

A Magic Formula

By Yasuhiro Shimizu

"YOU WILL BE FLUENT IN ENGLISH IN 14 DAYS."

You find this type of *eikaiwa* books in colossal numbers in bookstores, which suggests that quite a few Japanese English learners look for a magic formula to speak English. Surveys show that in 1996-1997 about 130,000 Japanese students went in for the TOEFL, accounting for 14% of the total number of examinees from 180 nations. It is obvious that our desire to acquire the language is extraordinarily high.

In Japan there has been perennial discussion over the pros and cons of English education and how effectively the language should be taught. There is an influx here of *eikaiwa* schools, native English speakers and ALTs throughout Japan. Is their presence, however, of any tangible assistance to Japanese English learners? The result so far is rather dismal.

According to the *Cyūnichi Shimbun* on June 1, 1998, the average Japanese student scored 496 points on the TOEFL. Japan is ranked 23rd place among 25 nations surveyed. Is that a paradox? Why does a nation investing a phenomenal amount of money on English education fail to perform reasonably well?

The seeming ineptitude at English stems, in my view, a great deal from our complacency, notably, about choosing teachers. We are inclined to naively associate all native speakers of English with blond hair and blue eyes as reliable teachers.

And therein lies the problem. Many students show their ingrained predilection for native speakers by saying, "Why can't we have a native speaker?," no matter how poor their English is. There is a propensity among Japanese students to believe that just talking to native speakers ensures that their English will automatically improve. So they flock to schools with only native speakers, paying a fortune. However, one has to be skeptical about whether or not students can obtain the quality of education they deserve from these schools.

The majority of *eikaiwa* schools are run for profit by private owners who seem to be more interested in profit for their own gain than that of Japanese students, exploiting the entrenched stereotype that all native instructors are dedicated first-class teachers.

I met a Canadian woman employed by a booming English conversation schools in Kanazawa. "After having an interview at the school," she said, "they asked me if I could work the following week and I had to start teaching without any proper training." "I also find," she said, "that all the teachers there have blond hair."

In Japan teaching English is widely regarded as a job that any native speaker can do without any proper training and previous experience. It is abundantly evident

that the lack of quality and professionalism in teaching in many institutions has led to the stagnation of English education in Japan.

There is clearly a symbiosis between Japanese students and those schools milking the noble image of native speakers for all it is worth. Unless we eradicate the myth of all native speakers as first-class teachers, Japan will remain to be one of the most backward English-speaking nations in Asia.

So what should be done to change the status quo? There is no easy answer. Two years ago I launched my own language school in Kanazawa for the benefit of students who genuinely wish to study English, in order to surmount the dismal record in our language learning and raise awareness about better language learning.

I wish to make a contribution, albeit small, at the grass-roots level to Japanese society through my venture and enlighten many Japanese students as to the joy of acquiring a foreign language as the treasure of a lifetime.

Ten years later, will I still be in this business? If that is the case, my venture will really have borne fruit.