



一般社団法人  
日本英語交流連盟  
English-Speaking Union of Japan

## **Report on the ESUJ 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Symposium** **“Using English to Meet Challenges in the World”**

### **About the Symposium**

Commemorating two decades of fostering English communication skills by the English-Speaking Union of Japan, the ESUJ 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Symposium was held on October 10, 2017 at the International House of Japan. Leaders active in diverse fields in Japan offered insights to a full house on best practices to cultivate effective communication skills and a global mindset in Japanese people. In addition to a keynote speech by the Vice Chairman of the ESUJ, the Symposium featured a dynamic panel discussion moderated by the Chairman as well as an active Q&A session.

### **Speakers and Panelists**

Keynote Speaker: Mr. Yasushi Akashi, Vice Chairman, ESUJ; Chairman, International House of Japan; Former Under-Secretary General, United Nations

Panelists: Ms. Simona Leskovar, Ambassador of Slovenia to Japan  
Mr. Jamie Gibbings, Director, English Language Services, British Council  
Dr. Kiyoshi Kurokawa, Professor Emeritus, National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies; Chairman, Health and Global Policy Institute  
Mr. M. James Kondo, Co-Chairman, Silicon Valley Japan Platform; Ex-Chairman, Twitter Japan  
Ms. Aiko Doden, Special Affairs Commentator, Senior Commentator, NHK

Moderator: Mr. Sadaaki Numata, Chairman, ESUJ (Former Ambassador to Canada)

### **Supporters of the ESUJ**

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### Opening Remarks

Mr. Sadaaki Numata, Chairman, ESUJ; former Ambassador of Japan to Canada opened the Symposium by introducing the English-Speaking Union of Japan, a non-profit organization dedicated to familiarizing Japanese people with English as a tool for international communication. The ESUJ has played a pioneering role in promoting parliamentary debate in Japan, and convened the ESUJ Debating Competition 2017 during the weekend prior to the Symposium. Mr. Numata noted that he would ask the panelists to discuss effective means of fostering a global mindset and skills to bolster Japan’s communication on the global stage.

### Keynote Speech

Mr. Yasushi Akashi, Vice Chairman, ESUJ; Chairman, International House of Japan; Former Under-Secretary General, United Nations opened his keynote speech by lamenting that Japanese people are preoccupied with pronunciation when speaking English while neglecting the substance and persuasiveness of their speech. He stressed that having a wide vocabulary, grammar ability, and skillful use of patterns of expression are more important than perfect pronunciation.

Mr. Akashi then spoke about his career serving in the United Nations, where he did not face serious inconvenience in using English as he concentrated on the substance of his speech. His attitude and manners also played a part in his well-received use of English. He noted that “UN English” is being adopted as a lingua franca throughout the world, with a slight tilt toward British English over American English.

Japan has received low ratings for its English ability compared to other countries. In a recent ranking of TOEIC test scores, Japan took 40<sup>th</sup> place out of 48 countries and was downgraded from “moderate proficiency” to “low proficiency.” In connection with its low English ability, Japan slipped from 8<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> place in the most recent Global Competitiveness Report by the World Economic Forum, behind the top spots occupied by Switzerland, the United States, and Singapore respectively. Mr. Akashi pinpointed Japan’s complacency as a country with a mid-size market for its inward-looking tendencies. However, Japan must recognize the relatively small size of its economy and its place in the world, which necessitates reaching out to the global market by using English as a strategic tool.

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Shifting in tone, Mr. Akashi urged the audience not to worry because there are signs of hope. He advised Japanese learners to overcome the culture of shyness and perfectionism that prevails in Japan, with its side effect of overemphasis on pronunciation. Rather than fixating on perfection, Japanese people should work to achieve good dialogue with partners, become more relaxed in interpersonal relationships, and speak up when they might previously have remained silent. He signaled that there was hope in the young generation of Japanese who have higher foreign language abilities and a more aggressive mindset. He also called for a plan of action for higher English proficiency by the 2020 Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games.

### First Panel Discussion

Ms. Simona Leskovar, Ambassador of Slovenia to Japan spoke about her career as a diplomat and her wish of furthering Japan-Slovenia exchange. Given Slovenia’s small size with a population of two million, learning foreign languages, especially English as a lingua franca, is essential with study starting in kindergarten. In fact, most students learn at least two foreign languages, and many times even more. There were fears about the disappearance of the Slovene language, but also faith in its resilience and the benefits of fostering multilingual communication on a global stage.

Ambassador Leskovar stressed that English is not just a communication tool but also a means of thinking from a different perspective, which she knows from her personal experience of coming from a country where foreign languages are a must. She agreed with Mr. Akashi that substance, rather than accent and pronunciation, is of higher importance for speaking a foreign language. Being multilingual has enabled her to achieve better negotiation outcomes, build up her confidence, and become a better decision maker.

Ambassador Leskovar noted that during her time in the U.S., namely Washington D.C. and New York, she met many Japanese diplomats especially in the UN, who were skilled debaters and negotiators in English. However, she was surprised at the low level of English in Japan itself, which, she believes, influences Japan’s efforts abroad, including being represented at the highest levels in international organizations. She closed her remarks by highlighting ‘The EU Comes to Your School’ project, a program that sends EU diplomats on visits to local Japanese high schools in order to introduce Japanese-EU cooperation in various areas and to encourage students to learn foreign languages.

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Dr. Kiyoshi Kurokawa, Professor Emeritus, National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies; Chairman, Health and Global Policy Institute highlighted “shame culture” in the Japanese consciousness as the root cause of difficulties with communication. He agreed with the previous points that Japanese people should not fixate on pronunciation or spelling. He stressed that Japanese should speak up by focusing on *hatsugen* (statements) rather than *hatsuon* (pronunciation).

Dr. Kurokawa’s experience in India convinced him that Japanese people should learn to speak out, as he saw Indians and people of other nationalities with no compunctions. He noted that Amartya Sen stated in his book “the Argumentative Indians” that speaking up is the foundation of democracy. He closed by joking that even the previously inflexible French have begun speaking English some 20-30 years ago, so it is high time for Japanese people to start.

Mr. M. James Kondo, Co-Chairman, Silicon Valley Japan Platform; Ex-Chairman, Twitter Japan opened by stating that he is very optimistic about the young generation of Japan. He noted that each year at the Forum of Young Global Leaders, supported by the World Economic Forum, he sees increasingly engaged, connected, and globally conscious Japanese young people.

Mr. Kondo then addressed the increasing influence of social media, which has both beneficial and detrimental effects. Social media is bringing a voice to the previously voiceless around the globe, from Black Lives Matter in the U.S. to activists in the Middle East. Twitter chose Japan for its first international office, and in 2011 the Great East Japan Earthquake was the most widely-tweeted topic. Twitter is now the favored mode of communication of a U.S. president. The language of social media has been predominantly English, enabling global conversations.

Social media is also enabling increasingly sophisticated methods of shaping public opinion. As more and more real-time data is accumulated, artificial intelligence can understand and predict people’s interests and reactions. Crucially, this data also looks at who people are resonating with, allowing a thorough understanding of one’s audience and skillful analysis of how to influence it. This is causing, or will cause, changes in many industries. For example, criticism of automatic translation has centered on the fact that the translations produced are awkward and fail to resonate with readers. However, AI is improving its ability to accumulate and

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leverage data on readers to create what they will want to read. Mr. Kondo concluded by stating that social media is a highly competitive arena in which Japan needs to participate more aggressively.

Ms. Aiko Doden, Special Affairs Commentator, Senior Commentator, NHK related an experience from her childhood in London. She had been looking forward to learning about the Japan portion of her geography textbook, but was disappointed to find a photograph of a Japanese woman dressed as a geisha eating a big bowl of seaweed for breakfast. Her teacher saw her disappointment and encouraged her to speak in front of the class, a daunting task for her as a non-native speaker.

Her mother encouraged her to keep calm and carry Japanese tea and sweets to class. During her talk, she explained about her father’s hard work and long hours and the costs Japan was paying for modernization, while juxtaposing this with the tea as an example of how Japan was maintaining its traditions.

Ms. Doden’s example showed how Japanese people can speak up with courage and substance. However, she noted that in Japan one is not supposed to speak up and stand out from a crowd, and this is doubly true for women. She stressed that conformity should no longer be the norm. Her experience of speaking up has stuck with her through her career as a journalist, in which one of her roles is to amplify the voices of the voiceless.

Mr. Jamie Gibbings, Director, English Language Services, British Council spoke about his early teaching experience through the JET Programme and his later return to Japan to work in education. As an Assistant Language Teacher, he was struck by how little English was spoken in Japanese classrooms. The focus was on reading and grammatical structures in lieu of communicative skills. Although there are currently still similarities with his experience years ago, there are also encouraging signs of change, including introduction of English at younger ages and test reform.

Mr. Gibbings also noted that Japanese speakers of English are seeing a correlation between their language skills and positive career development. More companies are considering English a requirement rather than a plus. However, some trends suggest that young Japanese are

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growing more insular in their mindset, including a decrease in study abroad. There is a recognition that English and internationalization are important, but at the same time the young generation is not necessarily willing to take on these challenges.

### Second Panel Discussion

In response to a question from Mr. Numata, Mr. Gibbings spoke about English language classrooms and teacher training across Japan. He stated that of the four systems of language of grammar, vocabulary, phonology, and discourse, it is discourse which typically receives the least attention in Japanese EFL classrooms. This is partially because Japanese teachers of English are more comfortable teaching grammar or vocabulary through pre-set teaching materials. However, one could argue that discourse is the most important albeit most difficult system. Discourse encompasses the abilities to coherently organize thoughts, understand conversational conventions, and direct an exchange in the way one would like. Paralinguistic features such as body language also influence how we communicate attitude and express opinion and intention.

In addition, connected speech should be modelled in Japanese classrooms, but teachers often stick with a staccato style of drilling English. Teachers must be trained to not only test speaking and listening skills, but to also teach them. This will necessitate a change in mindset and well-managed test reform. Mr. Akashi highlighted the problem of teacher training in Japan. Primary school teachers are ill prepared to teach English, and it might be more effective to send teachers, rather than children, abroad for language training. He also noted that Japan ranks in the top category of elementary education, but as you go higher up to the level of universities, deficiencies of MEXT (the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology) policy regarding foreign language education become more evident.

The next topic was role models, with an introduction by Mr. Numata of the U.K. team of debaters who took part as adjudicators in the ESUJ Debating Competition 2017. Ms. Leskovar said there is a need for social media role models who can encourage young people to speak out in foreign languages and be active in various debates. She also stressed that despite the metastasis of social media, negotiating skills and in-person dialogue will still be an important part of operational diplomacy. Ms. Doden noted the importance of compellingly relatable role



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models, such as Malala Yousafzai. Although Malala has been elevated to saintly status by some, when she spoke out against the Taliban she served as a role model who exhibited great courage while still a relatable teenager.

Mr. Numata asked how the older generation can speak up through new technology, Mr. Kondo said that the main barrier to IT for older people has been mastering devices and input systems. However, the world is shifting to voice-based communication, which will enable increased access by more closely mimicking speaking to a partner.

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### Q&A Session

A participant stated that Prime Minister Abe should make more of an effort to speak English. Mr. Akashi argued that there are merits on both sides. Although Prime Minister Abe might be able to communicate better with a foreign audience in English, he would not resonate with his Japanese people back home. Mr. Akashi said he wished Japanese politicians were more skillful not only in expressing themselves in Japanese but also in foreign languages, especially with countries with which Japan has sensitive relations.

Dr. Kurokawa emphasized that hierarchy is built into the Japanese language, which hinders free communication and is reflected in the system of what he calls “single-track elites”, leading to scandals such as the Fukushima nuclear accident and Toshiba’s accounting troubles. However, when Japanese people speak in English they become equals, allowing them to break out and question their superiors.

A Canadian participant introduced himself as the principal of the first British Columbia offshore school in Japan, an experiment between MEXT (the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology) and Canada. He asked the panelists to discuss developing bicultural education that preserves the beauty of Japanese culture while also helping young Japanese elevate their voices in the world.

Mr. Kondo pointed out that Japanese people post on social media more than any other people in the world, showing that it is an important platform for vibrant Japanese content. However, Japanese users are distinguished by their tendency to use multiple accounts, some as their public profiles and others to post content on their various interests. This means that Japanese people give themselves multiple “pen names,” and shy from even the possibility of posting to their public profile content that could embarrass their own status or their employer. The lesson is that young Japanese are actually very expressive and multi-dimensional if given a chance.

Ms. Doden stated that she asks students to contemplate how they would start a conversation with students from other countries. She encourages them to include cultural sensitivity in their consideration when deciding on a topic. Dr. Kurokawa stated that Canada has adopted the benefits of British civilization without the focus on hierarchy, and that Japan and Canada can learn from one another.

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### Advice to the Young Generation

Following the Q&A session, Mr. Numata asked the panelists to give advice to the young generation in Japan.

- ☞ Dr. Kurokawa: "Go abroad. If you like it, stay another year! You will begin to see two things. The first is that you will encounter things you never encountered in your own world, and you will experience awakening moments. The second is that as a Japanese person, you will learn to appreciate your own country."
- ☞ Ambassador Leskovar: "I always tell young people to be your own hero. Chase your own dreams, think for yourself, speak your mind, explore, and go abroad as far as possible to understand and engage with others. Don't stay in your comfort zone because there is so much out there."
- ☞ Mr. Kondo: "Develop empathy and understanding for people who are suffering around the world. Traveling to see them is powerful. By understanding that there are terrible things happening, people will begin to care, communicate, and contribute by starting initiatives."
- ☞ Ms. Doden: "When I translated Malala's book, a female high school student asked me, 'What can I do to change the world if I do not have a lot of money or time?' I told her to appreciate the fact that she could go to school. Make the most of the knowledge you learn, follow the news, and think of the questions that need to be asked. And watch NHK!"
- ☞ Mr. Gibbings: "Watch English TV and movies, listen to English music and podcasts, and read English books. It is fun to read material you enjoyed when you were young in another language. Do this on a regular basis, even if it is just a small amount each time."
- ☞ Mr. Akashi: "Learning a language is learning a culture or history. We are enriched through mastering languages. But Japanese people struggle with this. They must overcome difficulties, such as overemphasis on pronunciation or the challenge of learning in rural areas, to study all aspects of language including vocabulary, grammar, and discourse."

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Vice-Chairman, ESUJ; Chairman,  
International House of Japan; Chairman,  
Japanese Council on Population



Ambassador Ms. Simona Leskovar of  
the Republic of Slovenia to Japan

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