

## Motivating & Fostering Future Global Communicators in Japan

By Sadaaki Numata



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### Global Human Resources Development

“Global human resources development” is now a buzz-phrase in Japan. In May 2011, the Council for Promotion of Human Resources for Globalization Development was formed by the relevant ministers in the cabinet of the then ruling Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ). This was against the backdrop of deepening concerns that Japan’s global influence was declining as it lagged behind in responding to the challenges of globalization, where the rapid transfer of people, goods, money and information beyond national borders gave rise to untrammelled competition. The triple disaster in March that year of earthquake, tsunami and nuclear power plant accident jolted the Japanese out of their inertia, awakening them to the real danger that Japan, with its rapidly aging society and dwindling birth rate, would be overtaken even further by emerging powers like China and India (*Chart 1*). Of particular concern was Japan’s lack of people equipped with the communication and other skills to vie on a par with their international counterparts on the global scene, especially compared to China and South Korea.

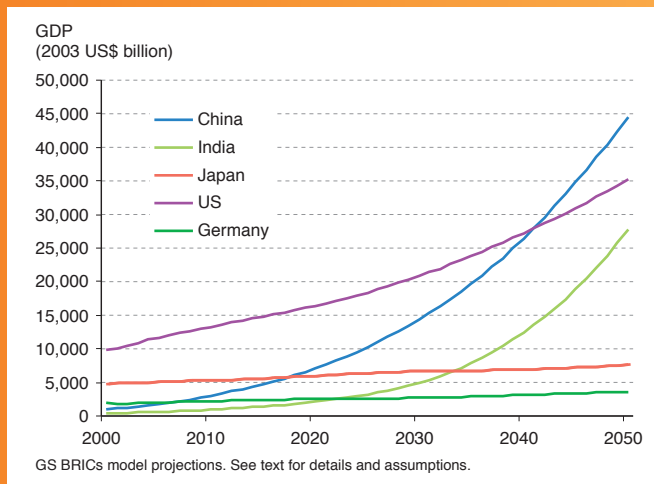
The Ministerial Council’s “Global Human Resources Development Strategy” in June 2012 laid out the following factors as constituting the concept of “global human resources”:

Factor I: Linguistic and communication skills

Factor II: Self-direction and positive outlook, a willingness to tackle challenges, cooperativeness and flexibility, a sense of responsibility and mission

CHART 1

### China Overtakes G3, India Close Behind



Source: Goldman Sachs, “Dreaming with BRICs: The Path to 2050”, October 2003

Factor III: Understanding of other cultures and a sense of identity as a Japanese.

Individuals, Japanese or non-Japanese, who possess all these attributes are not easy to come by. It would be necessary for all the stakeholders in government, business, universities and schools, media and other circles to probe for ways to nurture all these skills and mindsets among the coming generations. Let me focus on the question of global communication skills on the basis of my four decades’ experience as a professional diplomat.

### Words as Weapons

Sir Henry Wotton, a 17th century British diplomat, defined an ambassador as “an honest man sent abroad to lie for the good of his country”. While this may have been true in his age of secret diplomacy and intrigue, it certainly is not the case today. Without integrity, an ambassador loses credibility both at home and abroad. In actual life, an ambassador often finds himself sandwiched between the proverbial rock and hard place, that is, between the pressure from the government and public opinion at home and the pressure from the government and public opinion in his host country. He has to negotiate in secret and act in public to minimize frictions and maximize the areas of convergence. Another adage, which is quite true, is one by Demosthenes, the ancient Greek orator and statesman: “Ambassadors have no battleships at their disposal, or heavy infantry, or fortresses; their weapons are words and opportunities.” Throughout my diplomatic career, I have felt that words do matter and linguistic skills are a much-needed weapon.

### Japan Lagging Behind in English Language Proficiency

TOEFL iBT, an English language proficiency test covering listening, reading, speaking and writing, is used as an admission requirement for non-native English speakers mainly at American universities and colleges. In 2010, the mean score of Japanese test-takers was 70 out of 120 possible, placing them 27th out of 30 Asian countries, way behind South Korea and China (*Table 1*). If Japanese businesspersons are to compete on a par with their South Korean or Chinese counterparts, the TOEFL mean score of 80 may serve as a benchmark. It makes sense to adopt the score of 80 as a benchmark for teachers of English, and to introduce TOEFL into the career civil service examination, as has been suggested of late in the context of the strategy for revitalization of Japan.

### Nurturing Communication Skills — Writing & Interpreting

Out of my experience of using English for more than 50 years, I

TABLE 1

**TOEFL iBT scores & country ranking**

Ranking (Asia)	Country	Score (out of 120)
1	Singapore	98
2	India	92
3	Malaysia, Pakistan, Philippines	88
9	South Korea	81
16	China	77
24	Afghanistan, Mongolia, Vietnam	73
27	Japan	70
28	Laos	67
29	Tajikistan	65
30	Cambodia	63

Source: Test and score data summary for TOEFL Internet-based and paper-based tests; January 2010-December 2010 test data

remember in particular the challenge of writing English. In 1960, at age 17, I found myself at an American prep school (Choate in Connecticut, John F. Kennedy's *alma mater*) as an exchange student under the American Field Service. For the English class every Monday morning, I had to submit a 500-word essay on a given theme. Having experienced hardly any essay writing at my Japanese schools, I had to spend sleepless nights at the dormitory eking out 500 words in English.

Then, in 1966, I arrived at Oxford to read Philosophy, Politics and Economics as an undergraduate, and faced the tutorial system. It is a weekly one-hour, one-on-one session with the tutor, where the student reads out his essay on a pre-assigned question, and the tutor proceeds to comment on, critique or decimate it. Writing these essays of a couple of thousand words was quite a struggle, especially in philosophy, which required logical, precise and succinct argumentation in English. I was so frustrated that I asked my philosophy tutor why I, already a diplomat, would need all that. He said, "Just think of this as an exercise in critical methodology, in using your grey cells. You will find it useful later in your career." He was right. It was in fact a very useful way of learning "critical thinking", the value of which is being increasingly recognized in Japanese educational circles these days. In my mind, the essence of critical thinking is as follows:

- Don't just swallow what someone tells you.
- Keep asking why at least five times until you are satisfied.
- Present your own ideas with logic and reason.

From 1972 to 1982, I acted as the official interpreter in English for our foreign ministers and prime ministers.

Takeo Fukuda (prime minister 1977-78) sometimes used typically Japanese expressions that were not easy to translate. When he visited Malaysia in 1977, the delicate pending issue in his meeting with Prime Minister Hussein Onn was whether Japan would commit itself to a new round of yen credits, on which inter-agency conflicts within the Japanese government had not been resolved to reach a consensus. When the Malaysian prime minister indeed raised the subject, Prime Minister Fukuda looked at me, smiled, and said in Japanese, "*Sore wa ishin denshin desu*" — obviously challenging me to see if I could translate that. I was silent for a few seconds as I groped for the right set of words, and said, "We have a Japanese version of telepathy." Upon

Photo: Corbis images



President Jimmy Carter and Prime Minister Masayoshi Ohira, White House South Lawn, 2 May 1979

hearing this, Prime Minister Hussein Onn was silent for a few seconds, then smiled broadly and said, "Thank you."

Masayoshi Ohira (foreign minister 1972-1974, prime minister 1979-1980) used to mumble in between sentences and was not known to be an eloquent speaker. However, from my experience of interpreting for him often when he was foreign minister, I found his statements to be thoughtful, succinct and easy to translate. His first encounter with President Jimmy Carter in the White House on 2 May 1979 was filled with personal warmth and rapport. President Carter mentioned the desirability of a more equal Japan-US relationship, and the declassified US minutes of the conversation faithfully reproduce my translation of Prime Minister Ohira's response as follows:

"As I look back over the postwar years, our relationship has gradually but steadily developed from a vertical to a horizontal relationship. In all candor, however, our relationship is not fully equal yet. It is important for our people to have an accurate perception of their own strength and responsibility so that they can have influence on a variety of issues in world affairs."

His statement holds true to this day.

### Lessons in Crisis Communication

I spent the better part of the 1990s acting as spokesman for Japan (Foreign Ministry deputy spokesman 1991-1994, deputy head of mission in London 1994-1998, and Foreign Ministry spokesman 1998-2000). In London I was exposed to aggressive Western-style journalism through 126 radio and television interviews with the BBC and other channels. I learned the hard way that the defensive mentality of Japanese Q&A would not work, when clear and crisp messages were called for, especially in times of crisis. On the first day of the Kobe earthquake in January 1995, I had to do 16 interviews. In the absence of any guideline from Tokyo amidst the chaos at home, I decided to go on air with the simple message that it was a cat-and-mouse game with nature; we try our best to escape from nature's claws, but we sometimes get caught.

There are three important lessons to learn from the crisis communication by the Japanese government and Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO) in the wake of the 3/11 nuclear disaster.

Lesson 1: You should jump into the information space without hesitation and inject your messages proactively.

With the revision of the severity of the crisis from Level 5 of the INES rating to Level 7, the belated admission of "meltdown" at Reactors No.

1, 2 and 3, and the delayed release of the SPEEDI (System for Prediction of Environment Emergency Dose Information) data, it seemed that, as time elapsed, veil after veil was lifted to reveal the disturbing truth. The fear that premature release of unverified information would cause panic is understandable, but it would have been better to err on the side of transparency.

Lesson 2: Send unambiguous and forceful messages.

Uncoordinated fragments of information from multiple sources give rise to confusion. A central command post should be set up as soon as a crisis breaks out. It should analyze the situation, prioritize the relevant information, and prepare the key messages for delivery by the responsible leaders.

Lesson 3: Proactively disseminate positive stories abroad.

The 2011 Time 100 listed Dr. Takeshi Kanno, a 31-year old doctor who risked his life looking after his patients, and Mayor Katsunobu Sakurai of Minami Soma, who went on YouTube to make an impassioned plea for help. Tens of thousands of volunteers rushed to the disaster areas from all over Japan and from abroad. These stories, as well as initiatives for reconstruction taken by local communities and young entrepreneurs, provided a positive counterbalance to the general mood of doom and gloom.

## Learning to Speak Out: Speech, Discussion & Debate

Speaking out is an essential part of acting on the global stage. Silence is not necessarily golden; in fact, it can be deadly.

Speechmaking is not a one-way process of making unilateral declarations but a two-way process of interaction between you and the audience. You need to speak loudly so that everyone can hear you. You should have eye contact with your audience, or, if you feel a little diffident about doing that, try to look at their foreheads instead! You should try to speak as spontaneously as possible, using notes instead of reading a fully written-out text. You should also

- (1) Know what you want to say, and frame it in about three message points. (If you try to make too many points, the audience will not remember them.)
- (2) KISS (Keep It Simple and Short)
- (3) Think about what your listeners can absorb. (Do your homework about the knowledge level and interests of your audience.)

Many Japanese delegates at international meetings feel uneasy about

TABLE 2

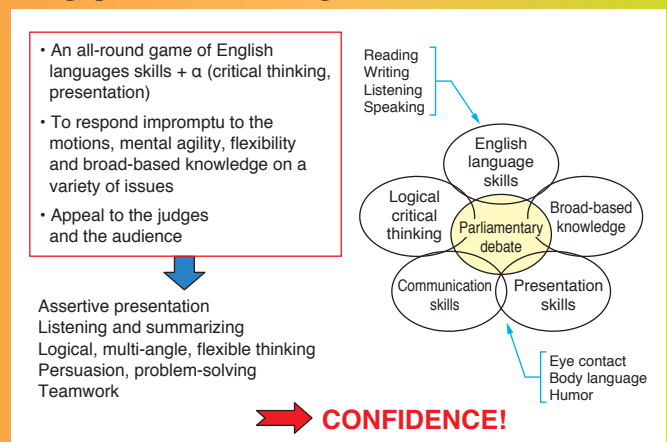
## Academic debate & parliamentary debate

Academic Debate (policy debate)	Parliamentary Debate
Patterned after court of law	Patterned after parliament
Motion given several months in advance	Motion given 15-30 minutes before the debate
Experts' judgment	Ordinary citizens' judgment
Need to conduct detailed research and collect evidence	Impromptu preparation based on common sense
A little formal?	Humor counts

Source: Produced by author

CHART 2

## Why parliamentary debate?



Source: Produced by author

jumping into the discussion that goes on around the table. To this day, I have tried to follow the advice given by Yoshihiko Kobayashi, professor emeritus of French Literature at Tokyo University, in his column "Why Are the Japanese Poor at Foreign Languages?" in the *Asahi Shimbun* of Aug. 20, 1992:

To be listened to in international meetings, you have to:

- Express your own views logically
- Butt in without hesitation
- Say something a little different from others
- Make people laugh every 5 minutes.

The art of debate, or quick and crisp verbal exchanges, forms an important part of public life in Britain, the United States and elsewhere. It is not a quarrel but a game of persuasion. Academic (policy) debate and parliamentary debate are practiced as a means of improving such skills.

Parliamentary debate, patterned after the highly extemporaneous exchanges in the British parliament, is a most effective means of nurturing communication skills that are required in real life. Its merits are summarized in [Chart 2](#). The English-Speaking Union of Japan (ESUJ), of which I am chairman, has been hosting annual university parliamentary debate competitions since 1998 as well as non-student, adult competitions since 2002. Our work over the past 15 years has helped foster a growing cadre of global communicators who can vie on the world stage. The circle is widening these days to high school students as well.

## What It Takes To Be a Global Communicator

The recent discussion on "global human resources development" in Japan has tended to focus on "language education". But linguistic skills are only a tool for communication. Of equal importance is the global mindset required for global communication.

The first component of the mindset is openness and willingness to break out of one's shell. What is troubling in this context is the "inward-looking tendency", especially of the young, in Japan. One example of this is the decline in the number of Japanese students studying abroad from more than 80,000 in 2005 to fewer than 60,000 in 2010.

The second component is respect for diverse values and humanity. As you talk with someone from another part of the world, you should



appreciate that he or she may have a different set of values, hopes and concerns from you. You should be curious and willing to learn about these things, and also have empathy, that is, the ability to put yourself in his or her shoes. The lack of sensitivity in this regard has resulted in “gaffes” by some prominent Japanese personalities, as was the case with Deputy Prime Minister Taro Aso’s comment on the need to “emulate” the Nazi regime’s approach to the Weimar Constitution or Tokyo Governor Naoki Inose’s reference to “fights” and “classes” in Islamic countries in the context of Tokyo’s rivalry with Istanbul in the bid for hosting the 2020 Olympics.

The capacity for intellectual discourse is also a requisite asset. In order to present your point of view with logic and reason, you need not only specialized knowledge in your own field, but also broader knowledge based on extensive learning, as well as critical thinking skills. Liberal arts education is important in this regard. Passion and humor are also essential ingredients of the art of persuasion.

### Role Models

Japan needs global communicators not just in the economic and business fields, but also in political, diplomatic, scientific and cultural fields. Who are the role models that we can look to? The following names have come up in my conversations with my Japanese friends and colleagues.

- International diplomacy:
  - Sadako Ogata, former U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees
  - Yasushi Akashi, former under-secretary general of the United Nations.
- Science:
  - Eiichi Negishi, Nobel laureate in chemistry
  - Shinya Yamanaka, Nobel laureate in physiology or medicine.
- Business:
  - The late Akio Morita, co-founder of Sony Corporation
  - Masayoshi Son, founder and CEO of Softbank.
- Arts and Culture:
  - Haruki Murakami, novelist
  - Seiji Ozawa, conductor.

No recent Japanese political leader has been mentioned. This is perhaps because, as veteran journalist and political and diplomatic commentator Yukio Matsuyama says in his recent book *Kokusaiha Ichidai* (Memoirs of an Internationalist), words matter more in America where “what is spoken is everything” than in Japan where people rely on the tacit communication of *ishin denshin*, as was the case with Prime Minister Fukuda’s response to the Malaysian prime minister.

### Conclusion: Malala Opens Your Eyes to the World

“Global Human Resources Development” has been a hot topic in Japan, but the debate seems to have been trivialized into the topic of how English should be taught in schools. The stress should be on how to foster a broad range of communication skills as a tool for persuading others. It would not be quite fair to place the whole burden on English language teachers at schools. Fostering global communicators should not be confused with the question of raising the level of English language proficiency of the average Japanese. We need to focus our

Photo: Metro Pictures



Malala Yousafzai addresses UN on her 16th birthday on July 12, 2013

target on those people who will really be using English at the forefront of interaction with the outside world, such as politicians, senior officials, international businessmen, journalists and civil society leaders. The key is to motivate enough young people to be active on the global scene.

Young people in Japan can draw inspiration from Malala Yousafzai, a girl from the Swat Valley in Pakistan. For her brave advocacy of education for girls under Taliban rule, she fell victim to an assassination attempt by Taliban gunmen in October 2012. After her recovery in a hospital in Birmingham, England, she spoke on July 12, 2013, her 16th birthday, at the United Nations calling for worldwide access to education:

“Dear friends, on Oct. 9, 2012, the Taliban shot me on the left side of my forehead. They shot my friends, too. They thought that the bullets would silence us, but they failed. And out of that silence came thousands of voices. The terrorists thought they would change my aims and stop my ambitions. But nothing changed in my life except this: weakness, fear and hopelessness died. Strength, power and courage was born.

“...let us pick up our books and our pens, they are the most powerful weapons. One child, one teacher, one book and one pen can change the world. Education is the only solution. Education first.”

Nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize 2013, she has already emerged as a true global communicator. Even though English is not her native language, her message has resonated with the world. The strength of her motivation and passion come from her experience in an environment where people are daily exposed to life and death threats to their security.

As argued above, those young people in Japan who aspire to be global actors will need not just linguistic skills but also a global mindset consisting of openness and willingness to break out of one’s shell, respect for diversity (including curiosity and empathy) and the capacity for intellectual discourse. They should start by casting their eyes beyond Japan to the world.

Malala tells you that there is a whole wide world out there where living safely cannot be taken for granted. She also tells you that if you believe in something and speak out with conviction, you can be heard and influence the world. Listening to her story, trying to understand her people’s plight and empathizing with them would open the way for you to become a global communicator.

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