The English language is called "the virtual standard international language" because of its role in communication among nonnative English speakers, and its growing popularity as the Internet language of choice. While Japan is trying to adapt to an increasingly globalized environment, there is a growing fear that the country may be left behind without skilled speakers of English. And the Japanese public as a whole has an inferiority complex when it comes to using the language. So why don't we have skilled English speakers? And how should English be taught to meet the needs on hand? Yomiuri Shimbun Staff Writers Natsuki Komatsu and Masanori Hironaka explored the issues by looking into English education at some of the nation's colleges.

Like Aizu, Tama concentrates on a single academic area—management information. And Tama's English education is specifically targeted at business communication.

"I want our students to be able to, for example, talk about stocks in casual conversations in English," said Sonoko Nakamura, a Tama assistant professor who teaches English.

Motivation and needs a key

We have looked at two universities that specialize in specific areas, where it is relatively easy to set specific aims for teaching English. For universities with a variety of academic areas to deal with, however, it is not as easy to set a uniform goal. The key, therefore, is maintaining students' motivation.

Thus, Tokyo's Waseda University takes a different approach to English education from Aizu or Tama. Once every week, students of Waseda's nonscientific departments meet for a "comprehensive English" class, where a teleconference system allows Waseda students to communicate with their counterparts at universities abroad. In one such class they communicated with students at South Korea's Kangwon National University.

In this class, students on both sides were speaking English. They were not fluent, but they were showing a spontaneous attitude toward communicating, while discussing anything from soccer's World Cup, to be cohosted by Japan and South Korea, to their prospects after graduation. All the while an amicable, enthusiastic atmosphere prevailed.

"In the past, students sat face-to-face with English texts in class. Now we face other students," Hitomi Baba, a sophomore of Waseda's School of Law, said. "What's great about this class is that students with lower English skills can use body language and manage to overcome their weakness. That gives us the feeling that we are learning real, living English."

According to one professor, the benefit of the class is that it allows the Japanese students to talk to foreign students who are nonnative English speakers, thus eliminating the students' inferiority complex. Since the South Korean students' level is on a par with the Waseda students, it has an added benefit of motivating both sides to outspoken the other in English.

University students in Japan generally do not need to use English in their day-to-day communication, and that makes it difficult to motivate students for learning English. Waseda is tackling this problem directly.

"If you can give students opportunities to use English on campus, or create situations where they need to use English, they will naturally acquire English communication skills," Masahisa Hirano, professor of applied linguistics at Waseda's School of Literature, said.