

English Conversation: Fever on the Rise

By Fumio Igarashi

At 7:00 a.m. on any weekday morning, a large number of neatly dressed businessmen can be seen hurrying into the Kanda Institute of Foreign Languages near Tokyo's business center. The purpose: to attend a one-hour early morning English conversation class starting at 7:30 a.m.

On arrival at the school, the students quietly sit and watch the CNN news on the TV screen in the lobby to help them prepare for their English conversation lesson. After the lesson, they are served a light breakfast of rolls and coffee. At the breakfast table, too, they talk with one another in English before rushing off to work.

The tuition fee for the three-month weekday early morning course is ¥60,000 (about \$400 at the rate of ¥150/\$). When the school commenced the early morning course two years ago, there were only 30 students. The class has now swollen to 180 pupils. The institute says the class is full and no more applications can be accepted.

It's interesting to note that senior managers are among those attending the class, feeling ashamed of not being able to speak English. None of their subordinates know they are taking the early morning lessons at the Kanda Institute. The class also includes trading company staff members who are paying the tuition fee out of their own pocket because they can't qualify for overseas assignments without passing in-house English exams.

An official of the Tokyo branch of a prefectural government in the Tohoku region (northern Honshu) says he rises early and attends the class, with his colleagues, to brush up his English. In charge of attracting foreign business to his prefecture, he has a good reason for wanting to learn English: He has to contact foreign enterprises directly and try to persuade them to open factories in his prefecture.

An English conversation boom, the third since World War II, is now sweeping across Japan. The Tokyo telephone directory lists 1,286 English conversation



Interest in English conversation is surging partly due to the high yen.

Photo: The Berlitz Schools of Languages K.K.

schools and other foreign language schools. This means there is an English school of sorts for every 10,000 people in Tokyo, including babies and old people. The number has been increasing by 100 schools a year in recent years.

The first English conversation boom in Japan occurred during the American occupation following the end of the war. One of the best-sellers in 1945 was a small book called *Japanese-American Conversation Handbook*. Then came the second boom around the time of the 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games. The present boom is the third, according to English school operators.

Economics fuels the fever

One of the major reasons for this third wave of interest in English conversation is the yen's appreciation. The only way for producers of export goods to make profits under the strong yen is to produce overseas. Ironically, this requires their staff—everyone from management to workers—to learn to speak English.

The growth of the Tokyo money market into a giant market comparable with those in New York and London is also fueling the English conversation fad. Nowadays, one foreign business after another is advancing into Japan, with the result that the number of foreign residents in Tokyo is sharply on the increase.

Ten years ago, foreigners were seldom seen on Tokyo's trains. Now it's not unusual to see several overseas visitors in each train car. The day is only just around the corner, it seems, when station personnel and kiosk attendants will find it essential to speak English.

C. Itoh & Co., which has top sales among Japan's *sogo shosha* (general trading companies), adopted a unique, strict policy for its new recruits this year. This "no English, no promotion" policy has had a significant impact on the English conversation fever.

Several years ago, the company initiated a one-hour English class for new recruits to attend before work. Much to its dissatisfaction, however, the performance of young participants turned out to be very poor. Nearly 20% of the new employees failed to pass the mid-level in-house English exam even after four years. The new policy is, so to speak, shock treatment for these dropouts. It disqualifies them from promotion from Class 3 to Class 2, which normally takes place in the fifth year of service, unless they pass the exam.

A public relations official for C. Itoh explains that trading companies, which used to have exports as their main line of business, are being obliged to switch to imports as a result of the yen's appreciation. Even personnel in domestic branches, who didn't previously need English, now find the language vital for doing import business. One recent tendency is for those with a good command of English to be appointed as domestic branch managers after returning from their overseas assignments. In this age of the strong yen, every employee of a *sogo shosha* must be able to use English if he is to do a good job.

This resolute policy of C. Itoh has caused ripples among first-rate enterprises keen for their employees to speak English. Taking a leaf out of C. Itoh's book, some are already beginning to take into account ability in spoken English when promoting their personnel.

For manufacturers trying to go overseas for production, it is urgent to train personnel to have a good command of spoken English. One example is Toyota Motor Corp., which plans to start production in Kentucky in the United States and in Ontario, Canada. While hundreds of Toyota engineers and factory training officers are going to the overseas plants, Americans and Canadians, hired as foremen there, have been undergoing training at Toyota plants in Japan since this summer to master Toyota's production systems. To teach these foreign personnel, Japanese training staff have been coached in English since early this year.

As its business operations become international, Toyota has created an "international talent" registration system, under which 2,300 persons engaged in sales, accounting, production technology and plant management are registered. These registered staff are given priority in receiving the company's study privileges, called SEPT (Special English Training Program of Toyota). SEPT is so organized as to provide 100 hours of lessons to registered staff during their working hours. A total of 600 staff members, more than double the number several years ago, are to take the lessons this year.

To help employees improve their English, such top-notch enterprises are prepared to spend considerable sums. No company is willing to disclose how much it is spending, but not a few seem to be forking out somewhere between ¥100 million and ¥200 million a year. New ventures are even springing up to cash in on this study market. They specialize in providing English conversation classes for company employees.

A growing industry

Established last year to sell English training expertise, Sumikin-Intercom, Inc. was formerly the international education division of Sumitomo Metal Industries, Ltd., a major metal producer. With a dedicated lecturing staff of 19 native speakers, the company arranges English training programs under contract with about 10 companies, including auto parts makers, shipping firms and Sumitomo group companies. Its sales goal this year: ¥120 million.

Fees for dispatching lecturers vary according to the proficiency level of students. They range between ¥13,000 and ¥17,000 per hour per teacher. The fee for a 200-hour curriculum for 10 persons, for instance, works out at about ¥3 million. Says Koji Akizawa, director of Sumikin-Intercom, "If the yen spurts above the

¥140 level, labor will cost less in the United States than in Japan. If that happens, even those companies that have never before thought of production in the United States will do so. I think more Japanese corporations will come to give their employees English lessons."

There are certainly prospects that the English conversation industry in Japan will grow further, but no reliable statistics are available about how large the market is. Some describe it as a ¥10 trillion market comprising not only English lessons for corporations but also English conversation schools for the public, correspondence courses and English conversation manuals on sale at bookstores. Others are far more conservative, estimating sales at only ¥100 billion. Uncertainty still shrouds the industry.

According to Ikuo Koike, professor of English and linguistics at Keio University and vice president of the Japan Association of College English Teachers, 12 million persons (including students), or one out of every 10 in the population, are learning English in some way in Japan.

As if reflecting this incredibly large figure, Linguaphone, Japan Ltd., a well-established provider of English-language study materials, says Japan accounts for about one-half of the global demand for English-language study materials. Explaining this huge market, a Linguaphone executive says, "The English market in Japan is called a 'need to study' market. Japanese feel coerced to learn English. To foreigners it sounds strange. Even more strange is that very few Japanese are good at English despite their extraordinary dedication to learning the language."

In fact, university graduates when they enter companies have already learned English for eight to 10 years. And yet almost all of them are unable to use English in their assignments unless they undergo retraining. In school education, so much emphasis is placed on reading and writing that speaking and hearing skills are almost neglected.

The debatable point about the teaching of English in Japan's education system is that it is designed to help build up the students' cultural background and not to help them employ English for practical business purposes. Those in charge of English training at companies are unanimous in saying that such an approach is nothing but a waste of national wealth. To crown it all, many Japanese think they are inherently poor at learning English. For Japanese, mastering English has always been a dream that never comes true. This is why on the average 50% of English con-



versation school students quit halfway through their course. And only 20% of those taking correspondence courses complete all the lessons, data show.

Indeed, the English-language market is growing in scale, but many of its consumers are "repeat" students who easily set their hand to English conversation classes or materials but soon end up frustrated. The only solution for this type of learner is one-on-one teaching like that at the Berlitz schools. The Berlitz method of teaching English is quite popular among business people. With "you never fail to improve" as its catchphrase, the Berlitz Schools of Languages K.K., is enjoying a successful business. Their tuition fees are very high. For the four-week total immersion course in which lessons are given from morning to night on a one-on-one basis, the fee is ¥1.4 million (about \$9,300).

Also in vogue are "salon-type" English conversation schools for busy executives. They can attend the class any time it is convenient for them to do so, and the lessons are given in a classroom where sofas are provided so as to make the students feel relaxed. The annual tuition fees of such schools are as high as ¥500,000.

Neither individuals nor companies seem to mind paying handsomely for mastering English. But this enthusiasm sometimes falls prey to fraudulent sales of video teaching materials priced at an exorbitant ¥500,000 per set. The current English boom, a product of the strong yen and the internationalization of the Tokyo money market, appears likely to last for some time. Now what is really needed are schools and teaching materials that can offer high-quality English education at a reasonable cost.

Big businesses have recently been breaking into this market, but the lessons actually given are still low in quality and extraordinarily expensive. Can Japanese make their dream come true? Can they master spoken English well enough to help them carve out a new niche in the international community? That seems to depend a lot on whether effective English education can be offered at reasonable cost. ●