

**A**s the world becomes smaller with the development of high technology, it becomes easier to express one's opinions and associate actively with our global neighbors. Brushing up one's English skills in a friendly atmosphere is now both a means and an end.

I myself experienced one such occasion earlier this month when I hopped into one English-loving group, the Fukuoka Toastmasters Club. The club's mission is to provide members with skills and abilities to communicate well and be better leaders in society.

The Toastmasters Club, which began in the United States, has, according to its Web site, more than 212,000 members over 9,960 clubs in more than 80 countries. As the site says that this figure is as of February 2006, the current number is probably higher.

The Fukuoka club is one of about 95 Toastmas-

## Out & About

By Shoichi Nasu



ters clubs in Japan and it has one of the longest histories of any such group in the country with its first meeting held in 1954.

The group meets twice a month, on the first and third Tuesday night, at Fukuoka Shiritsu Fujin Kaikan (Airef) in Chuo Ward, Fukuoka. When I attended one gathering, the 1,144th regular meeting, I was greeted by the club's grinning president, Yukinori Tanaka, 31. I was struck by the friendly atmosphere there, originating from the consciousness they share and their eagerness to enjoy the evening and learn something new.

The meeting, attended by 21 people, including five nonmember guests, started with a call to order by Tanaka. The meeting had four main segments: current affairs, table topics, formal speech and evaluation of the aforementioned segments. Each member is required to speak within an allocated time.

After a lively exchange on the topic of current af-

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fairs and national politics, two members, Yoshiko Mohri and Shawn Fukuda, took to the podium as the formal speech makers. Mohri told the gathering of the attractions of her favorite tourist resort, Machu Pichu in Peru, describing it as "mysterious and breathtakingly beautiful, as if time had stopped."

His evaluator, Shoji Yamaguchi, later told the gathering that "I would like to go there if I could secretly save money that my wife doesn't know about," drawing laughter from other members.

Fukuda's speech on the importance of leadership in adverse situations was commended by his evaluator, Kazue Fujino.

Fujino said, "Many people think that the Toastmasters Club is just a club for making speeches. They forget about leadership. The Toastmasters Club is constituted from two important points. One is communication skills. And the other is leadership skills."

She added, "I hope he returns to our regular meeting."

Christine Kuramoto, who played the part of grammarian, told the gathering, "I was very busy counting Ahs tonight," mentioning the counts of each toastmaster member. "Ah" means, I suppose, "eh" in Japanese. I myself have no idea how many "ehs" I utter when I make a public speech. Surely this is a good reminder.

Almost everybody was supposed, I sensed, to make a verbal contribution at the gathering. Although a guest, I was obliged to make a short speech. I was really glad it was exempt from evaluation.

Fujino, who has been a member for the past 13 years, told me that at first she didn't feel comfortable as she was rather shy about speaking in public. But as time went by, she has learned the knack of doing so. The club has helped her a lot with her present work as a college teacher.

Another member, 68-year-old Koichi Sata, told me, "After my retirement, I joined this club as I wanted to brush up my English. I really enjoy talking with younger members here, because it adds zing to my life."

Yes, I have no doubt about that.

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### CORRECTION

In last month's column on the Kyushu economy I erroneously stated Kyushu's gross domestic product including Okinawa Prefecture. The figure should have been given as ¥51.9 trillion