

Interview with Patrick Wang, English Language Coach

English Capability Vital for Japanese Business Executives to Compete in Age of Globalization

By *Japan SPOTLIGHT*

For most Japanese, it is a challenge to master the English language, as it is so different from Japanese. But in a globalized world where English is the universal language, in particular for business, it will be difficult for business people to survive the intense competition without good English language skills.

Patrick Wang had been living in Japan for a number of years teaching English to business people and has now returned to the United Kingdom, his home country, but continues to teach English to Japanese business executives online. He loves his students and the country. *Japan SPOTLIGHT* held an interview with him recently.

(Interviewed on June 7, 2021)

Introduction

JS: Could you please briefly introduce yourself and your English teaching experience around the world, including Japan?

Wang: I started my career with P&G but in 1993 made a career change and did a training course to become an instructor of English at a famous training institute called International House, which is in London, which happens to be next to the Japan Foundation in Piccadilly. Interestingly, I gave English coaching to the director of the Japan Foundation. On completion of my studies at International House, my wife and I were invited to become English trainers at a language teaching center in Dushanbe, which is the capital of Tajikistan. Tajikistan had just become independent and was going through a civil war at the time, but I believe English teaching can create international understanding so was very committed to supporting my contact there in his project. After Tajikistan I moved to Yekaterinburg in Siberia, where I lectured in English at the polytechnic institute in the city. That is a famous place, because the first president of independent Russia, Boris Yeltsin, studied there. While I was in Yekaterinburg, I was introduced to a visiting school director from Japan. We became friends and he invited me to teach at his school in Ikeda, in Hyogo Prefecture.

In my first year in Japan I taught both at an international school in Ikeda and privately to a variety of students who lived close to my home. We then moved to the Nagai area of southern Osaka where we taught English privately for the next four years, to business people and professionals in the city. I taught privately because I travelled frequently at that time to Tajikistan, as I had work that continued there. Since leaving Japan I have taught in Argentina, Iran, and in Georgia,



Patrick Wang

but I have continued to teach English online to people in Japan.

JS: It is interesting to know what you teach in your English lessons. For example, in the case of Alliance Francaise, a French language school, their program contains not only French grammar or vocabulary but also French culture, tourism and history. In particular, their lessons in literature and theatre seem to have attracted great interest. Do your English lessons include such cultural instruction?

Wang: Actually, I begin my teaching sessions with a needs analysis, where I conduct a level assessment of the student. Then I interview the student to find out what their goals are, and then I design a program to take them from where they are now to help them achieve their goals. Each program is tailor-made. Some Japanese students who deal with foreigners want to introduce themselves using their family name and I can explain that in Western culture we tend to use first names because we are trying to develop a close relationship with people that we meet.

Cultural Diversity

JS: You have taught in many countries and have broad experience with different cultures. Do you think such cultural diversity will be vital to international competitiveness for a nation today?

Wang: Many developed countries like the UK and the United States

have become multicultural by accident rather than by design. After World War II, the UK experienced labor shortages and invited people to come from the Caribbean and South Asia. So we became multicultural but that was not really the strategy, and people did not really think through the consequences. In the US, they have open borders, so they have a very multicultural society. Certain successful sectors within the UK such as finance and fintech are highly multicultural, but there are other sectors like law which are not multicultural. Despite that, English law firms are still very prominent globally. Being multicultural – as in the case of the UK – makes it easier to attract top talent from around the world because if a talented programmer from India considers which country to move to in order to improve his or her opportunities, they will tend to think of a country that speaks English or where English is used in business. Countries like the UK which are multicultural have been very successful in attracting international students, many of whom stay in the country after graduation. Around 20% of UK university students come from overseas.

JS: As you may have already observed, Japan is a homogenous country. But you mentioned in an email that Japan is changing and today Japanese society is increasingly diversified. Also, many Japanese have stayed overseas for a long time and are coming back to Japan to work. Would you agree that society is becoming more diversified?

Wang: Compared to other developed nations, Japan is not very diversified because the population is still 98.1% Japanese. I have noticed an increase in the number of English students I teach in Japan that come from China, South Korea, or other Southeast Asian countries like the Philippines. Compared to other G7 countries, though, the numbers are still very small. There are very few nationals in Japan from Western developed countries working in Japanese companies, and less than 0.5% of Japanese students are international. In terms of the reasons for this, I have worked in several Japanese companies and there is a cultural difference in the work styles, such as the dedication to productivity and customer service. However, some of the elements that I hear about from students such as negative work-life balance and the way that decisions are taken suggest that maybe to become more competitive Japan could develop a more international work culture that would be more attractive to international talent.

JS: Covid-19 has dramatically changed our working lifestyles and we increasingly use more Information Technology (IT). Could this change business culture towards more diversification?

Wang: Yes, I agree with that. Although I am currently based in the UK, I am teaching in Japan and in several other countries and I notice that my students are working for companies in the US, and this pattern will increase because of the new work style developed post-Covid. In terms of Japanese working culture, it is too soon to tell, but most Japanese students are reporting to me that they expect that after the pandemic they will spend more time in remote working, which will save time from their daily commute and should improve their work-life balance.

English Language Retaining Key Role

JS: English is of course the most important language in the globalized world. Do you think this will continue to be as important as it is now in the future?

Wang: I think the trend is for English to become even more important, as it becomes a truly globalized language. Several Japanese students have reported to me that English is becoming the language of their company. This trend can also be seen in Europe; I teach a student who works in a large German corporation. He doesn't live in Germany but tells me that English has become the official language in some companies. Similarly, more and more universities in Europe and Asia are offering their courses in English, and that trend is also coming to Japan as universities attempt to attract more international students.

JS: People tend to feel nostalgic about their own indigenous culture; for example, in the UK, some Welsh people still speak Welsh. Local languages seem to be considered as very important.

Wang: Some people are still nostalgic for the horse and cart; if you travel to the US you will see in Pennsylvania some people still use it for transport, but they are a tiny percentage of the international community. There are more groups of people who try to preserve their language, but history shows that it is very difficult to preserve a culture and language, and I don't think that we need to be afraid of

losing them. I think that English has become a global language because it is an open-source language – anyone can take it and use it and there are no rules that govern how English is used. The grammar rules are simply an attempt to codify or describe how people speak. The Australians have taken English and made it their own, as have the Singaporeans, with their own dialect. The IT industry has its own version of English. I don't think that we need to be afraid of losing our culture or language and trying to protect it, because if we do so we tend to become isolationists and that doesn't work out well.

JS: Logic and logical thinking seems to be an important factor in speaking English to make yourself understood. How do you assess the logical thinking capacity of Japanese people?

Wang: As a native English speaker I am honored that you think English is logical. I wish it were so. The truth is that English is a highly irregular and constantly changing language, and this is due to its history. It started as the language of some Germanic tribes that moved into a Celtic and Roman community in the UK, and soon after that French became the official language of the governing classes of the UK and remained so for 300 years. During this time, English was not generally written by ordinary people and was only spoken by uneducated people, so it explains our highly irregular spelling system. It is also important to understand that English belongs to the Indo-European family of languages which is quite different to the family to which Japanese belongs. For this reason, Japanese who learn English face a big challenge and this requires a lot of time and energy. I wouldn't say that English is more logical than Japanese; the Japanese language uses a different logic to the illogical English language. The sooner Japanese children start to listen to and speak English, the better. I have Japanese students who perhaps have spent time in their childhood in the UK and they speak perfectly. So the challenge that the Japanese face in learning English is more to do with the differences between Japanese and English and the way that English is taught.

JS: We still think that the Japanese aesthetic sense seems to go beyond logic and is difficult to understand for native English speakers.

Wang: As an English teacher, I am conscious of the fact that there are many different styles of learning. Some students like to see something written before they are comfortable saying it, while other

students are more comfortable just listening and getting a feel for the language. It is interesting to reflect on how children learn a language and if we observe children in Japan and a Western country, we will see there is a common way that they learn. They can speak Japanese before they go to school, by listening, and I believe that is how we learn to speak a language and so the focus of teaching our young people to learn English for example must be to help them to listen to material at a young age that they enjoy and which they need and giving them opportunities to use that language and speech.

Japanese Executives More Committed to English Training

JS: You are teaching Japanese business executives. How do you see the difference between current business leaders in Japan and those you taught in the past?

Wang: Japanese business professionals are now more committed to English training and it is common for Human Resource departments to encourage their managers to take English lessons, which are often subsidized. The professionals that I know are highly disciplined and dedicated about their English training and more so than other nationalities I have taught. Japanese rarely cancel their lessons because of other commitments, for example.

View of Japan SPOTLIGHT

JS: Japan SPOTLIGHT is publishing views and opinions regarding economic and political issues. What is your candid impression of our magazine?

Wang: I think it is highly impressive, with some fascinating content and I hope that it is widely read and appreciated.

JS: To a certain extent, we are trying to promote a certain image of Japan, whether directly related to Japanese issues or not. It is rather difficult to do so because we are not so good at expressing ourselves, in other words promoting ourselves.

Wang: Every Japanese citizen is an ambassador for Japan and every citizen who travels overseas is an ambassador. As people from Japan take part in international events, as they relate to other people on the

world stage increasingly through digital ways, I think people will come to appreciate the strengths that Japan has. The Japanese have some unique talents and abilities and as they interact with people on the world stage and international organizations and in business, people will come to appreciate that and to appreciate Japan.

JS: Japanese contemporary civilization, in particular business, is not necessarily a good subject to promote. However, old culture such as Kabuki or Noh or *The Tale of Genji* might be more attractive to people in the rest of the world.

Wang: As I talk with other internationals about my interaction with Japan, people I meet are attracted to Japanese cuisine, technology, anime and manga, and of course there are a lot of people who are interested in visiting Japan. I know tremendous progress has been made but I think Japan has a lot to do to make the country more attractive to foreign tourists.

JS: Due to Covid-19, tourism is not in a good shape. However, maybe after the pandemic is over we will see tourism coming back. We would like to attract as many tourists as possible to Japan and we have many cultural inheritances and sightseeing spots, but we are not so good at promoting them. Should we showcase these things more to the rest of the world? Do you have any views on this?

Wang: I am not an expert on tourism but the country where I now usually live, which is Georgia, is probably in a similar position to Japan. They want to attract more visitors and are working very hard in that respect, making sure that hotel and restaurant staff are all suitably trained in English and that they are able to host guests. I suppose that the Japanese hospitality industry needs to grow in that area, especially outside of the major cities. Also making sure that some of the incredible heritage of Japan such as castles and temples and shrines are easily accessible for non-Japanese. The nature and countryside of Japan is also fascinating, including the beaches which would be highly attractive to visitors.

JS: Should we have more English-speaking people in such Japanese regions with beautiful nature so that foreign tourists could have better guides?

Wang: I don't know whether each prefecture has a tourist board to promote international tourism, for example, but if they do I don't know if they are well-resourced. In the UK, we have the National Trust and English Heritage which help to preserve and promote our cultural heritage and these organizations are very important for encouraging people to visit our country.

The Quality of Japan SPOTLIGHT

JS: How do you think we could improve the quality of Japan SPOTLIGHT?

Wang: We are living in an age where the audio-visual medium is becoming more important, and the printed word is becoming less important. People live their lives at a very fast pace and have less time to sit down and read a long article. As a result, people's concentration spans are shorter. Other business magazines are featuring shorter articles and podcasts and videos.

Japan's Future Contributions to the World

JS: What do you expect Japanese people – young and old – to contribute to the world in future?

Wang: The cultural history of Japan gives its citizens some special characteristics such as self-discipline, thoroughness and a desire for continuous self-improvement. As Japanese individuals take their place as members of international teams they will bless the world with their talents. Japanese cuisine, manga, technology, and customer service have already had a huge influence on the world and will continue to do so.

Humanity is now facing some very big challenges, for example environmental protection and reducing the effects of climate change. I am sure Japanese expertise will help the world to overcome these challenges. **JS**

Written with the cooperation of Joel Challender who is a translator, interpreter, researcher and writer specializing in Japanese disaster preparedness.