huge gap" between the basic conversational English students learn in junior high school and the exam-prep curriculum of many high school classes.

"They get on an elevator and they're suddenly taken up to the 15th floor from about the 3rd floor," Cameron said, "and they're expected to learn massive numbers of vocabulary items and to read very complex material. Now that, it seems to me, is a recipe for disaster.

Cameron estimates most of his students, usually college-educated adults, know about half of the 3,000-word vocabulary used in everyday English conversation.

Talking the talk

"Speaking to a group of prospective English teachers at Tsuda College in suburban Tokyo Oct. 1, Professor Richard Allwright of Britain's Lancaster University stepped to the blackboard and began a list of things that happen in a language class.

"Translation and "imitate pronunciation of text" were suggested by the audience. In a moment, "small group discussion and "games" had also joined the list—and 21-year-old Den Alcine raised her hand.

"I'm confused," she said. "In my experience, normal activities involve learning new words, using the textbook, and maybe a bit of speaking. But these things about discussion, debate, and so on are very rare, very unusual to me."

Such interactive activities are still far from standard in Japan, but new techniques are beginning to appear—particularly, it seems, in private institutions and in the growing number of classrooms where native English-speakers play a prominent role.

Creating a classroom conducive to conversation doesn't require abandoning the current system, according to Su Carberry of Obihiro College in suburban Tokyo.

"Even grammar and studying for an entrance exam can be taught in an interactive way," she said. Carberry is among a team of faculty from Obihiro overseeing the development of an experimental new English curriculum at affiliated Obihiro High School.

Action and noise are key elements of having students speak comfortably in the Obihiro classrooms. It's OK for students to spend 20 minutes shouting and moving around while they're doing an activity," Carberry said. Placing desks in unorthodox formations and designing activities for students to work in small groups are also part of the Obihiro formula.

But Carberry said that "whenever I've shown these things to Japanese teachers, it's like 'Wow! Can we do this?'

For Murray Cameron of the English Language Education Council, teaching the Japanese to converse comfortably and "bringing reality into Japan" does small inaugurating a new system of sorts.

"Don't teach the English itself," Cameron said. "Teach the ideas and information and how to process it in English, and everything will start to fall into place.

"There's no point in teaching grammar rules, there's no point in teaching chunks of vocabulary in isolation," he continued. "You have to teach the ideas within which those things are used in order for people to properly acquire a language in any meaningful way."

With his "information-rich" method, Cameron gives students lots of multimedia material about serious-but-digestible topics, such as an environmental issue.

This material often includes the opportunity to hear a native speaker discuss the subject in English. Students must then come to class and talk about the topic—not from memorization, but in casual style in a group setting.

Professor Ken Yoshida also sees the value in the missing link. He says students need to experience English as "a tool for intercultural understanding" by using it to debate political, social, or personal issues in the classroom environment.

"The aspect of self-expression is going to be very important in order to bring the Japanese to a point where they are really going to be able to communicate and understand the feelings of people from other cultures—and for having (others) understand the feelings of the Japanese," Yoshida said.

Many, like Professor Richard Allwright, think classroom habits are unlikely to change on a broad scale if university exams themselves are not fundamentally altered.

Some believe this pressure may eventually come from above, from companies who need more competent English speakers to compete globally.

But a powerful force for change might also come from below, from children with changing aspirations and broader horizons than the generation before.

Such is the case with Hayami Hazama, who has finished deconstructing the details of her partner's picture in Jerry Winn's English class.

"I use a computer, so English is very important," she says, in English. "I want to be a programmer."