

エッセイ

Re-Thinking English Language Education for Profes- sionals in Japan

ダニエル・ドーラン
(主任研究員)

As Japan's Ministry of Education, Science, Sports and Culture relaxes its control over English language education in Japanese schools and corporations increasingly require English language skills as evidenced by TOEIC scores among employees, it is a good opportunity to reflect on these trends and their implications. The focus in this essay is on English language training for adult professionals rather than for students still in school.

According to a NHK report in 2000, Japan has the largest commercial English language education market in the world, valued at \$20 billion (約2兆5千億円). Globalization pressures and recent restructuring at companies has resulted in greatly increased importance put on daily use of English within many companies. At Nissan, for example, the March 1999 tie-up with Renault left Japanese and French employees no simple alternative but to adopt English and Japanese as two official company languages. In Japan, 860,000 people took the TOEIC test in 1997-1998.

Is TOEIC Really the Answer?

The popularity of TOEIC among Japanese organizations obscures an important question that apparently is too seldom asked: Does TOEIC accurately measure the language skills required of Japanese assigned to overseas posts or to positions in Japan that require frequent and complex communication with native English speakers?

Clearly it does not, because there is no oral communication component to TOEIC. Japanese students of English understand quite well from experience that reading and listening skills alone will not assure smooth communication in actual face-to-face conversational situations. Speaking skilfully in a foreign language involves not only sufficient vocabulary for a given communicative task, but also an understanding of a complicated web of culturally appropriate rules for speaking. So a person who scores high on TOEIC may be demonstrating proficiency in reading and listening, but this score indicates nothing at all about the person's actual speaking abilities.

The English for Specific Purposes Alternative

What is needed is to move away from a focus on TOEIC scores to a focus on English language skills that (1) promote oral communication abilities, and (2) have direct relevance to the professional goals of English language students. One promising trend is growing recognition in Japan of the value of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) training. The basic premise of ESP is that English language students will be maximally motivated to succeed by improving communication skills that are necessary for success in narrowly targeted professional specialties of their choice. For example English for Medical Professionals, English for Legal Professionals, English for Certified Public Accountants (CPAs), or English for Academic Preparation. Good ESP training recognizes the critical importance of oral communication skills, and uses situations, vocabulary and communication rules specific to particular professions to accomplish clearly identified learning objectives.

Testing Oral Communication Skills

Instead of or in addition to TOEIC, organizations and individuals should consider using tests designed specifically to assess oral communication skills. One such test is offered by Educational Testing Service, the creators and owners of TOEIC, as an extension of TOEIC called the Language Proficiency Interview, available to TOEIC scorers of 730 and above. The test involves a 20-30 minute interview and test-takers are evaluated on a scale of 1 to 5 by specially trained native English speakers. Other widely used tests of oral communication ability include Educational Testing Service's Test of Spoken English (TSE), the Spoken Proficiency English Assessment Kit (SPEAK), and the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) Oral Interview.

A shift from reading and listening skills training only to inclusion of oral communication skills, combined with testing that measures all three areas is a win-win proposition: English language students gain ability to communicate, and organizations benefit from this increased ability and improve the accuracy with which they can identify employees' practical English communication skills. This transition will be gradual, but it is coming

「智場」記事一覧