Workshop 2010
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English and Diversity

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1. English as official language

Announcements by the President of Rakuten Inc., the Internet shopping mall operator that English will be the company's official in-house language by the end of 2012 and by Fast Retailing Co, the operator of Uniqlo that it will require its employees to use English in meetings attended by foreign coworkers and in company documents from March 2012 reminded me of my own experiences using English in meetings.

I am a Thai who spoke not a single word of Japanese when I arrived in Japan. I joined Hokkaido University a decade ago and have been responsible for an engineering graduate program where all classes are conducted in English. Given the time needed to master the Japanese language, most of the international students who are required to carry out experiments are unable to study the Japanese language as much as they would want to. It is therefore necessary that information needed to ensure that students can study efficiently and live comfortably should be provided in English.

Since its establishment in 1999, the English Engineering Education (e3) program or previously known as the English Graduate Program in Socio-Environmental Engineering (EGPSEE) has been managed by a working group consisting of faculty members from different subject groups. I used English in my first meeting in 1999 while other professors used Japanese. The WG chairman translated the decisions to me from time to time. These WG meetings were called by me and most of the matters discussed at the meetings were raised by me, so all related documents – agenda, background papers and minutes – are in English. As time passed more English was used at the meetings and at present all discussion is done in English. Japanese professors were no longer reluctant speaking English in front of each other. Decisions made at the meetings which include practices, rules and regulations relevant to professors and students in the e3 program can be transmitted to concerned people directly since they are already in English.

In his commentary in The Daily Yomiuri, 18 September 2010, whether it is necessary for English to be an official language in Japanese companies, Political Scientist Takashi Inoguchi says that it is up to them and there is no point in arguing whether it is right or wrong. "But for central government bodies the issue is problematic. It seems that, because of officials' poor English abilities, these bodies fail to provide quality services to the public." He cited the administration of pharmaceutical affairs as example, "I wonder to what extent these officials concerned have

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taken advantage of scientific knowledge from around the world that is available in English." Prof. Inoguchi thinks it is necessary for government officials to obtain a higher level of English ability than they have now. He proposes that a TOEFL score above a certain level be an eligibility requirement for the national public service examination. We are facing a similar problem at Hokkaido University so I could not agree more with his proposal.

As of 2010, there are 744 universities in Japan. Due to the decline birth rate, many are struggling to fill their government-authorized number of places. While leading national universities continue to be protected by state support and leading private universities by their reputation and alumni networks, they are not protected against global competition among universities. To survive, one of the attempts is starting classes in English to attract international students. It is therefore not wrong to say that universities are no difference than Rakuten and Uniqlo, they have to do whatever they think will ensure their survival. The big difference is that while company presidents are ready to give a top-down orders to achieve their goal within the timeframe, most of the university presidents are not.

2. Appreciation of diversity

Everyone seems to admit that the English education in Japanese schools bear no fruits. The situation is the same in my country, Thailand. Students learn how to read and write but are not given a chance to put what they learn into practice. My situation is quite different from ordinary Thais. I started learning English in a private primary school. My English teacher was a Thai woman who did her schooling in England. She used the textbooks that English school children used with not a single Thai word. Her English pronunciation was beautiful and like music to my ears. I enjoyed learning English very much and since then English became one of my favorite subjects in school. My high school days were spent in the multi-racial and multi-lingual Malaya (presently Malaysia) where Malays, Chinese, Indians and other ethnic groups live side by side. It was another crucial time of my life since it not only exposed me to different English accents and different languages, it taught me to appreciate diversity and cultural differences.

It is therefore the most welcome news to me that the Japanese government is considering sending young English language teachers for training at primary, middle and high schools in the U.S. for a period of 1-2 years. I am sure they will not only enhance the skills and confidence needed to teach the English language but learn to appreciate diversity and cultural differences.

The experiences I gained from living in Malaya helped me a lot when I worked at the Asian Institute of Technology (AIT) in Bangkok where professors at that time came from all over the world and students, from all over the Asian continent. Despite their diverse countries of origin, AIT professors and students shared two common things — their aim for excellence and their good English ability. Differences in opinions, actions and reactions due to differences in educational, socio-economic and cultural background generate discussions that lead to new ideas and new values. I enjoyed this dynamic atmosphere brought about by diversity and believed that, like the U.S., it is the foundation of AIT success.

When I joined HU I had to admit that I was surprised to find that many professors at the Graduate School of Engineering speak English and some of them very well. Quite the reverse I could not find any English speaking administrative staff. Ten years have passed since the introduction of the e3 program. The number of international students in the program now stands at close to 100 and the number of courses taught in English increases to over 100. Professors and "part-time" administrative staff who speak English well are everywhere. Does having more people who can communicate in English make people appreciate each other differences?

At AIT, everyone — students, staff and faculty, regardless of his/her nationality and group size, is a foreigner. As a tool for these foreigners to communicate, English is used as the official language. Being able to not only communicate but understand announcements, rules, regulations, etc. everyone feels that he/she is part of AIT and diversity is something natural. At HU, Japanese are Japanese and foreigners (6.5% of the total population) are foreigners and the official language is Japanese. Besides a small fraction of professors who appreciate contributions by quality international students and researchers, most Japanese do not understand why HU has to have them and consider their basic needs due to language handicap a burden.

3. Unpreparedness at Japanese universities

Bringing in international students should not be regarded as simply to fill out the empty seats in universities or to help professors carry out research. It should be regarded as a good chance to bring in diversity that is crucial for any organization to grow. In order to foster mutual understandings universities that offer programs meant for non-Japanese speaking students must provide an appropriate infrastructure and environment to enable international students and staff to be on their own and avoid being looked at as a burden. In my opinion, the most important thing is to make everyone — students, staff and faculty fully understand the university's policy regarding international students and staff. Why do we need them? How does their existence benefit Japanese students?

At present five English-medium programs including the e3 program are offered at HU. No special recognition or support is given by the university to these programs as they are regarded as the individual Graduate Schools' programs. As a result Graduate Schools struggle individually in running the programs. At the Graduate School of Engineering, to supplement for the administrative staff's lack of English proficiency, English speaking part-timers are employed. If the university recognizes these programs within its so called "internationalization" strategy, it should include English as one of the requirements when hiring new staff and declare English and Japanese as its official languages. By doing so, making necessary information available in Japanese and English will be part of the job not additional work and the feeling of "us and them" that exist between Japanese and foreigners will gradually disappear giving way for diversity to thrive.