

Essay-What do I expect of English Education in Japan? Reflecting on my experience as an interpreter for the Tokyo Olympic Organizing Committee in 1964

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Prologue

Less than a year and half remains before the Tokyo Olympics. Japan had to give up holding the Tokyo Olympics in 1941 because of the war. We have gained peace in the Pacific Region after World War II. We should all feel very happy to learn that the Tokyo Olympics is going to be held smoothly here again, following that of the Tokyo Olympics back in 1964.

Fortunately, at the age of 18 I passed the English test to qualify myself as one of the youngest interpreters for the Tokyo Olympic Organizing Committee in 1964. Luckily I was one out of thirty to be chosen as an interpreter of English at the time. At that time there was not a good number of people who were able to speak English fluently. Because of the Tokyo Olympics the Japanese people were urged to learn English. There came a time for many Japanese to be encouraged to learn English Conversation. After the Olympics the boom subsided and the guts to learn English faded. I want the boom to learn English to come again. Actually, we cannot say that the Japanese have learned to speak English even now. Some have learned the language, but most do not speak it despite extensive opportunities to learn English now.

Many native teachers of English in Japan feel that the Japanese are poor English language learners. English education here must bear fruits. I am concerned about no strong a motive for Japanese even now to learn English in the face of the upcoming Tokyo Olympics. In other words, English has always remained/been a foreign language beyond reach for most Japanese people. In Japan you do not need to speak the language in your daily life, so you will not learn it. Yet so many Japanese travel outside of Japan. As a teacher of English it is frustrating that the Japanese do not learn the language, no matter how long it is taught.

I was a member of English speaking society in high school and university. I had many opportunities to speak the language through discussion, conversation activities in the club in high school with other Japanese friends. Those experiences helped me. The same was true in college. I never learned it outside of Japan. Basically I studied English alone.

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I proudly recall my experience as an interpreter for the Tokyo Olympics in 1964, which brought excitement and moved all Japanese.

A U.S. dollar was equal to 360 Yen. It was an era before internationalization. Japan was recovering again. With relatively a small investment a bullet train-Shinkansen began to run and expressways were made open in Tokyo, Japan. As a symbol of Japan's economic development the Tokyo Olympics was held. The time was so different from now. The economy, the culture, the social system are so different. Japan is aging. People are getting old. More than one out of four is over sixty-five years old. There began a decrease in population. Thanks to medical advancement it is no more rare people live beyond ninety years.

They want to live long to see the Tokyo Olympics again (and probably the newly-set world exposition in Osaka in 2025 in memory of the one in 1970 just after the Tokyo Olympics in 1964). Young Japanese athletes are trying their best to do well in the coming summer Olympics in 2020. Japan won many medals in Rio de Janeiro in 2016. Japanese do remember the excitement and the experience then. People hope that Japan will gain more medals in the coming Tokyo Olympics.

Many people think recovery from the after-effect of the Great East Japan Earthquake should come first. Of course it should come first. Holding the Tokyo Olympics should match the recovery efforts. My first wish this time as a teacher of English is that Japanese youngsters make use of this opportunity to learn English. (My experience may sound like my brag, barroom rhetoric.) Look at the sharply increased number of the inflow of foreign tourists attracted to Japan. Shouldn't we make their visits even happier and more memorable, using English and other foreign languages?

Social background

There was only a radio broadcast in Japan to learn about the results of the Rome Olympics live. We learned of the death of President Kennedy over the black and white TV broadcast on the first day of its introduction between the U.S. and Japan. Now everything is known over the Internet in this information technology age. We now live in the epoch-making era, realizing advancement of science, technology, medicine.

Then, can we call Japan an international society? We should be grateful that we need not learn a foreign language. Japan is a monolingual and a sort of closed society. The number of travelers coming from abroad has jumped up so much in recent years to register over thirty-one million in 2018. We see many foreigners working throughout Japan. Generally-speaking, they are well accepted in the community thanks to hospitable minds of Japanese people. They learn Japanese fast. Many things can be communicated through body languages. Body languages do not often help. Learning the language is the first priority.

Over the NHK (Japan Broadcasting Corporation) TV program in 2016 one primary school in Australia was shown. Some classes adopted Japanese for their foreign language study. Some Japanese teacher taught geography and abacus in Japanese, while other classes did not do so. Three years after introduction of the teaching it was surprisingly known that the class Japanese was taught conspicuously excelled in English (not Japanese) reading abilities than the classes where foreign languages were not taught. Many people in Japan say that starting to learn

English in elementary school is too early to learn. One should make such a remark after finding out the result. I wonder what is happening now in Japanese elementary school. The result will be known soon because the foreign language study began to be introduced in Japanese elementary schools a few years ago.

Many Japanese make light of foreign language study. People do not want to hear any Japanese around them speak English. They think the guy wants to show off or they even detest hearing English. Still water runs deep. It is a society where you should be modest and hide your skill in public. You should obey one's senior. It is basically a hierarchy that dominates. You should always think which is older and must choose the words carefully. Three kinds of honorific wordings need to be observed carefully in Japanese society. Some foreigners think Japanese are poor linguists because students never learn it. Students mind others around them and do not want to stick out. So foreigners learn the Japanese language here very fast, whereas Japanese never learn English.

I must urge Japanese to use English or other foreign languages, talk to foreign people to learn them. That is a must to do to learn it. For Japanese people's sake I must ask many native speakers of English teaching English not to use Japanese as much as possible, not only in class but also in such situations as English can be learned. Even if they do it, they have many other opportunities to use Japanese because in their daily lives they rarely see bilingual Japanese. Regrettably, people do not seem to show an eagerness to learn English, although the Tokyo Olympics is being held soon.

My English studies in 1960's

Very few Caucasians (a discriminatory language?), though they lived in Japan for a long time, spoke Japanese, thinking partly the Japanese language was a language inferior to European languages in 1960's. When I saw foreigners on the train, I used to talk to them in English. Once in a while, some foreigners answered me in Russian and I was taken aback. When I asked, "Are you English (instead of British)?," some people said, "I'm Scottish." I remember I was perplexed then.

There were only one tape recorder in my high school and one record player to listen to Linguaphone to hear English spoken. To practice English pronunciation there was no model reading. I just read phonetic symbols and had to judge myself the sound was something like this(?). The English speaking society in Keio Shiki High School attached to Keio University provided me with opportunities to speak English. I graduated from the then prestigious Hitotsubashi Junior High School. I was not good at English in junior high school. Among four private high schools of fame in Tokyo, Rikkyo, Rikkyo Girls, Aoyama and Keio Shiki there were joint discussion meetings in English. I was not good at English at first. But one female classmate of mine in junior high school, whom I took fancy to, entered Aoyama. I chose to enter the English Speaking Society, thinking there might be opportunities to see her. (I saw her only once in my high school days after all.) From that time on I began to study English alone, reading English reference books. In my sophomore year I was not good at English yet. There was a genius among freshmen club members. There were returnees, too, who spoke English very fluently. He

was even better than the returnees. He spoke German as well. His elder brother was the same age as I. He went to Waseda High School attached to Waseda University. (Both Waseda and Keio Universities are top private universities in Japan.) The guy explained everything in English when I went to his house. He spoke French as well. Their eldest brother became an official interpreter for the 1964 Tokyo Olympics and entered a first rate bank. Their elder sister later gave me a chance to work at the international exhibition Australian Embassy booths at Harumi pier near Ginza, Tokyo. They were children of a high school principal. Their mother died at the age of 100 in 2015.

I saw many geniuses from related Keio High school at a Keio High School Oratorical Contest. My level of English in my second year remained to be mediocre. Every week we, English club members, went to American Army families, Beasley's and Randall's besides ordinary club activities. Gradually I began to manage to speak English. In my third year I was called, "God of English" among my classmates. I did not have to prepare for English tests, so I was able to study other subjects. I entered a department of my choice, Economics Department, Keio University.

Keio University was ranked No. 9 in the world to produce first-rate top executives among giant enterprises in 2013. No.2 in the world was Tokyo University after Harvard University according to Times Higher Education. (In passing Waseda University was the 20th.) It is a pity that Japanese universities are academically rated rather low among universities in the world, partly because almost everything is studied in Japanese. Founder of Keio University, Yukichi Fukuzawa, translated everything into Japanese in his time 160 years ago and from then on there have always been Japanese equivalents to English words. Japanese students do not need to read English books to reach top academic levels. (By the way, Yukichi's face is seen on the Japanese 10,000 Yen banknote.)

In my third year in high school I applied for the test to become an official interpreter for the Tokyo Olympic Organizing Committee. I was quite lucky to be chosen as one of the youngest official interpreters of English for the committee. In the application selection one out of three was selected. I was able to write an American teacher's name as a referee, which seems to have worked. Only a few returnees who had lived abroad thanks to their fathers' jobs were at the same age as I. Through the American Field Service scheme some Japanese high school students had spent one year in America. They were one year or two older than I. One out of ten among those who had passed the first test passed the written English test.

English was only one language spoken at the time.

There was virtually no common language in 1964. The Olympic official languages are English, French, German, Spanish, and Russian. Not many European people spoke two or three languages then. Japan urgently needed to recruit interpreters of many languages as a first nation to host the Olympics in Asia in 1964. (Later the number of those who spoke English increased and the Nagano Winter Olympics were held thanks to volunteers' work as interpreters. Volunteers are expected to help athletes as interpreters and guides in 2020. Thanks to internationalization much more people speak English in Japan. English has become a common language despite the fact that

there are still so many people around the world who cannot speak English.

When Tokyo was chosen to be a venue for the 2020 Olympics, M. Rogue, the then President of International Olympic Organizing Committee, expressed himself, requesting Tokyo to learn from experience. I wonder what he expected of the coming Tokyo Olympics in Japan in 2020. What did they worry about? Maybe the language problem? Or what else? Are we going to be quite ready? I have found out that among many foreign tourists there are many who cannot understand English at all. Even many Europeans do not speak the language. They need multilingual interpreters in large numbers.

Before the Olympics my first assignment was to accompany a delegation leader. At the time of orientation on the third day I had to attend the activity of my club, English Speaking Society, not the third day orientation, together with another will-be interpreter in the same club, one year senior to me. Because of my absence on the third day I was transferred and assigned to a hospitality role at accommodations, a sort of sinecure, maybe. (I urge college students not to be student-minded. When you work for some business, you must naturally be business-minded not to lose good opportunities. After entering companies many youngsters remain to be student-minded, which is no good.) Here let me cite my article mostly in its original form released for Keio English Speaking Society organ in the spring of 1965.

“The Tokyo Olympics and I-What I felt as an interpreter”

Five months have passed. The Tokyo Olympics began to be highlighted again because of the movie directed by Kon Ichikawa. Does that movie really and nicely represent the Tokyo Olympics in 1964? The discussion began to be heated in the media. We have not forgotten and remember the Tokyo Olympics throughout our lives. Every four years the hosting countries continue to remember the excitement brought by the Olympics. It really has become a very good memory for me to have worked as an interpreter then. I was able to learn a lot from the experience. A Caucasian said, “I have come to Olympics for the seventh time in succession. Tokyo was far from my place, but the Olympics are worth coming.” But we may not be able to overestimate its value. The Olympics are just a dream and only a festival.

There came about an English conversation boom after the Tokyo Olympics were decided to be held in Japan. (By contrast, now it seems not many people are eager to master the language, although it is a very good timing to learn it.) Practicality of English began to be made much of, which was good. In a sense in Japan it had been thought to learn English as a means to cultivate your character, not as a means to communicate. English conversation remained to be learned as a hobby after all. Colonized people speak English, French, Spanish fluently. They are at an advantage communication-wise.

The world has become narrower and narrower at least through the media and transportation. Can Japan remain as it is? The culture of “Speak no evil, hear no evil, see no evil” remained even at the time of the Tokyo Olympics in 1964. That culture has changed in many ways. What has not changed is that Japanese people do not speak the English language.

There were 340 Japanese interpreters of English, 140 interpreters of French, 80 interpreters of

Spanish, 60 interpreters of German, 50 interpreters of Russian who worked for the Organizing Committee. After the first selection ten times as many applicants for English and German remained to be chosen, as I mentioned earlier. For some other foreign languages the applicants were not sufficient. Of course, it does not mean their linguistic levels were low. The language learners were not so many regrettably. The need to recruit a dozen of multi-lingual Japanese interpreters for the Olympics remains to be strong. Many Europeans do not understand English even now.

Let me cite some interesting experiences of mine hereafter : At a hotel as accommodations

First I was assigned by the liaison department to one accommodation-Shinagawa Tokyo Kanko Hotel, a small hotel. There were four official interpreters, Ms. Masuda, a beautiful interpreter of English who later on entered Nippon TV, Mr. Okada, an interpreter of German, Mr. Kudo, an interpreter of English and a senior at Tokyo University of Technology and me.

Our role was to be of help to officers from organizing committees around the world to introduce Japan. There were two officers from Germany, one spoke English and another one French. The one who spoke English was an affable guy and gave us German exchange badges and funny-looking German wine glasses. There was no way to communicate with another one. I labelled him a cold guy because of no communication. An East German officer was booked to come in, but he did not show up. There came a gentle refined lady from Italy. Italians hosted the Rome Olympics in 1960. She went to Nagoya during the Olympics, came back and gave us many presents including the Rome Olympic Committee flag and an old shawl, which were later given to my masters swimming coach who won the bronze medal in a 100 m backstroke in Rome. Satoko Tanaka was the second woman to win an Olympic medal in the history of Japanese women swimming. A tall basketball coach from the then Yugoslavia was gentle, powerful and always smiling. He fell ill during the Olympics, but held on. He might not have liked the Japanese weather.

An Iranian officer was reserved and did not ask us anything, turning down our offer lightly. He gave us pistachio (now commonly available anywhere in Japan), which was like peanuts with some acidity, so delicious and my family enjoyed them. Two Iranian girls aged 14 or 15 were staying at the hotel. I was asked at the beginning where Japanese pop stars like the Beatles were singing. I was thought of as a hotel employee. (At that time you just cannot get information easily.) I could have fetched the Japanese beetles instead to meet their demand. One spoke English, French and Arabic besides Persian. The other one did not speak English and looked more attractive to me because of her gentleness. (It was the time under the 2500 year old Parlavi Dynasty a dozen years before the Homeinian Revolution.)

One officer from Latin America is to be remembered most. He represented sports department from the ministry of education in a country, whose name is withheld for his honor. He was not an official at first, so we were not able to cope with his request. He got the ID card as an officer and showed it to us. After requesting something, he showed his ID, saying, "Look at this." so we abased ourselves, saying, "Certainly, you are an officer. What can we do, Sir?"

He gave us many small gifts, but each time requested something not easy to do. "Get all visas for my Asian trips from all Asian countries I am visiting." "We came to participate in sports conferences, so give us all schedules of the sports meetings. Every meeting was finished when we contacted. He wanted to see athletes training before the events. Just before the Olympics, athletes were busy preparing themselves, so we were not able to contact them. "We left our country, stayed in Hawaii too long, and everything is finished. We must cover it up to look nice. Collect all documents for finished sports meetings." Some jobs he gave were troublesome, but we were not busy. He commended the Japanese industriousness and the nice well-organized opening ceremony of the Tokyo Olympics.

One officer joined later. He was from Sierra Leone, in the west of Africa. Only a few years have passed since the country was born. He was an officer of the ministry of education, but the country was not participating in the Olympics. He was not a president of its Olympic Organizing Committee, either. So the liaison section manager did not accept him as an officer. But I thought of him as a kind of Jigoro Kano, the founder of Judo. I took him to a party to see an internationally-minded general manager, Mr. Iwata, who liked Rakugo (comic story telling), immediately calling him a Mr. Sierra Leone and giving him an ID within a minute. (It was in October, 2018 that I saw a Colombian lady with her children at a swimming pool in Ichikawa, Chiba next to Tokyo, who said her husband was Sierra Leonean. It was the first time I ever heard of anybody from Sierra Leone. I am seventy-three. Of course, her husband has nothing to do with the gentleman in 1964. Anyhow it looked like a miracle to talk with her in Spanish and I came to hear about somebody from Sierra Leone, a former English colony.)

We were not busy and requested the Organizing Committee to give us some more jobs. We did Jyankenpon (a sort of Japanese coin toss) among four interpreters. Ms. Masuda and I won.

At the Olympic swimming pool

First I was assigned to the Olympic indoor swimming pool, which was designed by a worldly-known architect, Tange Kenzo. (The pool is no more in use, but may be registered as a world heritage site. He also designed the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building in Shinjuku.) My role was not to allow other events athletes and officers into the swimming venue because of limited capabilities. (At the time of Rome Olympics, all athletes and officers were allowed to see the games in the swimming pool. I wonder the capacity of 15,000 will be good enough to accommodate everyone related to Olympics yet without tickets.) I was told that a few days before there had come many athletes for other events, who broke into the venue. The pool was just beside the Olympic village. Boxers, basketball players brandished their hands to go in. A female interpreter was not able to cope with them and let them in. Girls at the ticket counter were in danger and left the place. So they were happy to have a male interpreter. (No kidding. I am not a bodyguard.) The swimming events were held just beside me. (Now as a masters swimmer, though at the bottom level, I should have seen the games.) There were star swimmers. Dawn Frazer from Australia recorded less than 60 seconds in 100 m crawl stroke for the first time as a woman. She later became a politician, as is known. Don Shollander from the United States won two gold

medals in 100 m and 200 m in crawl stroke. (As far as my research goes, there were only three swimmers in the past that broke or equaled world records eleven times in one event. The last one is a Japanese, Satoko Tanaka in 200 m backstroke, which then was not an Olympic event, though. Even Michael Phelps has not done it in a single event.) Only one bronze medal went to Japanese male relay team at the Tokyo Olympics. After Frazer won the victory, she was surrounded by many reporters. I was asked by a swimming director to tell the press to leave the room because the next swimmers were coming in. So I uttered to everybody including Dawn Frazer in the room, "The press interview time is over. Next swimmers are coming in here."

I was like a gatekeeper. There were two kinds of tickets, one for the morning events, the other for the afternoon events. However, it was not clearly written. Foreigners came in the afternoon with morning tickets and did not accept my explanation.

Japanese were not like that, they easily accepted my explanation, saying, "Oh, is that so?" (Maybe, Japanese today are a little different.) But foreign people never accept my simple explanation. They are usually nice people. But when it comes to such matters, they do not concede easily without any good reason. Japanese, in general, seem to accept, when they were wrong in some way.

It looks very bad that you turn down whatever they may say. What I said to them was, "Sorry you just cannot get in." (I do not want this to happen again in 2020. We must learn from our experience. Different rules at different swimming pools, table tennis courts, everywhere now are found in Japan. Why so? Try to minimize absurd rules. Do not rely on mind-reading. If necessary, you must say what you want to say. Do not easily give up, when you need to say something important. Be hospitable. Understand others. Be sympathetic.)

A British female swimmer's father came with many tickets for swimming. His bundle of tickets lacked the one for her final game mysteriously. He wanted to be in. But the person in charge rejected to let him in and told me to interpret what he said. It looked bad. I could not remain to be just an interpreter and persuaded the guy to allow him in. He needed to sit down on the stairs not any seat. He shouted and called her name, who knew her father was there and responded in a loud voice. He could not come closer to her. Her father kept on seating there, seeing her compete in semi-finals and finals at the farthest end of the swimming pool. She was finally placed the sixth after the fourth placed Satoko Tanaka.

An foreign gymnast wanted to take divers' motion through 8 millimeter tape recorder and I allowed him in. I saw him later.

At the Olympic Gymnasium near Sendagaya Station

He was trying to sell tickets to a few visitors near the Metropolitan Gymnasium. I asked him how things were going. He said that he got the ticket from a Japanese at the price of 5,000 Yen, so he wanted to sell the ticket for 5,000 Yen. I told him that he should sell at face values. He became indignant, saying he would find others to buy the ticket.

Even gymnastics looked boring. Without explanation you cannot find out how the games are going on. (I cannot say such a thing. My P.E. teacher took me to Tokyo University of Education at Sugamo. A well-known few-time Olympian and several medalist, Takashi Ono talked to me,

after seeing me perform on the horizontal bar, "How old are you?" I answered, "I am in my first year in high school." He kindly said, "You are not too old to be a good gymnast. I had been on a horizontal bar and he saw me do something. Japanese Olympic gymnasts were real stars. Y. Endo won the gold medal. Near the Olympic gymnasium I saw a Japanese-American guy eat at a restaurant. Japanese gymnastics were far beyond their level. The American level was low and I did not talk to him. I should have. Later I knew he was Makoto Sakamoto, who became a coach for American gymnasts and levelled up the U.S. as No.1 in the 80's. His achievement was so remarkable that he entered a hall of fame.

At the Boxing Arena

Finally I was dispatched to a boxing arena at Korakuen, Suidobashi. I was at the entrance, televised and was asked by my friend from junior high school a day later what I was doing. The interpreter's black blazer uniform attracted attention of others with a collar laced with white. Once, on the train I was asked if I was a table tennis player. I still remember a Philippine plump coach, always greeting us in a loud voice "Konnichiwa (meaning Good Afternoon.)" Boxing games were so much fun. A heavy weight tall boxer from the Soviet Union (now Russia) was very strong and each day he beat his opponents very easily.

There came an American young woman requesting to get an autograph from an American heavy-weight boxer only six-foot tall. At the semi-final game the American boxer beat the Russian easily. His name was Joe Frazier. He became worldly known as a heavy weight champion later beating Muhammed Ali, earlier called Cassius Clay, a light-weight gold medalist in Rome. Unbeaten heavy-weight gold medalist at the Mexico Olympics George Foreman lost the game against the regained Muhammed Ali and later became a world champion again until in his forties. I never expected then that I would see the fierce battles in heavy-weight boxing later. I wished to go to the closing ceremony, but gave up the idea to get paid for the day to become a discussion chief of the English Speaking Society.

Other interpreters helped as volunteers.

There were many good-will interpreters. Some students did their jobs at the Olympic Village. Two time marathon gold medalist, Abebe Bikira lost an engagement ring at the Olympic Village. It was a ring to give to his fiancée. Every staff at the village looked for his lost ring inch by inch and finally found it fortunately. I want to ask many young people to make the upcoming Tokyo Olympics a memorable one. Use English and make some personal memories. Learn English as your mission and use it as often as possible.

Be multi-lingual or even semi-lingual and multi-cultural.

At the time of the Tokyo Olympics in 1964 I was asked by two French Canadians, "Where is oiseau (phonetically, /wazo/)?" It was the time I started to take a French class. After a while I

thought of Oiso (/ohiso/), which can be pronounced in French as oiseau meaning a bird. (Oiso beach is near Kamakura, the first Samurai shogunate government in 1185, 45 km away from Tokyo.)

The official report compiled by the Tokyo Olympic Organizing Committee in 1964 is available at a library at Edogawa University. There it says that Japanese interpreters can speak only one foreign language and Japanese. The organizing committee was at the Akasaka Detached Palace. English was not a common language. French people hated English. The main language for the Olympics is French, because Baron Coubertin started modern Olympics in 1896. Some interpreters were recruited from Athene-Francais and Franco-Japonais Institute. The Committee asked many embassies to help language-wise. It worked nicely. Still, to make up for the insufficiency thirteen European interpreters were called. They looked very brilliant. They spoke four or five languages very fluently. Thus, I was motivated to learn other foreign languages. I came to speak my second foreign language French to some degree. I had chances to interpret Spanish into Japanese and vice versa simultaneously through my experience at manufacturing plants. Portuguese is very much similar to Spanish. Italian is not so different from Spanish. If you acquire basic vocabulary, many words are the same. German is not so difficult as an English speaker in a sense. Through Chinese characters we generally get the meaning of what is written in the Chinese language newspaper. Korean has the same word order. I would recommend all to learn some greeting words and utter them loudly when the chances come. Learn some basic words in various languages.

Try to make the 2020 Olympics to be multi-lingual or semi-lingual and multi-cultural as much as possible. To people around the world we Japanese are looking forward to welcoming all foreign visitors at the Tokyo Olympics and conveying our heart-felt messages to all others who cannot come.

(This was translated into English from my Japanese essay in March, 2017 for people around the world to know of and share my experience as an interpreter for the Tokyo Olympic Organizing Committee in 1964. Some changes were made to my Japanese essay to meet the foreign readers' needs.)