

Speak English

① I assume if you are reading this newspaper it's because you're interested in learning or improving your English. If that is the case, you're doing exactly what the Japanese government thinks you should. The idea is that everyone in Japan should have a working knowledge of spoken English, and that it should be the second language.

② Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi asked a panel of experts to come up with a vision for 21st century Japan. One of its recommendations was that spoken English be made a priority. The reason is that the world is becoming an increasingly smaller place. Everyone travels much more and is required to interact with people from other countries by telephone, e-mail and the Internet.

③ Tadashi Yamamoto, the head of the Japan Center for International Exchange, an independent think tank, was on the panel. He told me that at international meetings Japanese representatives do not get their voices heard because they are less confident about or simply less skilled at speaking English than their counterparts from the rest of the world. He said of the 300,000 English teachers in Japan, only half can speak English adequately. Mr. Yamamoto, I might add, speaks perfect English.

④ I used to be an English teacher in Japan and I have no illusions about the level of English in Japanese schools. But I would also say that these days I meet more and more people who are happy to speak English, so I am perhaps not as worried as the government about Japan's competence in English.

⑤ However, I think there is still a hang-up in Japan about speaking English correctly. The blame can be laid squarely at the door of the high school and university entrance exam system, which insists on testing grammar rather than conversation skills.

⑥ What is important is communication. Leave the perfect grammar to native English speakers, who, on the whole, get it wrong some of the time anyway. Concentrate instead on saying what you mean, clearly and simply.

⑦ Good pronunciation is important, as English won't be the mother tongue of many people with whom you'll be speaking English. And remember, there are also lots of other languages in the world, and if you're traveling it pays to learn a few basics in the local tongue. People you meet will usually love the fact that you made the effort.

⑧ But here is a last word to the prime minister who proposed this grand aim for his country. I have on numerous occasions asked government ministers and officials to do interviews in English. We talk about the contents of the interview beforehand, and they demonstrate that their language skills are flawless.

⑨ But as soon as the camera is turned on they insist on speaking Japanese. I want to say to them, "If you can speak in English, don't be afraid."

⑩ Does Mr. Obuchi speak English? I've heard that he doesn't. Perhaps he too should start learning. I'd like him set the example.