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Using English and the Internet could foster a Cultural Revolution in Japan

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This article moves from the family to the societal level to illustrate a dual challenge facing Japan. Judging from the measurable results of the educational system up to now, one might wonder if English and the Internet are welcomed or feared. Do they threaten to invade the inviolate precincts of Japanese culture, or just to rock the boat of some comfortable assumptions and habits on the way to serving genuine needs?

Ever since the ancient Egyptians, adults have been moaning about the younger generation. The latest threat to the sanity of children seems to be electronic games.

We just moved to Osaka, Japan's second largest city, from an outer island. My 12-year-old son is very sociable and has been playing online games that increasingly have a social dimension. While playing the usual combative games, there is a chat function to talk to the other kids in the same game zone. They have handle names and can even make the avatars representing themselves smile :-)

My Japanese son has not been very lonely or missing his friends because he is playing online games with some of the same friends from our previous region. He makes friends with other kids nationally as well in the

Japanese language online game environment. Furthermore, kids from other countries have recently been entering the game area, and posting chat messages in English. Perhaps one of them was American, and Japanese kids would tend to assume that they all were, but actually most of them were Asian kids using English as a foreign language. No one was particularly good at English, but my son was motivated to improve his English for communication. Considering Japan's insularity up to now, this phenomenon of kids spontaneously meeting online internationally could be the beginning of a cultural revolution, yet another educational benefit made possible by the global Internet.

Clearly the younger generation will have a much easier time adjusting psychologically to remote communication, while older people remain fixated on the familiar rituals of face-to-face communication. Face plays a larger role in Japanese communication in any case, adding to the obstacles facing distance education and online communication. For example, two or three Japanese businessmen might visit a client where a Westerner would just telephone or send an e-mail. But where people live in a social reality with human relationships all-important, it would be risky to bypass the usual protocols for the sake of efficiency. Here again, younger people are less enculturated and more flexible to form a new consensus, if only for their own convenience, since traditional East Asian customs are very demanding about obligations toward others. For more details, please see the articles on Asia, cultural/linguistic studies, and online education available at the Bilingualism and Japanology Intersection:
<http://waoe.org/steve/epublist.html>
or in Japanese:
<http://waoe.org/steve/jpublist.html>

"Using English" in the title of this article may

sound very mundane, yet Japanese people are generally unenthusiastic about English as a language for communication. They could say there is no need for it in Japan, because foreigners are relatively few. They also worry that speaking English threatens their cultural solidarity with their peer groups. But language and culture are more separable than they realize. Language can be used as a tool wherever it serves one's purposes without implicating one's culture. My research findings indicate that Japanese-English bilingualism is 'additive' for adult native speakers of either Japanese or English in Japan. That is, they do not lose their cultural identity or anything involuntarily, while they become bicultural to an extent and gain cognitive benefits from the wider perspective.

Nevertheless, cultural attitudes persist that discourage English fluency, and the lack of progress by other Japanese makes the sense of having no need for English a self-fulfilling prophecy for most individuals. In the countryside there is a genuine absence of English-speaking opportunities, so even my sons--born and raised in Japan, hardly ever going abroad, and culturally Japanese--have little more than instrumental motivation for English as a school subject. So generally, to reach the education ministry's recently stated goal of "Japanese with English abilities" would be tantamount to a cultural revolution. Using English and the Internet constitute a dual cultural revolution, yet the two literacies are mutually reinforcing, and are recognized at some level as essential needs for 21st Century Japan.