

Should English be the official language at Japanese companies?

Rakuten, the online shopping mall operator, earlier this month held a welcoming ceremony for 480 senior university students who will join the company in spring. President Hiroshi Mikitani spoke in English and so did the students. This was not surprising because Mikitani promised in 2010 to make English the sole company language by 2012.

Still, it was disconcerting to Japanese reporters covering the event. Why should they be at a linguistic disadvantage in their own country?

More and more, English is becoming a career necessity. In many companies, getting hired or promoted increasingly depends on tested and certifiable knowledge of English – even when a person’s professional responsibilities don’t require the language. Has this trend gone too far? The energy it absorbs is easily measured. In 1990, 330,000 Japanese took the TOEIC. In 2010, 1.78 million did. But former Microsoft Japan president Makoto Naruke, himself a fluent English speaker, says “Ninety percent of Japanese don’t need English. The proportion of Japanese who really need English is about 10%. When I heard about Rakuten and Uniqlo adopting English as the official workplace language, I thought, ‘That’s stupid.’”

Recently many companies have learned that English proficiency does not always equal professional proficiency. Sometimes studying English wastes time that could be spent on developing job skills.

The editor of a leading newspaper remarked “We’re seeing more journalists who speak English but lack reporting skills. People who grew up abroad and returned to Japan speaking native-speaker English are highly valued over here, but when they’re sent overseas, they don’t cultivate sources or do legwork. They just translate stuff from the local papers and send it home. They make big money, and it’s a complete waste.”

Then there’s the case of the small company – a manufacturer and exporter of wrapping machines – that was surprised to notice a few years ago they were getting applicants from top universities and with impressive TOEIC scores. At first the president was

happy but he was soon disillusioned. Aside from academic and English credentials these seemingly bright lights proved very dim indeed, incapable of doing anything on their own. “Even after six months”, he says, “they couldn’t do a thing unless you gave them detailed instructions.”

Former NEC executive Tatsuaki Kikuchi recalls being posted to a U.S. subsidiary despite knowing very little English. He communicated by drawing pictures, and the Americans made a point of speaking slowly for his benefit. “We had no problems,” he says breezily.

He’s now a career counselor at a Yokohama University. “I tell my students that the era of mass-production, mass-consumption is ending, and corporations now appreciate that it’s no longer a question of steadily fulfilling a fixed agenda but of rising to new challenges. It’s better to know English than not to know it, but English is just one tool among many.”

Questions

1. Japanese Companies like Rakuten and Uniqlo are making English their official company language. Is this a good idea? Why? Why not?
2. Do you agree with Makoto Naruke that only 10% of Japanese people need to speak English? If you disagree, what percentage do you think is correct?
3. Why do you think Japan is behind other countries in English fluency?
4. Do you think it would be better for Japanese children to study Chinese instead of English? Why? Why not?
5. If you could return to your teenage years, would you spend more time studying English? Something else?
6. Do/did you use English in your job? Do you expect to use it in future?