

# New reasons to learn English

By MAKATO HATTORI

TAKAO Yamamoto is a master of active learning in English. Changing students' pair work partners like a folk dance, the 52-year-old inspires them to learn by themselves while having fun. When he was teaching at a secondary school, this method helped his students pass the Eiken English proficiency test (Japan's most widely used English-language test) and succeed in entrance examinations. The results were so remarkable that teachers from all over Japan came to see his classes.

But a few years ago, when he moved to Nitobe Bunka Junior & Senior High School – a private school where he now teaches – many of his techniques did not work. The students seemed to be wondering, “Why do we need to learn English?” and this proved to be the reason for his failure.

In schools where students and teachers work together for better results on entrance exams, that would have been enough. But in his new school, passing entrance exams was not sufficient motivation to study English.

Why do Japanese children have to learn English? The government and ruling parties in Japan want children to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to survive amidst the ongoing globalisation of the economy and society.

The need to adapt to globalisa-

## Japanese lawmakers should consider AI developments when reforming the country's English language education.

tion had already been recognised at the time of the Ad Hoc Council on Education in the 1980s. Around the turn of the century, English was taught in elementary schools as part of *sogo gakushu* (integrated studies) to encourage international understanding.

Current education reform in Japan was spurred by the “Lehman shock” of 2008 (the bankruptcy of global financial services firm Lehman Brothers Holdings Inc), as many companies suddenly began to look for global human resources. English proficiency was considered essential for global human resources, and the expansion of English education accelerated under political leadership.

A lot of people used to study English to enjoy travelling abroad, but that is not necessarily the case anymore. Travellers can now use inexpensive pocket translators that can handle not only English, but also French, German, South-East Asian languages and many others. Websites in various languages can be converted to Japanese at the click of a button.

One of the reasons I was assigned to write a column for *The Japan News* is because of my English language skills. As a reporter, I spent days thinking up ques-

tions in English to interview kings, presidents, prime ministers and world-class intellectuals. When the interviews were over, I spent more days listening to the tapes, transcribing them, translating them into Japanese and writing the articles.

But now it's different. I don't have to think in English or listen to English tapes and struggle with listening comprehension anymore. Artificial intelligence (AI) does most of the work for me.

According to Japan's new National Courses of Study, which began to be implemented in primary and lower and higher secondary schools from 2020, students are to learn the four English skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking in a balanced manner. If you consider the availability of AI tools, you should change this balance, giving, for example, higher priority to reading so that students can gauge how well their AI tools are working. As experts pointed out even before AI translation came along: If you can read, you can handle the other three skills.

Some say we may have to review the teaching of the Japanese language, because without a sufficient command of one's mother tongue, the proper use of AI tools may not

be possible. We may have to increase the class hours for Japanese language in schools. In lower secondary schools, Japanese language education is given 140 hours a year in the first and second years, the same as English, and 105 hours in the third year, which is less than English.

In the process of revising the National Courses of Study, which I covered as a journalist and took part in as an expert member of the Central Council for Education, AI was not taken into consideration for English education. Programming studies were introduced because of the rapid development of AI technology. But when it comes to English education, experts thought AI translation was not good enough for practical use at that time.

As you may know, now we have pocket translators and other devices that are sometimes referred to as “AI interpreters”. In some schools, these high-tech devices are already being utilised in international exchange studies. Students can use free translation software with PCs and tablets provided to ensure education amidst the Covid-19 crisis.

Since the failure of active learning, Yamamoto has tried to spend more time on having his

students draw a road map to their future every so often, giving them a sense of how they will need English along the way. Some say on the map that they want to interact with people from various cultural backgrounds, while others want to watch foreign movies without the help of subtitles in Japanese. No matter what the motivation is, they enjoy learning English by themselves, using textbooks, dictionaries and AI translation, which they are taught how to use in advance.

Politics always has a crucial role in determining the framework of education in Japan, especially for English. The Council for the Creation of Future Education, chaired by Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and comprising ministers and experts, recently finalised its first education reform proposal. It is mainly for universities and lifelong learning, which are expected to be driving forces for the future of Japan. I hope the way children learn English in the AI age will be discussed more for the next proposal.

To train tough negotiators on the global stage is not the only objective of English education. Children may find various reasons. If they are motivated to learn English for their own reasons, they will have a wider range of choices and the path to the future will be brighter. – The Yomiuri Shimburn/Asia News Network