Untying tongues to put English into Japanese

Everyone agreed that years of rote memorization and drills do not equip Japanese to converse in English. So what is the solution?

By JEFF MORIWICH
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It's Tuesday, so Moe Hiranaka and Yuichi Takahashi sit at their desks in the back of the room and talk in class.

"Two boys are playing tennis," "A cat is crossing the street." "Oh no. I have a dog." "Yeah...OK, no problem." "She is riding a bicycle." It's a rather inane conversation, but a conversation nonetheless. And it goes on this way as Moe and Yuichi sort out the differences in the photocopied street scenes they hold in their hands.

The din grows around them as other students begin their own comparisons. In Jerry Winn's English class at Tokyo's metropolitan Kogei High School, Tuesdays are a day for talking—and that sets them apart not only from the other days of the week, but from most days in most English classes in Japan.

Winn doesn't claim to have a perfect formula, many students in his first-year classes just compare their pictures using Japanese. In three successive classes, he calls out in the midst of the soft hum of voices to remind the students still scribbling on their papers that this is supposed to be an oral exercise. "Don't write," he shouts. "Talk!"

Winn's co-teacher, Kaori Chihara, says many students are shy and feel they haven't been any good at English since junior high. Most, like first-year student Aki Oto, understand English questions from a reporter—but answer in Japanese.

An oral exercise would be fun if I were fluent, she says, but right now I never use it. Writing is easier. You can just memorize, but speaking is another story. It's embarrassing, says others. And so difficult.

Speechless
From the Education Ministry to teachers and their students, there is a shared sense that something is quite wrong with the way many Japanese learn English. In spite of years of compulsory study for every schoolchild, for instance, Japan ranks near the bottom of the world in the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL)—a global standard for English proficiency.

"By all measures of what it takes to succeed in the real world in English," said Murray Cameron, General Manager of the English Language Education Council (ELEC) in Tokyo, "the Japanese are not there."

Specifically, there is a growing consensus that many Japanese are deficient in the skills of English conversation—a primary component of tests like the TOEFL and now, in an age of increasing travel and telecommunications, a primary way in which Japanese must interact with the rest of the world.

"There's too much emphasis on simply teaching the form of the language, the grammar, the vocabulary, the pronunciation," said Kensaku Yoshida, a professor of English at Sophia University. "Simply teaching the skills and simply teaching the formal aspects of the language is not enough for people to communicate with each other."

A quick glance at the workshops scheduled this morning at the Japan Association for Language Teaching (JALT) conference in Maebashi, Gunma Prefecture, suggests a pervasive theme: "Increasing Students' Verbal Participation"; "Energizing Conversations"; "Sprangboard to Real World English"; "Teaching Public Speaking."

For ELFC's Cameron, the Japanese teaching establishment in Japan, teaching students to talk casually and confidently is perhaps the first order of business at the turn of the century.

A number of culprits are fingered for their role in denying conversation skills an adequate place in Japan's English classrooms. An historical explanation holds that at least until the last 50 years or so, Japan's preferred method of learning about the outside world was through written works, not intercultural dialogue. A more contemporary view suggests that the business culture in Japan still discourages language facility because posts abroad or in international divisions are often considered demotions. Others point out that many Japanese who teach English are not themselves comfortable with English conversation.

Perhaps the most often-cited factor is the design of college entrance examinations. In reformers' circles, the English exams are notorious for their emphasis on rote memorization and exceedingly difficult subject matter. Many say these qualities have inspired a high school curriculum built primarily around expected exam material.

"It really is horrible to think that large numbers of students are spending probably hundreds of hours studying materials that is of very little practical benefit to them in terms of understanding English in the real world," said ELFC's Cameron.

Cameron says there is "a