanese is a zero-sum game.

If we stick to such thinking in this age of globalization, we could cause Japanese youths to develop a constant inferiority complex toward English.



Nakajima

Although the situation may be somewhat different in Europe, where countries have much in common in terms of language and culture, recently the European Union has started advocating "plurilingualism." This concept promotes the idea that individuals learn other languages in addition to their native tongue.

Proponents say learning foreign languages stimulates the students and helps them expand their linguistic spheres, thereby having a positive effect on the study of their native tongues. It is a linguistic policy aimed at peaceful coexistence of diverse cultures.

In Japan, too, learning a foreign language as a tool for communication should be encouraged from an early age as a matter of public concern.

Furthermore, in higher education, I believe plurilingualism is needed as a means to expand intellectual learning by encouraging students to learn a second foreign language in addition to English and Japanese.

In Japan, the conventional method of teaching English poses a problem. Even though Japanese students learn English in school, many of them are unable to speak the language. Unless this is drastically reformed, the vicious cycle will continue.

The government has decided to introduce compulsory English education for fifth- and sixth-graders in elementary school in the school year starting April 2011.

At this juncture, the Suzuki method of talent education developed by the violinist and educator Shinichi Suzuki (1898-1998) should be considered as an approach. Using this method, students are taught music from early childhood.

The essence of the educational philosophy is to have children listen to classical music until they learn the tunes by ear, when their minds are open. Then they will repeatedly practice what they learned by hearing rather than reading music.

I believe this method of learning, which does not initially rely on musical scores, can also be applied to foreign language education.

This will encourage students to first acquire practical communication skills by hearing, learning and speaking the language, before teaching them grammar and spelling.

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