

## Reflections

### of a Non-TESL Person in a TESL Setting

by Jayne G. Garside

During the 1970-71 school year, I had a sabbatical leave which I spent with my family in the town of Kyoto, Japan. Kyoto is a large city of about a million and a half people on the island of Honshu located about 400 miles to the southwest of Tokyo.

At one time, Kyoto was the capital of all Japan before the Meiji restoration. Following the Meiji restoration, the capital was moved to Tokyo, but much of tradition of Japan is still centered in the area of Kyoto and its environs. Kyoto has over 1,600 temples and shrines, many of which are cultural national treasures of Japan.

The main industry in Kyoto is connected in some way to tradition. The main industry is the dying and making of Kimono. Kimono is the national dress of the women of Japan but is not, in modern times, worn usually every day during the year. Because of the beauty of the silk material and because of the need for many layers of underclothing to make the Kimono, as an outside garment, appear the most beautiful, Kimonos are quite warm when they are worn. They are usually worn, then, in late fall, in winter, and early spring.

Since the ending of the Second World War, the people of Japan have tossed aside many of the traditions of the past and have come back from a wartime economy to have one of the highest standards of living in the world. Japan is counted a world power in industry and in technology. Major exported items include such things as automobiles, particularly Toyota and Isuzu, and electronic equipment.

While Japan is making all this progress industrially and technologically, the people of Japan still cling to many of the traditions of the past that bring into their lives beauty and knowledge. Some of the aspects that bring into their lives beauty and a sense of national identity are reflected in Noh plays, Kabuki plays, Kyogen, Bunraku; and for

most of the people in Japan, they represent the past and feelings of personal commitment to a country, to an ideal, and to a philosophy.

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At the ending of the Second World War, the educational system of Japan was revamped and reestablished along democratic lines - that is public education for all. Although public education for all was the philosophy, because of space allotment and building problems, while education was compulsory until junior high termination, it was not possible to put all people in public schools. Therefore, there was a development and continuation of many of the private schools of Japan. Places in public education are still highly sought after because public education has achieved an excellence. For this reason, competition is very keen for opportunities to attend the public school. Competition, then, is a part of the Japanese people from a very early age in that many of the children in Japan begin a public Kindergarten or private Kindergarten (called a Yochien) at about three years of age. At six years, they are formally taken into the first grade of public schools or private schools. Periodically, as they journey through school, it is necessary for them to take examinations which permit them, with high scores to continue on in public schools if openings occur. This means, then, that the excellence of public education is not really in question.

As a foreign sojourner in Japan, I had

planned to do research only, while living in Kyoto and absorbing as much of the beauty and culture of Japan as possible. My two boys were placed in Japanese schools, one in a Shinto—Buddhist yochien; one in a regular public school in the fourth grade. We were fortunate enough to obtain living accommodations in a Japanese style apartment in a neighborhood chiefly composed of artisans, of the Kimono industry. We were well accepted in the neighborhood and in the community. In my association with people in the neighborhood and in the community, it came fairly well—known to others that there was a “gaijin” (foreigner) living in the immediate area.

Not long after we obtained residency and were living in Kyoto, I was approached by an older woman in a very formal manner who asked me, through an interpreter, to be English conversation teacher to her daughter who was at that time a student in Kansai Junior College, majoring in English. In Japan, most of the students in junior high and high school are required by law to take English. English, in this setting, is taught usually by a Japanese person who has a somewhat limited knowledge of the application of English. Therefore, most of the people of Japan who have been through public schools are able to read and write English but their speaking ability is very limited due to not having had the opportunity of conversing often or in depth in English with a person who has an extended knowledge of English. It is not unusual for strangers from Occidental countries to be approached by Japanese people in the street and asked questions in English or asked if they would teach the person English. For the young woman for whom I had been requested to teach English, I found that her knowledge of written English was quite extensive; her ability to converse was somewhat limited due to the same lack of opportunity. I did agree to teach her as a student. Immediately she prevailed upon me to also include in my teaching another girl who also was a student at Kansai Junior College.

Not long after this, I was approached by two young women who were working as salesgirls in one of the very large hotels in Kyoto and who had opportunity of dealing with many foreigners. Both young women

requested English conversation lessons. I was then asked by two young women from Church to act as their English conversation teacher.

This reflects a phenomena of Japan that should be mentioned. The Japanese people are possibly the most industrious people in the world as far as their commitment to their job and their desire for personal development. As you talk to most of the young men and women of Japan, you find that their work—a-day week is six days in length and their workday is not necessarily limited to eight hours a day but often is much longer. They are expected, upon obtaining employment, to devote themselves to the good of the company. The company becomes a paternal figure for them, thus, they become children in the organization. In addition, to their work—a-day world, the Japanese people have much desire for self-improvement and obtaining knowledge. Toward this end many of the young people, particularly the young women are engaged in flower arrangement, tea ceremony, knitting schools, dressmaking schools, cooking schools, and classes in English, typing, and other forms of academic pursuits.

To teach English in Japan is a choice experience. Financially, it can be very rewarding, but teaching English in Japan, if you are a foreigner also offers the only opportunity of learning in depth about the culture in which you are residing. It was my plan to utilize teaching English conversation as an opportunity to become more knowledgeable about the experiences, the thoughts, the emotions of the people with whom I dealt. It was possible to find out about their traditions as practiced in the homes. It was possible to converse about their plans for the future, the desires of the young people of Japan, to find out if they have broken the bonds of tradition or whether tradition was still significant in their lives. But there arose some difficulties that might be mentioned for the benefit of those people interested in teaching English in a foreign situation.

My background included a BA in Spanish with a minor in English. In obtaining this type of degree, it was possible to learn certain techniques of teaching language, but I have never had experience in TESL. When I began teaching English conversation, I tried to obtain some books or manuals that would

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help the students best in their desire to pursue English conversation. For me, this was a very difficult task not only due to some of the paucity of material available, but also due to the fact that my ability to choose that which was appropriate was limited. Exactly *what* was good text for teaching English as a second language?

Another problem arose in the form of having difficulty in knowing the techniques of phonics and phonetics. After many trial and error situations, I found that which worked best for me was the utilization of a "mim—mem" method, that is often I would say a word and my students would repeat the word after me several times until I felt their pronunciation was correct. Another technique I utilized was calling the student to talk upon a specific or assigned topic utilizing experiences from her own background. As the students would talk, I would correct them in their grammar or their pronunciation.

The errors that occurred most frequently in the grammar were the errors due to a lack of commonality grammatically, such as in Japanese the definite articles are not utilized like they are in English. It was not uncommon for Japanese students in talking in English to refer to house or car or boyfriend, instead of *the* house, *the* car, or *the* boyfriend. It was also not uncommon for Japanese students to place the verb in English conversation in a different locality than that which was desired because Japanese syntax is different from English syntax.

When assigning students particular topics, I felt that the best utilization could be made through topics that were reflective of the students' own experiences such as their plans

for the future, what they would like in marriage, what they do for their leisure activities, where their parents came from, what was the physical arrangement of their home, what their room was like, what they did as children, etc. This provided an opportunity for me to learn much more about Japan and the Japanese per se than if I had not had the opportunity, and were easy topics for the students to prepare.

I know of no greater calling nor opportunity than that of a teacher to the youth of the world. Through the use of TESL in a foreign setting, I believe intercultural communication does occur and through this intercultural communication all people are better prepared to function as citizens of the world.

It was with a great sense of loss and regret that after a year's time my family and I returned to our beloved Hawaii. We will miss the friendships we had. I will miss extremely the experience of working with the youth of Japan, particularly the students who seem to be so motivated beyond what is required of them. I would like to return to Japan someday to again have the experience of functioning in a society different from my own. In order to prepare for this, though, and for the eventuality or opportunity of teaching English as a second language, I would like to obtain more knowledge and ability in this particular art—TESL. I believe, then, that a person could go to almost any country and function as a teacher having the opportunity of working with many different people because skills would be possessed that transcend cultural barriers.