

Nihongo debaters thrive in cross fire

By Yukiko Katsumi

Daily Yomiuri Staff Writer

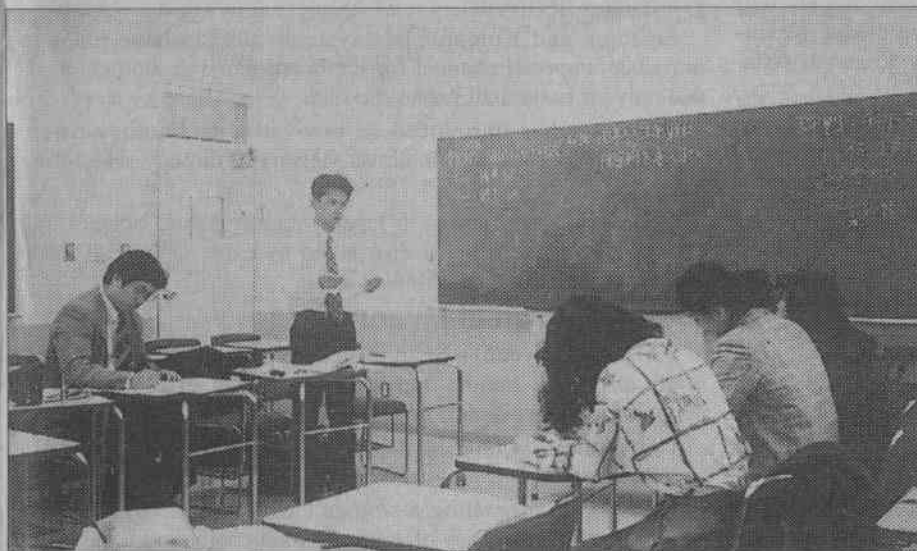
Teams of debaters recently clashed over the issue of whether Japan should implement a system of trial by jury.

"If the jury system were introduced in Japan, the impressions of juries would be influenced by the media. The sensationalism of Japanese television, newspaper and magazine reports would prejudice juries before a trial and would make them incapable of rendering a fair judgment," argued one debater.

"If it were introduced, the media would voluntarily refrain from making sensational reports so that the jury would not be influenced by the media," countered another.

The debate was part of a tournament held March 25 by the Japan Debate Association (JDA) at Kanda University of International Studies in Makuhari, Chiba Prefecture. The goal of the tournament is for debaters to demonstrate their ability to deploy logic in a debate.

Debate is becoming more popular in Japan. It is, however, widely believed that Japanese people are poor debaters,



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A debater speaking on the jury system

because they are not accustomed to expressing their opinions logically and presenting evidence to support their ideas.

JDA Director Hiroaki Kitano, 34, said that Japanese debaters have not been skillful in general. "It is generally thought that debaters focus on stressing their own

opinions, but that is wrong. Debaters must listen to what the other party says in order to develop logical arguments. And they always have to logically argue their ideas," he said. " 'What they think' and 'facts' are completely different, but there are so many debaters who mix them up."

Most debate tournaments in Japan have

so far been conducted in English. This is probably one obstacle that has prevented many Japanese speakers from improving their debate skills.

The JDA decided to hold debates in Japanese as a way to increase the number of people participating.

Teams in the tournament had to debate first one side of the issue, then the other.

But many participants in the debate adhered exactly to a planned strategy, persisting in presenting even groundless opinions as fact.

According to Kitano, skillful debaters can switch to another strategy when they find their evidence is too weak to support their initial arguments, but those who are not experienced tend to stick to their original strategy.

"Debaters learn techniques of argument that focus on persuasion. Those who are not experienced generally do not have the ability to assess the debate objectively, therefore they tend to pursue illogical arguments," he added.

The Japan Debate Association was established in 1986. It now has about 100 members. For details about the association, contact Shigeru Matsumoto at (043) 273-1233 or fax (043) 273-1777.