

Japanese 'critical' in U.S. language scheme

By BEN DOOLEY
Kyodo News

WASHINGTON — Thirty students from the U.S. traveled to Kyoto last month under a new U.S. government initiative to boost the country's number of Japanese speakers, to make the country more competitive globally.

The student trip was sponsored by the U.S. State Department as part of its Critical Language Scholarship Program, known as CLS, a government initiative aimed at improving the foreign language skills of U.S. citizens.

The two-month program gives undergraduate and graduate students from across the country the opportunity to study Japanese in intensive, full-immersion environments at Doshisha University and Kyoto University.

Japanese was added to the CLS program for the first time this year since it started in 2006 under the administration of former President George W. Bush, in line with the launch of the National Security Language Initiative, a scheme to increase the study of languages considered vital to U.S. national security.

In the program's first years, scholarships were offered for Arabic, Pashtun, Korean and other languages that are rarely studied in the United States but are considered to be of strategic importance by the U.S. military and intelligence communities.

But the program has gradually expanded to include languages that are more broadly relevant to U.S. global interests, including trade and finance, and Japanese was chosen this year.

Susan Schmidt, an expert on Japanese language acquisition at the Association of Teachers of Japanese, believes that including Japanese in this year's program reflects the

changing attitudes of U.S. policymakers about what makes a language "critical."

"I think what happened probably is that in the State Department, it was felt that that definition of critical, as in important for national security or national purposes, that that definition should be expanded a little bit, beyond the strictly military context," Schmidt said.

Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Academic Programs Alina Romanowski said that CLS selects "challenging, difficult languages in places where we know there's economic opportunity, we have long-term bilateral security interests and where to be proficient in that language takes time."

The program comes at a time that some describe as a fraught period in Japan-U.S. relations, when the outlook of bilateral ties has grown uncertain due to a change in Japan's political leadership and a dispute over the fate of a U.S. Marine base in Okinawa.

The decision to include Japanese in the CLS program, however, was made well before the current tensions began, Romanowski noted. "It's a very important relationship. . . . It made sense that we would end up including Japanese," she said.

In fact, in its decision to add Japanese to the CLS program, the State Department seems to be riding a growing wave of interest in the study of Japanese within the U.S.

The number of American students studying Japanese has more than doubled over the last two decades and continues to increase steadily, according to a 2006 report on foreign language study in the U.S. conducted every four years by the Modern Language Association.

Schmidt believes this interest has been primarily driven by student interest in Japanese cultural exports, noting that " 'manga' cartoons and animated films and the video games are a fairly big motivation for students."

Once their interest has been sparked, Schmidt said, these students increasingly put their Japanese to use in their studies.

"A lot of students in the sciences now are interested in

learning Japanese and studying in Japan," she said.

Schmidt's assessment was confirmed at an orientation session for the CLS program held in Washington in early June, where participants said that although Japanese culture was what initially interested them in the language, they see it as an important tool for their future, whether in international business, diplomacy or the sciences.

"Before the large 'anime' boom around the early 2000s, I had never even heard of Japan," said Tiarra Beaver, a 19-year-old student at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign, who now hopes to work with Japanese immigrants as they adjust to life in the U.S.

While not discounting the attraction of Japanese culture, Ryan Seebruck, a 27-year-old graduate student at the University of Arizona, sees the Japanese language as "critical" for a more pragmatic reason.

"Japan will undoubtedly remain a top economic power for a long time," Seebruck said.

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