The New Nation

Loving English—but not well

(The Japancse still take poorly to the world's No. 2 language)

BEFORE he turned to politics in 1951, Prime Minister Noboru Takeshita was an English teacher in rural Shimane prefecture. When he visited Washington in January 1988, he started an address to the National Press Club with a brief statement in English, in which he admitted that his accent was so bad a translator was needed for the rest of his speech. "Pity my poor students," quipped Takeshita. "They had to suffer through my lessons without benefit of a translator."

Takeshita's problem is not unique in Japan in fact, it is endemic. Many Japanese are eager to use the world's most popular foreign language but have trouble mastering it even when they are like, Takehita, well educated, hardworking and determined. More than 9 out of 10 youngsters study English three to five hours a week during six years of junior and senior high school. Many students—and hundreds of thousands of adults—spend millions of dollars taking additional English courses at the private language schools that seem to cluster around commuter railway stations and in shopping plazas. Japanese stud their own language with English loaners. raisu, for example, rather than one of the many perfectly suitable Japanes words for rice, and sararıman (salary man), for a male officeworker, English is hip in advertising, packaging, pop culture and technology.

Yet for all that intense interest when English is spoken at all in Japan, it is generally spoken poorly. Just over a year ago, when a TV reporter approached students at the University of Tokyo and simply asked in English, "What is your name ?" many of the youths fled, unsure how to reply.

The problem is rooted in a much praised educational system. Japanese schools churn out top graduates in mathematics and science but fail in teaching spoken English. Admits Minoru Wada, a specialist in English curriculum at the Ministry of Education: "Japanese teachers do not have much experience in teaching English for communication because teachers are not accustomed to speaking English."

The same teachers, speaking in Japanese most of the time, are generally successful in instructing students in the intricacies of written translation and English grammar. Had the television interviewer asked Tokyo University students to translate a passage from, say, Hemingway into Japanese, the students many with a reading vocabulary of 3,000 to 7,000 words of English dutifully mastered would probably have done well.

Why such attention to grammar and translation ? Because entrance examinations for acceptance by top-ranked universities stress nothing else. "The test tells us how good the student is at filling in the blanks but nothing about his or her communicative skills," says Michihiro Metsumoto, author of many books on English language education. Adds Yoji Tanabe, a professor of linguistics at Waseda University, the prestigious school that is Takeshita's alma mater, "If the test were changed, we would attain a high level of speaking ability.

Dramatic changes in the examination system are unlikely. Yet small signs of progress are sprouting. This year, for example, the University of Tokyo will experiment with an English listening-comprehension test as a minor element of the entrance exam. "If it is successful,' says Tanabe, "other universities may follow." The Ministry of Education is slowly modifying the junior high and school curriculums to stress spoken English over grammar and written translation.

Older teachers are resisting change, however, and students stubbornly avoid learning anything not directly applicable to the vital entrance exams. The government has recruited more than 1,300 native English speakers to serve as teaching assistants in schools around the country. These young, often impetuous foreigners have sparked some enthusiasm—and not a little controversy—with new approaches, including conversation sessions and team teaching. Their number will increase to 3000 in 1990, but they are fighting an uphill struggle in crowded classes of more than 50 students.

Other barriers stand in the way of English-language proficiency, "Japan has a risk avoiding culture" observes author Matsumoto, and learning to speak English is considered a high-risk proposition in a conformist society. Shy students and that means most—would rather remain silent, regarded as something of a virtue, than trip over pronunciations. Even success is risky: a student who is overly fluent in English may be viewed with suspicion by less talented peers. Says Matsu-Everyone wants to learn English but not too well."

Some factors militate for change business among them. As Japanese corporations span the globe languages skills become ever more critical. Companies believe that English is so important that they are requiring everyone to acquire It," says Yasuo Kitaoka, whose company, International Communications, has administered 200,000 examinations in spoken English to employees of blue-chip corporations. At the head quarters of the Nissan auto firm, about 10% of the staff, including top managers take voluntary English classes. While promotion is not directly tied to success on English tests "the message is quite clear tha you have to speak English to move up,' says Yukio Kitahora of Nissan's human developmen department. In other words, enterprise is moving in where education has failed Prime Minister Takeshita take note.

—Time