Govt plans to boost English-speaking skills

The Yomiuri Shimbun

The Education, Science and Technology Ministry on Thursday put the final touches on a strategic plan to encourage school students to speak English in international settings, sources said.

The plan would require anyone who has finished middle school to have acquired English-speaking skills comparable to the third grade of the English proficiency tests sponsored by the Society for Testing English Proficiency (STEP).

The ministry also encourages students to aim at developing the speaking skills required to pass at least the second or semi-second levels of the STEP test by the time they graduate from high school.

The ministry also advises introducing classes of English as a foreign language in elementary schools. It has suggested establishing a panel of experts to study the matter, in the hope of coming up with a definite proposal within three years.

Another suggestion has been to introduce English listening tests held by the National Center for University Entrance Examination by fiscal 2006, in an effort to improve listening skills.

Japanese English education—especially at the college entrance level—has been criticized for putting too much emphasis on reading and writing instead of listening and speaking.

The ministry also hopes to increase the number of assistant language teachers (ALTs) from English-speaking countries, including the United States, Canada, Britain, Australia and New Zealand.

"We want to increase the number of class units in which native-speaking teachers can team-teach with Japanese English teachers to more than a unit a week. For that to happen, we need at least 11,500 ALTs from around the world," the official said.