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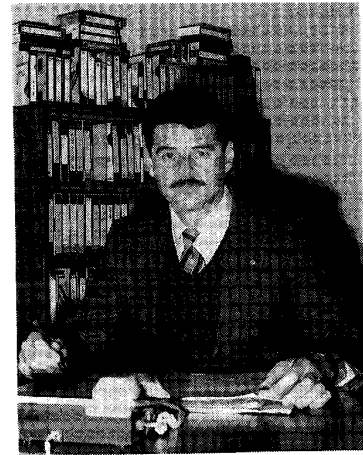
A Japanese Steel Company and the English Language

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In spite of the recent boom in domestic demand for steel, the economic future of Japanese steel companies depends to a large extent on their ability to adapt to the changing market conditions in the outside world. In order to be able to learn directly about such foreign market trends and then to be able to interact satisfactorily with the top people in international business, engineering and research, certain employees in these steel companies must be proficient in the use of the English language.

Because of this, these steel companies have provided many kinds of English-language classes for various types of employees. Some, like Kobe Steel, have their own in-house teaching staff who have tailored their curriculum to the actual language needs of their particular company. The focus of these classes ranges from fairly general 'conversation-type' English to highly specialized courses in such areas as negotiation and technical report writing. Whether these classes are effective or not depends not only on the skill of the teacher and the motivation of the students, but also on whether the students can attend class regularly and whether they will actually be using the English they learn in class in their jobs at some not too distant stage. Sometimes, the relation between the in-house English-language class and the outside business world can be pretty tenuous.

However, Kobe Steel has daily contact in English with foreign companies through many kinds of written communication, and a considerable number of its employees make speeches in English at international conferences, both in Japan and all over the world. With these two kinds of interaction, the Kobe Steel employees are involved in a very specific piece of



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work in English, and they can be sure that the help they receive from the in-house native speakers with this work will definitely be of benefit to them and to the company. For this reason, Kobe Steel has recently been stressing the importance of seeking native-speaker help from the company's teachers whenever employees are working on written material or speeches in English.

I would now like to give some reasons as to why it is so important for the company that its employees do seek such help. In the case of written material, I have seldom seen any writing by a non-native speaker which could not be improved in some way by a native speaker. Many non-native speakers from various countries can write very good English, but perhaps just one or two phrases are a little 'unnatural', and these can easily be noticed by a native speaker. Thus, most people can benefit from native-speaker help, and even certain of Kobe Steel's directors who are very fluent in spoken English are willing to ask us to check their writing for any irregularities.

When Kobe Steel employees commit their English to paper, such writing can be kept for many years in another company or a university library. As such, the company's image is on 'permanent record' wherever the writing is kept, and, if the writing is of poor quality, people who read it will also think that the company itself is

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of poor quality. Thus, bad English written ten years ago without any correction by a native speaker may still somewhere be giving Kobe Steel a bad image, and, even though both the company and the standard of its English may have improved in that time, perhaps that ten-year-old piece of writing still represents the image of the company somewhere in the world.

Equally as important as the company's image are cost considerations. A company's researchers often spend long hours and a lot of the company's money on their piece of research. When publishing the results of their research in English, this may represent the climax of a very arduous team effort, and it may be an excellent chance to show the outside world how good the company's researchers are. In spite of this, some researchers are willing to spend only a minimal amount of time on producing a good written record of their research in English, and, therefore, the quality of their material to be published in English does not reflect the level of their research. This seems to be rather a shame since producing a good report does not take as long as carrying out good research. A foreign team of researchers might feel that publishing their research results was the highlight of their career, but I often feel that Japanese researchers consider that producing a good report in English is troublesome and not worth the bother compared with other work they have to do.

When a company employee gives a speech at an international conference, considerations of image and cost effectiveness are again extremely important. When the employee is actually standing in front of the audience, he represents his company in the minds and the eyes of those present. If he gives an amateur performance, the audience will think that his company is also amateur. I use the word 'performance' deliberately because giving a speech is a kind of performance, and, at Kobe Steel, the teachers spend a lot of their time helping the speakers to project the modern, dynamic image of a forward-looking company. We also give them

advice on such non-linguistic areas as eye-contact, the use of the pointer and deportment. With time, we can help people with a fairly low level of general English to make a professional speech, but even the best speakers may have trouble with the question and answer session, which often follows the speech itself. We can give the person practice in answering certain questions, which the speaker can predict will be asked, based on his own knowledge of his field of study and on what he feels the audience might be interested in. We can also teach the person various strategies for handling situations where he does not understand a particular question or the questioner speaks too quickly. With a few hours' practice, we can give most speakers confidence to give at least a reasonably professional performance, if not a very professional one.

Sending someone from Japan to the U. S. A. or Europe is very costly, and, considering the expense involved, I often think that a company does not get full value for money. Some presenters tend to think that getting through the thirty minutes of the speech and the question-and-answer session is all that is required of them at the conference they attend. This is only the formal reason for their being at the conference. I often feel that chances to make important contacts with potential customers and possibly with world-leaders in the employees' own technical field are lost and that Japanese participants at international conferences should consider more seriously the importance of the social side of the event. Therefore, we advise a Kobe Steel presenter to introduce himself to different people and to give them his name card and offer to send these people brochures or any other information they need when he gets back from the conference. Thus, since the company has, in some cases, sent him to the other side of the world, the presenter should do all he can to meet as many people as possible and project a friendly and professional image to everyone he meets.

When preparing written material and speeches, many people often underestimate the effect of good visuals on a reader or listener. Too often, the content, timing and artistic impression of a slide or overhead projection sheet is not given enough attention. A visual in a written paper may contain more complicated data than a visual designed to accompany a speech because in the former case a reader has unlimited time to study the information. A visual in a speech, on the other hand, is often on display for only a few seconds, and, therefore, it must be much simpler. The data contained in the visual should be immediately clear and should be relevant to the stage of the speech in which it appears. Good visuals can greatly enhance the overall effect of writing or speeches, and, therefore, the cost of using professionally-produced color slides may be worth the investment when considering that shoddy or hastily-prepared visuals may actually detract from the effect desired by the writer or speaker.

In conclusion, I would like to say that

native-speaker readers or audiences are very sensitive to mistakes in the use of their own language and are very intolerant to non-native speakers who have obviously not taken the time to have their writing checked by a native speaker or to practise their speeches before taking part in an international conference. Some people in Japanese companies are incredibly casual in their preparation for making a speech in English at prestigious conferences and universities. Because of this, I would strongly recommend that those concerned with international business in Japanese companies sit down and think whether their colleagues are doing enough to make their English-language work as effective as it could be. They will find that, by working with native speakers on their English-language writing and speeches, they will hopefully make their own jobs easier and even more enjoyable, as well as making their work that much more professional and improving the international image of their company.