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My Views on the Learning of Foreign Languages and Elements Necessary for Effective Cross-cultural Communication

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While I have never been formally connected with education, I have had the opportunity of teaching at an adult education society at my high school, where we taught English and other subjects to domestic helpers at the school and to their children. I have also had many opportunities to teach English when I was here in Japan 40 years ago as a student. I taught at a variety of institutions, including companies, English language schools, and the UN Foreign Language School. Likewise, in Vietnam, in the process of learning Vietnamese I had an opportunity to teach some of my Vietnamese teachers, many of whom were young students, something about the use of the English language.

Having said that, I am by no means a qualified person in this august gathering of teachers, to give you any words of advice or wisdom.

Nevertheless, I would like to mention that in India most of us grow up learning more than one language; usually our own and one other Indian language. For those of us who receive an education, specially at university, the English language is also one to which we are exposed at an early age. It is in this context that I want to underline the unfounded hesitation that many Japanese teachers seem to have, about exposing young Japanese children to English or any other foreign language, because they are fearful that in doing so, they may be distracting the child from learning his or her mother tongue—in this case, Japanese. This is a completely false fear, as I have seen the positive and good effects of an early exposure to a bilingual programme of teaching. This was in the Kato Gakko in Numazu. Here, from kindergarten up to high school level, the children are exposed to the English language, starting from 35% of their curriculum in English at kindergarten, and progressively going higher at the elementary, middle school; until in high school, they are receiving as much as 75% of education through the English medium. The school employs both Japanese teachers

and so-called ‘native speakers,’ largely drawn from Britain, America, and Australia. This is again a mistaken belief that native speakers of English come only from countries such as the US, UK, and Australia; India has about 55 million fluent English speakers of the English language, which is considerably more than the entire population of Australia, and equal to the population of the UK. It is important that teachers be drawn from countries like India and Singapore where English is widely used and where standards of teaching and learning are also high. This exposes Japanese students to a variety of Asian English accents and idioms, since English is no longer exclusively a Western language.

I just wish to share some interesting facts which show how the wide use of English and the high teaching standards of English have had a positive impact on the people of India in many ways; in particular, I wish to highlight how English has strengthened India in the field of *Information Technology*.

It is interesting, for example, that in India over 100,000 people are currently engaged in outsourcing and call centres. From a revenue of USD 1.47 billion, outsourcing and call centre income is expected to rise to USD 24 billion by 2008, which will constitute 3% of India’s GNP. Last year, the IT enabled services sector, including call centres, grew at 71%, making it the fastest-growing industry in India. There are now 336 call centres in India, of which 50 were set up only last year. India is still way ahead of its nearest competitors from Ireland and the Philippines in terms of the number of people employed, the number of companies, and the revenue earned.

The fact that India was a major player in this field can be seen from the fact that General Electric already employs 11,000 people at its eight facilities in five Indian cities; it is planning to double its operation next year. GE’s Indian facilities provide

services for 270 processes, across 30 major GE businesses all over the world. 60% of GE accounts are handled at Indian centres; i.e. 6 million invoices annually. The result of this shifting of operations to India has resulted in a saving of USD 275 million a year for the company. Many other companies are following GE’s example. They are attracted not only by the highly competitive level of prices of labour and other inputs, but also, as Mckinsey in a recent study found, by the fact that operations which take 20 seconds to process at a US facility are handled in 8 seconds in India. Further, when compared to the UK, Indian transactions had a higher rate of being error-free.

Seeing these many advantages in India, other big companies such as CitiBank have moved many of their operations to India, and have been able to make savings of 75 million dollars a year. Likewise, British Airways is saving USD 42 million a year as a result of shifting their operations to India.

I have gone into these figures in some detail as I feel it is necessary for Japanese teachers of English to realize the spin-off benefits that can accrue if standards of English language teaching are raised.

A final word from my own experiences of learning foreign languages. Most of what I have learned of Japanese, Vietnamese, and German is less because of classroom instructions and more because of free interaction with native speakers, in all manner of situations. Language can often be learned more easily in convivial settings—over a meal, in a public bath, on a bus, while walking in a park, and in so many other ways that need not always be made explicit! So my advice to Japanese learners of English and other foreign languages is to shed your inhibitions, let your hair down, and enjoy yourself as you learn a foreign language.