Schools suit English classes to ability

Yomiuri Shimbun

An increasing number of universities and colleges across the nation have started to offer English-language classes designed to accommodate non-English major and freshman students with varying degrees of English ability.

Schools that have introduced ability-based systems include Ryukoku University, a private university in Kyoto; state-run Hiroshima University; and Sophia University, a private university in Tokyo.

Multilevel classes were introduced because an increasing number of firms require the graduates they will hire for career positions to have a good command of English.

As part of a fresh approach to English-language education, universities appear to be adopting a policy of providing English courses that better cater to students' individual needs.

At Sophia University, 2,075 freshmen—excluding students in the comparative culture faculty and the department of English literature—took screening tests in April to group them according to their English-language ability.

The tests comprised 100 questions in total, covering listening, reading comprehension and vocabulary. Only 19 percent of examinees achieved scores that placed them in the advanced level, while 48 percent scored in the intermediate range and the remaining 33 percent of students were relegated to the beginner and basic levels.

Advanced-level students are deemed capable of participating in academic lectures in English.

The students were placed in 60 different classes after the screening tests.

"If you put all students in the same class, regardless of their abilities, students who have high competency levels tend to lose interest and beginners will not be able to keep up," Sophia University President William Currie said. "We must aim for an educational environment in which all individual students can grow."

Such an approach is commonplace at U.S. and European universities, he added.

A 20-year-old male physics major commented: "My weakness (in English) is grammar, so I'm glad they put me in a beginner class. I think I can improve my English ability by studying the materials they have given me."

Sophia University recently has been encouraging its students to acquire a competency in English, emphasizing the fact that English is a necessary skill in many professions. Last year, the university established the Center for the Teaching of Foreign Languages in General Education.

"As Japanese society becomes increasingly internationalized, impractical English education that does nothing to improve students' ability is a waste of time," said Kensaku Yoshida, the center's director.

"We are positive that the new system will prove beneficial to students," Yoshida added.

At Ryukoku University, all freshman students this year were required to take the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) on their second day of enrollment, which was the day after the initiation ceremony.

According to their results in the test, students were divided into four levels.

The levels varied from returning students with a command of about 3,000 words to students with a vocabulary of barely 1,000 words.

The textbooks used and the pace at which classes are taught differ according to students' ability.

The university tested the system on students in the business and management faculty last year. The students showed a marked improvement in English compared with students enrolled in other faculties.

Other private institutions, such as Sanyo Gakuin University in Okayama and Keisen Jogakuen College in Tama, Tokyo, have ability-based classes.

At Hiroshima University, students have been divided into standard and advanced levels since 1997. The students are taught the four skills of English—listening, reading, writing and speaking—at least once a week.

Some language-teaching experts have expressed reservations about grouping students according to ability. They say it makes grading of students difficult and decreases the level of competition among students.

However, a spokesperson at the Japan Association of Private Colleges and Universities said the practice of teaching English according to students' English ability is definitely increasing in private universities and colleges across the country.