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Misguided English education initiative

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It is a mystery why those Japanese university graduates who have studied English for 10 years cannot use English properly. Acquiring the ability to use English has been one of the greatest challenges for Japanese since the Meiji Restoration when Japan opened its doors to foreign countries.

With that in mind, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) launched its "Strategic Initiative for Fostering Japanese Who can Use English (SIFJ)" in July.

MEXT's target audience includes both students and teachers. The MEXT minister hopes that at least 10,000 high school students will experience study abroad. He also urges more students to study in English-speaking countries during long school breaks.

The MEXT plans to support this initiative by providing about 400,000 yen for 1,000 high school students who study abroad for longer than three months next year. The MEXT believes that sending students to English-speaking countries where English must be used every day is the easiest way for them to acquire English language skills.

As for the 60,000 English teachers in public junior high and high schools, they are requested to get total immersion training to pass the pre-level 1 English Language Proficiency test, score 550 in TOEFL, or 730 in TOEIC over the next 5 years. If an English teacher decides to take unpaid leave and study at a graduate school abroad for longer than a year, the MEXT will provide them with half of the tuition.

However, this is nothing but a dole-out policy that gives away millions of yen for little if any return on the investment. Since Japan is suffering from a budget crisis, the MEXT should spend our tax money carefully and wisely.

The MEXT has a simple and misguided idea that offering funds to send students and teachers abroad will solve the problem. Why do they have to go abroad to study English when there are more than enough opportunities available in Japan? There are hundreds of books, cassette tapes, videos, CDs, etc, to learn English. CNN and other English-language TV and radio programs are widely available throughout Japan through satellite and cable TV networks. NHK and College of the Air offer excellent programs to learn English through both TV and radio.

Private English schools are readily available, and private universities and English language institutions offer distance-learning programs. Both students and teachers have millions of things they can do here before they need to consider going abroad to study.

What Japanese students and teachers are lacking is not opportunities but incentives to learn English. It is not the MEXT but local teachers and parents who can provide students with those incentives. The role of parents is critical because their way of raising children may decide the learning habits of the next generation.

Rather than sending infants and little children to cram schools and child academies, they should give love and care to their children at home and foster the children's spirits of inquiry that may encourage them to learn English voluntarily. Make kids hungry for knowledge about foreign countries and English usage skills, and they will take the initiative to learn English.

We have been depending on the government for finding the best way to acquire English language skills since the Meiji Restoration. It is time to wake up. We should not waste our tax money. Each one of us, not the government, is responsible for learning English, and only voluntary efforts will bear fruit.

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