



Bad English In Japan: A Conspiracy Theory

By Glenn Newman, Contributing Writer
The Japan Times | May 16, 2020

Portland, Oregon – Japanese speak english, poorly. According to Education First, Japan ranked 53rd on its English Proficiency Index in 2019, behind countries such as China, South Korea, Vietnam and Albania. Japanese takers of the TOIEC in 2018 finished 44th out of 49 countries, eight spots below China. and, statistics aside, anyone who has spent much time in Japan knows that Japanese with good English are few and far between.

Japan's English shortcomings are not the product of a lack of attention. Politicians, government officials, business leaders and educators have for decades emphasized that the path to Japan's economic revival runs straight through English. The government has invested heavily in the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) program and other programs to improve English-language education. With little to show for their efforts.

Given enough time, Japanese are generally able to achieve whatever they put their minds to. Just look at the Brave Blossoms' success at last year's Rugby World Cup, with the team reaching the quarterfinals alongside traditional leaders like New Zealand, South Africa and England.

Decades of determined effort paid off as Japan "blossomed" into a rugby powerhouse not just in Asia but on the world stage. True, part of the team's success is attributable to the far-sighted decision to build a diverse, multinational team. But it is just this diversity that enabled the native Japanese players to raise their game. And it's not just the elite national team; the high school players at Hanazono (Japan rugby's Koshien) are Exhibit No. 1 for the depth of Japan's rugby talent pool.

England is the birthplace of both rugby and English. Why have the Japanese become so accomplished at one while remaining mired in mediocrity in the other?

English grammar is surely no more mystifying than the Laws of the Rugby Union (and maybe less!). Unlike rugby, where Japanese are arguably at a

disadvantage due to their smaller average build, there are no physical obstacles to a Japanese learning English.

English may be a steeper climb for a Japanese than, say, a German, but no more so than for native speakers of Vietnamese or Albanian. English is not rocket science. If a proven method of English instruction were implemented in the schools, it wouldn't be long before most young Japanese had passable English and many achieved fluency.

The usual excuses for the hapless state of English-language instruction in Japan are the country's insular culture, its large internal market (which makes English superfluous for many) and the ineptitude of the education ministry. There also seems to be a hope that AI-driven translation and interpretation technologies will soon become so advanced that the need for living, breathing Japanese people to learn English will become a quaint anachronism.

These explanations may have merit. Still, it's hard to square the persistent vegetative state of English in Japan with Japan's success at so many other foreign-born domains. Could it be that this failure is by design? Surely, if the Japanese government actually wanted a broadly English-capable population, Japanese would have become proficient English speakers eons ago.

Educators have long known that effective foreign-language instruction must focus on the development of active communication skills, that is, speaking and writing. If

English-language education in Japan definitively shifted from its stubborn emphasis on passive reading and listening and abstruse grammatical rules to teaching and testing actual communication skills, improvement would soon follow. China has moved in that direction and has seen a significant bump in its EPI ranking.

None of this should be news to the powers that be in Japan. There has been a lot of lip service paid, and half measures taken, to this end for years. But just as Japan was preparing to take an important step forward by allowing students to take private English proficiency tests with a speaking component as part of their university applications, the government abruptly scrapped the plan last November.

The use of these private tests was ostensibly dropped due to economic fairness concerns after some unfortunate comments by education minister Koichi Hagiuda. Or perhaps Hagiuda's comments were just a pretext used by opponents to sabotage the plan.

Why might the Japanese "Deep State" be wary of truly effective English-language instruction? The bureaucracy could simply be afflicted with the same parochialism as the society at large. But that explanation may be facile. High-ranking government officials are sophisticated and smart. Their job is to think deeply about what is in Japan's best interests over the long term, and to consider worst-case scenarios.

What might these officials project for Japan in the years to come? For one, demographic decline as far as the eye can see. Confiscatory taxes on young workers to pay for pensions and health care for the old; poorer services and infrastructure for everyone else. An opportunity-poor society where even starting a family may feel like an impossible dream for many. A Country for Old Men (and Older Women). A country, in short, ripe for mass emigration by educated, ambitious young people to greener fields abroad. That is, if they could. Lacking solid English, most Japanese are effectively trapped in the linguistic walled garden that is Japan.

Faced with this bleak future, Japanese officialdom may have judged that the enhanced global competitiveness and other benefits which could spring from cultivating a broadly English-proficient populace would be outweighed by the risk that a sizable number of new English speakers would decide to cast their lot abroad.

Perhaps their thinking is that the loss of multitudes of Japanese in their prime working years to more opportunity-rich countries overseas could quickly turn a severe (but manageable) demographic decline into a death spiral.

Driven by a fear of mass emigration and brain drain, is the bureaucracy engaged in a conspiracy to keep English down? Probably not. But, whether by design, ambivalence or ineptitude, government reforms to English-language instruction will forever be too little

and too late. The takeaway for Japanese who want to learn English well: You are on your own.

Glenn Newman is a former long-term resident of, and frequent business traveler to, Japan.