Some colleges

At a time when businesses are starting to introduce merit-based employee evaluation, universities are increasingly being urged to introduce English education programs that teach practical, utilitarian English.

And some universities seem to be doing a good job, a prime example being Aizu University in Aizu-Wakamatsu, Fukushima Prefecture. Many English language educators are visiting the campus to study its unique approach.

Prof. Subhash Bhalla teaches a course in database system to Aizu seniors. In a recent class, held in a room resembling a small theater, Bhalla's lecture was conducted entirely in English to about 20 students. Written across the blackboard was "How to make data safe."

Established by Fukushima Prefecture, Aizu specializes in computer science and engineering and has about 1,070 students. Its stated educational goal is "fostering computer scientists who can work at the cutting edge of technology." And for this university, English is a tool needed to realize this goal.

"A lot of highly technological information is only available in English, and English is indispensable for anyone who works in computer-related industry," said Aizu President Shotaro Noguchi. "English education at Aizu concentrates on teaching to read faster, to write technical documents, to make presentations and to debate. Obviously, you don't need Shakespearean English here."

Of the 94-strong staff at Aizu, 42 are foreign nationals, including Americans, Russians and Chinese. When professors meet, discussions are conducted in English or Japanese.

On top of that, important events, such as graduation ceremonies, are conducted in English. From the junior year up, more than half of the sessions, including courses and seminars, are taught by non-Japanese teachers, which means students must communicate with them in English, whether orally or using e-mail—and, of course, graduate theses must be submitted in English. Thus, for junior and senior students, most of their time at Aizu is spent reading, writing, listening and talking in English.

Not surprisingly, many students have had a hard time.

"When I first came, I didn't even understand what the teacher was saying in class," said Shinichiro Saecki, 22, now a first-year master's student. "But if you want to learn about computers here, you just have to learn to use English."

In addition, Aizu tries to be practical in its compulsory English courses. And its English teachers are strict enough that "many" students flunk, according to university officials. These courses are taught by 11 teachers, 10 of whom are native English speakers with English-teaching qualifications.

The university's efforts are attracting attention from businesses: a staggering 853 companies offered 4,000 positions. The graduates lead technology companies such as Hitachi.

Resetting the study

While Aizu uses English in computer science, Tokyo's "completely different approach" resets the students' thinking to a totally different learning environment.

Freshmen are given a series of lectures by native English speakers who require them to record a week before each particular segment, and can understand, which will engage in activities and discussion.

The method was brought by Gregory Clark, who believes indispensable for improvement.

"At first, I just had to listen to the CD again and again to get used to this subtle dif..."