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Let's enjoy teaching life: an autoethnography of a novice ESL teacher's two years of teaching English in a private girls' secondary school in Japan

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LET'S ENJOY TEACHING LIFE:
AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF A NOVICE ESL TEACHER'S
TWO YEARS OF TEACHING ENGLISH
IN A PRIVATE GIRLS' SECONDARY SCHOOL IN JAPAN

A Thesis
Presented to
Eastern Washington University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree
Master of Arts in Teaching English as a Second Language

By
Danielle Nozaka
Spring 2018

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Abstract

This thesis is an account of a beginning ESL teacher's two years teaching abroad at a private all-girl's secondary school in Nishinomiya, Japan. It is an autoethnography and includes written and visual artifacts from the author's time spent teaching English to junior high school students.

Acknowledgements

I would first like to express my sincere gratitude to my advisor, Dr. LaVona Reeves, who worked tirelessly with me on this project and supported me throughout my time in graduate school. Dr. Reeves has taught me about the value of relationships in teaching as well as the importance of living a life full of laughter. She cares deeply about her students and gives selflessly. As she has also taught in Japan, I always love hearing about her experiences there. Dr. Reeves has inspired me more than I can convey in words, and, without her encouragement, I would not have been able to return and complete this master's program.

I would also like to thank Dr. Dana Elder for his involvement as the second member of my committee. I will forever be grateful for the opportunity to take his Rhetoric class and expand my Greek vocabulary. Dr. Elder is thoughtful in finding that which is praiseworthy in his students' work and he has encouraged me in my writing. His aphorisms and words of wisdom are much appreciated and his support has meant more to me than he knows.

Thank you to Dr. Heidi Hillman for being willing to be on my committee and for taking the time to read my thesis. I am very grateful for her insight and recommendations.

Preface

Language Learning Experience: Japanese

“Should we get tacos for dinner tonight?”

“No, no. I can’t eat *tako*.”

“You can’t eat tacos? Because...you don’t like tacos?”

“Yes. I like *tako*, but I can’t eat *tako*, because...*arerugi*.”

It was July of 2002, and I was in the car with my family and two high school exchange students from Japan. We were heading home from a day trip to Idaho—hungry and trying to decide what we could get to eat for dinner. Eventually, we were able to sort out the taco business and introduce a new food to our Japanese friends. In Japanese, *tako* means octopus, and my friend Takahiro was trying to express that he was allergic to octopus, which is commonly served both fried and raw in Japan.

My family had been hosting exchange students for as long as I could remember. When I was four years old, my first Japanese “brother” spent a summer with us. From that point on, our home was continually enriched by students from all over the world and new cultural perspectives. I loved each and every student and culture; however, it was the Japanese culture that really hooked me. I was addicted to learning about this far away land and intriguing language, and for some ineffable reason, I instantly felt at ease in the presence of Japanese people.

I started studying Japanese on my own as a child, building upon words and phrases I had learned over the years such as *arigatou*—thank you, and *genki desu ka?*—

how are you? Using Roman letters, I kept a notebook of the fun and useful Japanese expressions I learned from my Japanese friends and “brothers” and “sisters.” In 2006, as a university student, I started working as a resident assistant (RA) at Mukogawa Fort Wright Institute (MFWI) in Spokane, Washington. MFWI is a branch campus of Mukogawa Women’s University, located in Spokane’s sister city, Nishinomiya, Japan. RAs at MFWI live in dormitories with small groups of Japanese students who are studying English. It was the perfect chance for me to experience Japanese culture and language while at the same time sharing my own knowledge of the English language. I was making so many new friends who seemed thrilled to teach me Japanese.

Growing up, I was a child who was often too shy to speak up, even in English, my native language. I found it difficult to make friends and find the right words to say. Something different happened, however, when I started learning how to communicate with new friends in Japanese. It was as if my personality changed in a way. I had a confidence that had been lacking before—my new friends encouraged me, and it was the desire to connect on a deeper level that pushed me to soak up as much of the language as possible. Then, in 2008, through an exchange with Eastern Washington University, I had the opportunity to spend two semesters studying abroad at Mukogawa Women’s University and living in an international dormitory. My dreams of living and studying Japanese in Japan became reality.

Pre-MA Teaching Experience: Nishinomiya, Japan

Upon returning to the United States after a year of study abroad, I graduated from Eastern Washington University in June of 2009 with a Bachelor of Arts in International Affairs and minors including Japanese and Spanish. At that time, a former co-worker of

mine was working as an Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) for the junior high school division of Mukogawa Women's University, also located in Nishinomiya, Japan. With much anticipation, I waited to hear from her if there would be another opening for a teaching position the following school year. It was in the spring of 2010 that I was officially offered a position as an ALT at Mukogawa Women's University Junior High and Senior High School.

This teaching experience is the focus of this autoethnography

MATESL Program at Eastern Washington University

After two years of teaching English in Japan, I made the decision to return to the United States and to pursue a master's degree in English with an emphasis on teaching English as a second language. An unanticipated, but fortunate, opportunity presented itself—to return to Mukogawa Fort Wright Institute as a resident assistant—and I jumped at the chance. I was delighted to continue working with English language learners while simultaneously working on the graduate degree. With one year of the program completed, life circumstances imposed a pause in my studies. During the time off from the program, I worked as a substitute teacher for the Pasco School District in Pasco, Washington, and I also taught one-on-one English lessons online to children in China. In the Pasco School District, I often worked in bilingual Spanish-and-English elementary classrooms and in high school ELL classrooms. These opportunities gave me more valuable insight into language acquisition and confirmed my desire to return to Eastern Washington University to complete the second year of the program. Providing me with a solid foundation in

language acquisition theory and challenging me to think about language and teaching in new perspectives, the program has helped me to grow and develop as a professional.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

2006

Coming from my hometown of Spokane, Washington, where the summertime humidity is roughly zero percent, I arrived at Narita Airport and was promptly greeted with an unanticipated breath of thick, muggy air. Tokyo in August was a stark contrast to what I was used to. It was 2006—I was an undergraduate student at Spokane Falls Community College, and I was elated to be in Japan, the far-away enchanting land I had been dreaming of for as long as I could remember. With a few quarters of Japanese and some simple vocabulary under my belt, I could not wait to have some real-life conversations. I was going to be staying with the family of a Japanese high school student who had spent three weeks with my family in Spokane the previous summer, and after an approximately 20-hour sleepless journey by way of San Jose, California, I was more than a little eager to be taken to their house, hop in the shower, and rest. To my surprise, however, my friend, Kana, informed me that we were not going home, but were instead heading straight to a local *hanabi taikai* or firework festival in Chiba. To say that firework festivals in Japan are a big deal is an understatement; firework festivals are a summer pastime in which people dress in *yukata* and head out with friends and family to enjoy good food and magical pyrotechnic displays blooming in the night sky. When we arrived at the site of the festival, there were people everywhere, packed in closely on a sea of blue tarps covering the grass and pavement. I followed Kana as she led me to our own tarp, at the spot where her father and younger brother were waiting and had evidently reserved hours before. Her mother opened a bag, revealing a picnic dinner. We

ate *yakisoba* noodles and *onigiri* rice balls and waited for the sun to disappear. I had been to firework displays before, such as on the 4th of July; however, nothing I had observed in the United States quite compared to the visible excitement buzzing in the air on this particular night. At last the sun faded away, and the sky seemed to light up with a million brilliant colors, and then came fireworks in the shape of a heart and Hello Kitty and *Doraemon*, a famous children's cartoon character. I was already learning so much on my first night in this country, including the value placed on time with family and friends, fireworks, and food, as well as an emphasis on cute characters.

By the time the fireworks display had finished, I was simultaneously amazed and exhausted. In a slightly dazed state and unaware of what was happening, I followed Kana and found myself in the middle of a mass migration to the train station. The vast amount of people attempting to enter the station at the same time was something I had never experienced before—I was overwhelmed, but in only the best imaginable way. I wondered why we rode the train home and not the car in which we came, but I later realized it was because Kana and her family were trying to welcome me to Japan and make sure I could have the greatest and most complete Japanese experience during my stay. Riding the train during a rush in Japan is certainly a fascinating experience.

Kana and I had developed our own way of communicating. We spoke a mixture of Japanese and English, neither of us fully able to comprehend the complexity of the other's native language, but still able to understand what we wanted to convey. I wished that my Japanese had been good enough to converse with her family, who spoke no English. Of course, I knew some basic phrases: *konnichi wa* (hello), *arigatou* (thank you), *onaka suita* (I'm hungry), but I longed to know more and to better understand what was

going on around me. I wondered what was being expressed when her family would suddenly stop to have what appeared to be a family meeting—sometimes on the street—to discuss the activity at hand. Kana's parents seemed to be very protective and concerned at times for reasons I could not figure out. Kana was still a high school student, but, as a young adult from the United States, I was used to a bit more freedom and independence. However, the kindness and hospitality shown to me throughout my stay made a lasting impression and left me wanting more of this remarkable culture. Kana's family took me on a road trip to Kamogawa, a city south of Chiba on the coast, to a sumo wrestling tournament in the country, and introduced me to an array of traditional Japanese cuisine. I was welcomed to a family dinner party with uncles, aunts, and cousins, and have the privilege of saying that I ate *sushi* and *sashimi* for the first time ever in Japan. Although I was almost quite literally eaten alive by mosquitos on this three-week trip, it was well-worth it.

2007

Exactly one year later, in August of 2007, and after one year spent working as a resident assistant at Mukogawa Fort Wright Institute and living with Japanese university students, I had saved up some money and was once again traveling to Japan, this time with two of my friends from Spokane. We were going to be visiting some of the Mukogawa students whom we had lived with in the dorms at MFWI. I ended up traveling around the Kansai area of Japan—Osaka, Nishinomiya, Kobe, Himeji, and Awaji Island, staying at the family homes of a few different Japanese friends along the way. One of my friends who had invited me to stay failed to mention ahead of time that her bathroom was being renovated. In Japan, the bathroom is exactly that—a room with a bath and most

likely a detachable shower on one of the walls. The toilet is in a separate room altogether. With the house bathroom out of order, each morning we made our way to the local *sentou* (figure 1) or public bath. Upon entering, we paid 500 yen, approximately \$5 at the time, and we were given a key to a locker. The first time at the *sentou*, my American friend and I exchanged knowing glances and chuckled. “*So... we have to get completely naked, right?*” The only thing that either of us had heard about Japanese *sentou* and *onsen* (hot springs) was that full nudity was normal and expected, and that with visible tattoos, one would not be able to enter the public baths. Anyone who wears a bathing suit into the bath would stick out even more than we already did as foreigners in the country, and tattoos, we had heard, had a connotation related to the Japanese *Yakuza* or mafia. Fortunately, neither of us had tattoos at the time and we received only friendly and curious looks from some of the older ladies in the *sentou*. Inside the bathhouse, there is a procedure to be followed. One may enter with only a small, wash-cloth sized towel, and must wash their body with the shower before entering the hot bath.



Figure 1. *Sentou* or public bath. <http://www.techprincess.it/sentou-map-tokyo-trovare-un-bagno-pubblico-con-unapp/>

On this trip, I was so lucky to be able to see many different areas of the country and to spend time with several different Japanese friends and their families. Each family experience was different, and yet one common trait every family had was a sense of Japanese pride and a strong desire to share the Japanese culture with those from other cultures. My friends took me to Himeji Castle, a beautiful 14th century castle that is also a UNESCO World Heritage Site. I visited various shrines and temples and was introduced to the Japanese *Obon* holiday—a time in August when the Japanese remember their loved ones who have departed this earth. (Sakamoto & Reeves, 2011).

One of my American friends had just moved to Japan to teach English with the JET (Japan Exchange and Teaching) Program. She had previously studied in Japan through an exchange between Eastern Washington University and Mukogawa Women's University, and had been encouraging me to apply for the coming school year. She accompanied me to the university and gave me a tour of the campus. It was the summer holiday and there were no students on campus, but it was very cool to see the place I had heard about so often from the students I lived with in Spokane. I took my friend's advice, applied to the exchange program, and received a scholarship from MWU to study in the university for two semesters starting in 2008.

2008

It was late March of 2008, and I found myself once again in Nishinomiya, Japan—this time to attend Mukogawa Women's University and to study Japanese as part of my undergraduate International Studies degree at Eastern Washington University. I lived in Wakakusa International Dormitory along with Japanese students and a group of international students from Australia, Canada, United Kingdom, and Korea. An all-

female university, it followed that Wakakusa was a female-only dormitory, and, for the occupants, there were certain rules that had to be observed. We lived with a *ryoubo-san* or dorm mother, who acted as a house-manager and a friend and who led nightly meetings Monday through Friday. The meetings began precisely at 10 PM, which was also the dorm curfew. Unless arrangements had been made at least one week in advance, we were required to be inside the dormitory by curfew and seated in our assigned seats for the nightly meetings. For most of the Japanese students, although over 18 years old, this did not seem to present any significant problem—it was just the way things were. Personally, I did not have too much trouble adjusting to the dormitory rules, but for some of the international students, however, it was a concept that took some getting used to. Most of us were over 21 and had been living independently in our respective countries without curfews. The meetings consisted of announcements and pertinent information, and culminated with a big group cleaning session. There was not a hired cleaning staff in the dormitory—we were the cleaning staff—and each week night we dutifully swept, vacuumed, and scrubbed as part of one big group effort. In the dormitory entry way, above the lockers for our shoes, there existed a rotating wall schedule to remind us of our assigned cleaning task for the week. The *ofuro* or bath, was my favorite chore—I did not mind splashing warm water around all the walls and tiles and occasionally on my friends.

At Mukogawa Women's University, I attended Japanese language classes four days a week, in addition to a Japanese culture class, taught in English, that met once a week on Thursdays. The Japanese classes were taught in Japanese by native Japanese teachers, and there were three students in the class: a Canadian, an Australian, and me. We had a different teacher for each day of class throughout the week, and, because of the

small class sizes, we were able to form bonds with our teachers and receive a good amount of personal instruction. One of my teachers, Yamada *Sensei*, made a lasting impression on me that I will never forget. Caring and calm, she was invested in her students and sincerely wanted to know how we were doing in all aspects of our lives. She knew that effective teaching was often a result of genuine relationships. Yamada *Sensei* was highly intelligent, both interpersonally and linguistically. While she used Japanese to teach our classes, she had a keen understanding of the English language—an understanding that allowed her to recognize the questions and problem areas we, as English speakers, were running into in Japanese. Her teaching was clear and full of examples in context, a style that I would aspire to emulate in my own teaching one day.

Another teacher whom I love dearly carried a bright and positive energy with her everywhere she went. We gave her the nickname *Genki Sensei*, because she was never without a smile, and our class days were filled with laughter. We used a textbook, *Minna No Nihongo*, (*Everybody's Japanese*) but there was no technology in the classroom. *Genki Sensei* often used pictures and visuals in her teaching, as well as a whiteboard that we would all use to practice writing. She had an infectious quality about her at all times, making learning fun—a skill that I aim to attain and maintain throughout my entire life.

2010

I still remember the knots in my stomach as I stood up to introduce myself on my first day of school—and not as a student, but as a real teacher with real responsibilities. An auditorium of students stared curiously back at me, and I was well-aware of the camera that was positioned to project my introduction speech to a screen in every classroom throughout the entire school. Ignoring the nerves, I managed to smile and

made my way to the microphone. “Good morning. My name is Miss West, and I am very excited to be teaching eighth-grade English here at Mukogawa Junior High School.”

It was late summer of 2010, and I was thrilled to be back in Japan fulfilling my life-long dream of living and teaching English in the island nation. I was living in a neighborhood I knew well, near Wakakusa International Dormitory, and less than a quarter mile away from the university where I had studied for one year. I was familiar with the Kansai area, I had friends, and life just could not be any more perfect. I hopped on my shiny new bicycle with the basket on the front and started peddling toward my new home away from home, Mukogawa Women’s University Junior High and Senior High School. At this point my dream had become reality, but, with this new reality, also came the realization that I was to be responsible for the English language learning of more than three hundred junior high school students. Prior to this, my interaction with Japanese people had been primarily with my peers. I was hit with a nervous excitement. Did I really know what I was getting myself into? I was about to find out.

On the way to the school campus, I passed by numerous groups of students walking to school from Naruo Station. Students in Japan can be identified by their school uniforms—most consist of neutral colors such as black, gray, navy, or white, and usually a school emblem will be embroidered somewhere on the shirt or jacket. Mukogawa had two uniforms, one for summer and one for winter. September is the beginning of the second semester for students, but the school year, as well as the fiscal business year, begins in April. Returning from a few weeks’ summer vacation break, the students were outfitted in navy-blue pleated skirts and short-sleeved white sailor-style tops. It was still summer, and I could not figure out why many of the students opted to wear an

accompanying navy-blue, wool cardigan as it was still quite warm and humid. I would later learn that many Japanese women will endure sweltering heat to prevent an unwelcomed suntan.

Upon arrival to the campus, I noticed that the black, barred gate was open, and there was a member of the teaching staff standing at the gate to greet those who entered the school grounds. Each student and teacher who entered stopped to bow before stepping onto the property. Not wanting to offend or immediately label myself as a deviant, I dismounted my bicycle and bowed in the same way as I observed others around me doing. I parked my bicycle off to the right of the entrance, amongst a lengthy but neat row of parked bicycles, and headed into the building. Stepping inside the main entrance, I smiled hesitantly. “Ah! West *Sensei*!” One of the ladies in the school office had noticed me come in and directed me over to the office where my co-worker, Joe, was waiting. I did not have to wonder where to go or what to do, and I felt an instant sense of relief. In my experience, the Japanese place a very high emphasis on taking care of newcomers and considering others’ feelings, and this idea is manifested in all aspects of the culture.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the cultural experiences I had as both a traveler and as a student living in Japan, I accepted a position as an English language teacher and arrived at my post with no prior teaching experience. This is not uncommon for Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) in Japan. Previous interaction with English language learners had been largely peer-based, and although I had mentored Japanese ELLs, I had been neither an English, nor an Education major. My background was in international studies—with minors in Japanese, Spanish, government, and chemistry. I had completed an online TESOL course

and received a 50-hour certificate, and I was about to discover just how well my experiences might translate into effective classroom instruction.

Purpose

Like Holland's 2015 diary study and Lemberger's 2017 autoethnography about teaching in Japan, this thesis is the story of my two years of teaching English in Japan. My aim is to reflect on and better understand the cultural experiences I had as a novice teacher in Nishinomiya which is in the Kansai area—near the old national capital of Kyoto. Finally, I will formulate recommendations for those Americans who are preparing to teach English in Japan.

Assumptions

In carrying out ethnographic work, TESOL calls for researchers to disclose their assumptions about the culture and to provide information about their own backgrounds that might have had an impact on shaping their views and opinions, which might influence the interpretation of data collected. Considering that this is a retrospective study, it is possible that what I assumed at the beginning of this thesis may not be exactly what I assumed when I first started teaching in Japan. To the best of my knowledge, the following are my own assumptions prior to embarking on an education journey as an ALT at Mukogawa Women's University Junior High and Senior High School:

- 1) I would have no problems with the culture.
- 2) I would understand the ways in which the girls learned and communicated.
- 3) I would be an effective and empathetic English teacher.

- 4) Understanding Japanese would afford me some special insight into the students' challenges and errors.
- 5) Students would be able to answer basic questions such as "how are you?" and would be willing to come and talk to me.
- 6) I would not experience homesickness or loneliness in Japan.
- 7) As an assistant language teacher, I would receive guided input and support from the Japanese teachers.
- 8) There would be more CLT (Communicative Language Teaching) in the classroom, and the Japanese teachers would use me for authentic communication with students.

Research Questions

- 1) As a novice English teacher, what strengths did I bring to the teaching of English to junior high school girls in a private girls' school in Japan?
- 2) How did a major in international studies help me to teach this population?
- 3) What challenges, if any, did I face not having been an English major?
- 4) What did I find was successful in motivating my students to learn English as a living language?
- 5) What did I learn from teaching this particular population in Japan?
- 6) How did I change in these two years, and what caused the change?
- 7) What recommendations do I have for those Americans preparing to teach English in Japan?

Research Methods

Autoethnography seemed to be appropriate for this project because it is “intended to name a form of critical self-study” (Hughes, Pennington, & Makris, 2012, para. 1)—in this case my life teaching at a private school in Japan. In this qualitative method, the “researcher takes an active, scientific, and systematic view of personal experience in relation to cultural groups identified by the researcher as similar to the self (i.e., us) or as others who differ from the self (i.e., them)” (para 1). Upon arrival at Mukogawa, as a teacher, I had already developed a feeling of kinship toward the Japanese people and an affinity for the culture. Unlike many other ALTs, I arrived with no apprehension or anxiety about living and working in Japan. For me, it was like coming home to a familiar and welcoming family.

This autoethnography (Canagarajah, 2012), therefore, is about my life as a novice English teacher in a girls’ secondary school in Western Japan. To help readers understand my experience better, I have included a number of visual and written artifacts of the period from 2010-2012. In “Teachers' narratives: A source for exploring the influences of teachers' significant life experiences on their dispositions and teaching practices” (2018), Servet Altan and Jennie Farber Lane of Bilkent University, Graduate School of Education in Ankara, Turkey remind readers of the following:

- Teachers' stories provide key resources for effective teacher education programs.
- Teachers' significant life experiences and dispositions influence teaching practice.

- Supportive learning environments influence teachers' dispositions positively.
 - Experiences related to personal attributes influence teachers' dispositions.
- (p. 238)

Thesis Overview

This thesis is comprised of five chapters. Chapter 1 is the author's background prior to teaching English in Japan. Chapter 2 is a review of literature discussing the value of autoethnography for new teachers, the role of the ALT in Japan, and the pedagogical and cultural issues of teaching in Japan. Chapter 3 is the research methodology, which is my autoethnography. Chapter 4 reflects on the autoethnography and the original assumptions. Finally, Chapter 5 is a discussion of what I have learned over the course of my time spent in Japan and the completion of graduate school, and includes the answers to my research questions, as well as the limitations to the study, and recommendations for further research.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Chapter 2 is a review of literature regarding (1) the value of ethnography for new teachers, (2) the role of the ALT in Japan, and (3) the pedagogical issues and cultural issues of teaching in Japan.

I. The Value of autoethnography

Canagarajah (2012) defines autoethnography by its three constituents: *auto*, *ethno*, and *graphy*. *Auto*, from the Greek *autos* or self, denotes research that “values the self as a rich repository of experiences and perspectives that are not easily available to traditional approaches...It frankly engages with the situatedness of one’s experiences, rather than suppressing them” (p. 260). *Ethno*, from the Greek *ethnos* or a group with which one identifies, refers to the way “one’s experiences and development are perceived as socially constructed” (p. 260). Lastly, *graphy* from the Greek *graph* or write, is “the means of disseminating one’s knowledge and experiences” with an emphasis on narrative for “generating, recording, and analyzing data” (p. 260).

There is much that can be gained from the insight of personal narrative. According to Pavlenko (2002),

There is no doubt that recent developments that legitimize personal narratives are extremely important for the TESOL field, as they allow for both teachers’ and learners’ voices to be heard on a par with those of the researchers. As a result, researchers can gain rare insights into learners’ motivations, investments,

struggles, losses, and gains as well as into language ideologies that guide their learning trajectories. (pp. 212-213)

Autoethnography widens the lens and rejects the inflexible reigns of what we sometimes consider necessary for meaningful and useful research. In addition, “this approach also helps us understand how the kinds of people we claim, or are perceived, to be influence interpretations of what we study, how we study it, and what we say about our topic” (Adams 2005; Wood 2009, as cited in Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Ethnography is often referenced

as a key qualitative approach to studying the rules, norms, and acts of resistance associated with cultural groups. Consequently, the hybrid term, autoethnography, is intended to name a form of critical self-study in which the researcher takes an active, scientific, and systematic view of personal experience in relation to cultural groups identified by the researcher as similar to the self (i.e., us) or as others who differ from the self (i.e., them).” (Hughes, Pennington, Makris, 2012, para. 1)

Holland (2015) states that “some might argue that autoethnography is not valid because the researcher, being a participant observer, might be too biased to write objectively about her own experiences” and “others might argue that the researcher’s memories are not valid research as they might not be accurate or dependable memories” (p. 13). Mendez (2013) acknowledges there are limitations associated with the method, for example, one limitation “is the exposure it implies of the researcher’s inner feelings and thoughts, which require honesty and willingness to self-disclose” (para. 10). TESOL asks that ethnographers, through self-examination and reflexivity, reveal their own

backgrounds and assumptions that might influence data collection and interpretation.

While it is true that this method relies on personal narrative and memory, “autoethnography is one of the approaches that acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher’s influence on research, rather than hiding from these matters or assuming they don’t exist” (Ellis, Adams, Bochner, 2011, para. 3).

Despite the transformative value of this research method, there have been many critics, such as “Sir Social Science,” who writes: “Autoethnography isn’t sufficiently realist or scientific; it’s too aesthetic and literary. Your data aren’t real data....you autoethnographers are naval-gazing, self-absorbed narcissists who don’t fulfill your scholarly obligation to hypothesize, analyze, contextualize, and theorize” (Ellis, 2009, p. 371). In “Fighting Back or Moving On” Carolyn Ellis (2009) reads and contemplates critical responses to autoethnography as a research method. She says that “Ms. Aesthetic rants: ‘Autoethnography isn’t sufficiently aesthetic and literary and is too concerned with being science. You don’t write well enough to carry off the aesthetic and literary goals of autoethnography’” (p. 371). Despite the critiques she has received, Ellis remains hopeful that critical responses might serve to improve and enhance autoethnography, pointing out that “given the number, variety, and contradictory nature of some of the critiques, I have a sense that we must be doing something right and that we should continue doing what we are doing” (p. 373).

Still a relatively new research method in TESOL, I believe that there is much to be gained from autoethnography. For educators in particular, there is much that can be discovered from the personal experiences of others. Rather than a compelling sense to evaluate the validity of personal experiences, we are challenged to consider the value of

learning from them. Aguilar (2016) maintains that the central point of autoethnography is to reflect on the events of the past without any hidden messages. “It is not to gain the empathy of others, but to make the point that through the voice, one is able to show the obstacles faced and how one overcomes them” (p. 18).

In her 2015 thesis, *“Don’t Wake Me, My Desk is Far Too Comfortable”: An Autoethnography of a Novice ESL Teacher’s First Year of Teaching in Japan*, Holland employed autoethnography as a means to gain a better understanding of her teaching experience in Japan. She states: “I want to better understand my teaching experiences in Japan. I realize now that my way is not the only way, and I want to learn from my autoethnography....If I just let my experiences be in the past, they would have only benefited me, and no one else” (p. 28). She recognizes that her experience was framed by an “American lens,” and tells her story in order to “give the novice EFL teacher insight into [her] mind during this year abroad” (p. 30). From 2011-2012, Holland and I had the opportunity to work together as assistant language teachers at Mukogawa Women’s University Junior High and Senior High School. I had been teaching at the school for one year when I found out that Holland had been hired to start the next fall. In anticipation of my friend’s arrival to Japan, I had to remind myself that it would be her first time in the country. She may have questions about the culture or about customs that I had come to accept as standard routine without much extra thought. Through her eyes as a newcomer, I started to observe and consider the culture in new ways. Reflecting on her experiences in Japan, Holland notes there existed both delights and exasperations of living and working in the culture. I share this sentiment, and can identify with “the pendulum of feelings” that one might experience throughout the year (p. 117). Holland says:

Like Feiler, my feelings were constantly changing. One day I felt like the privileged foreign guest whom every student adored, and another day I would feel like the outsider who wasn't fully accepted because I was a *hakujin* (a white foreigner). (p.118)

Autoethnography gives us an inside view into the lived experience—in this case of an American teaching in Japan—and allows us to consider situations and roles from a humanistic perspective. Holland offers encouragement to others who may venture to teach English in Japan, and offers a summation of her time spent there: “Yes there were both frustrations and joys throughout my year, but my greatest take-away is the joy” (p. 157).

II. The Role of an ALT in Japan

The Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) system, which was started in Japan in 1987, allows native English speakers to work in Japanese schools and to assist staff English teachers. Today, JET (Japan Exchange and Teaching) is one of the world's largest international exchange programs; however, it accounted for just 24.5 percent of classroom ALTs in Japan in 2016 (McCrostie, 2017, web). While an ALT must hold a bachelor's degree from an accredited university, the opportunity is not exclusive to English or Education majors. Started “with the purpose of increasing mutual understanding between the people of Japan and the people of other nations, it aims to promote internationalization in Japan's local communities by helping to improve foreign language education and by developing international exchange at the community level” (JET PROGRAM; Amaki, 2008, pp. 54-55). Many ALTs are in fact “recruited with no prior teaching experience or certification, and are expected to develop their own teaching

skills in the course of assisting a full-time, permanent staff English teacher, who is generally a Japanese national in their schools” (Amaki, 2008, p. 54). As they are often the only native English speakers in their respective schools, ALTs are in position to have an intimate and practical perspective of the English language education in Japanese schools.

Amaki’s survey of 282 current and former ALTs resulted in valuable insight regarding the state of English education in Japan. When asked about the quality of the staff English teachers’ teaching skills, respondents offered more complaints than positive evaluations.

According to their observations, a number of the staff English teachers could not speak English fluently and coherently, and did not have confidence to speak English in their classrooms. This also seems to have been the source of poor communication skills on the part of staff teachers dealing with ALTs in creating team-teaching lesson plans. (p. 58)

ALTs work closely with staff teachers to plan and implement classroom lessons. However, low English proficiency of the staff teachers can lead to a lack of confidence in both speaking English in class and in collaborative efforts with the ALTs. Additionally, many respondents noted the fact that staff English teachers were worried about making mistakes or mispronouncing words in front of the students as well as in front of the native-speaker ALTs. In Japanese society, where high emphasis is placed on saving face, a clear connection can be drawn between the culture and the classroom behavior of both teachers and students.

An ALT holds great potential for the English language classroom—a real, live, native speaker there to assist in natural and spoken English. However, the role may at times be under-utilized. One respondent to Amaki's (2008) survey commented on the ineffective use of ALTs: "Sometimes the teachers use the CDs while I am in class, and it really bothers me! If you aren't going to use me as at least a human tape recorder, then why use me at all? The CDs sound really unnatural to me" (p. 59). Respondents were later asked to indicate their thoughts on the strengths or the weaknesses of English language education. 47% suggested that a lack of oral communication in the classroom was a definitive weakness. "The students do not have chances to speak English during class or use English in a practical way to express themselves: I think it is very unfortunate because many students were interested in English when they were 1st-year students at junior high schools, but now as 3rd-year students they say, "English is boring" and "I can't speak English" (p. 60). There are times when the focus of English language instruction in Japan appears to be on the information students need to pass a test rather than what students need for practical communication.

III. Teaching English in Japan

Pedagogical issues to consider

ALT programs such as JET have received mixed reviews. Supporters point to the benefit of helping to internationalize Japan, while critics argue that it is a waste of money and fails to improve students' English proficiency. Associate Professor Naoki Fujimoto-Adamson at Niigata University admits that there are not enough studies regarding the effectiveness of team-teaching for raising English proficiency, but believes that "students' motivation to learn English definitely improves through team-teaching lessons"

(McCrostie, 2017, web). Dörnyei introduced the idea of motivational strategies in teaching as “techniques that promote the individual’s goal-related behavior” (as cited in Hamada, 2014, p. 7). Through the introduction of a native English speaker in the classroom, Japanese ELLs can consider the practicality of language learning for communication. However, the introduction of a foreign teacher into the Japanese classroom raises other pedagogical and cultural considerations as well: “To avoid threatening the status of Japanese teachers, [Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology] officials insisted on classifying participants as ‘assistants’ and that little emphasis would be placed on recruiting trained teachers” (McCrostie, 2017, web). When the ALT system began 30 years ago, there was little known about the process of team-teaching. It appears that more effort has been made to ensure the authority and status of the Japanese teacher, and consequently, by some it appears that JET prefers untrained ALTs—even majors other than English who have been arriving in Japan in need of guidance and training. McCrostie, in his account in the *Japan Times*, names the demands on host teachers’ time as a major concern:

In theory, Japanese teachers work in tandem with foreign assistants to create and teach useful and engaging communicative lessons. In reality, overworked teachers often don’t have the time required to properly co-plan a team-teaching lesson—especially when dealing with an inexperienced ALT fresh off the plane. (web)

The concept of the ALT in the English language classroom is a potentially good one—one that could serve to increase student motivation and demonstrate the practical use of English for communication. However, many of the ALTs are first-year teachers, and

many of the host Japanese teachers do not have adequate time and resources to devote to co-planning and co-teaching with their foreign assistants.

In comparison to other Asian countries and despite being a wealthy and developed nation, Japan has struggled to attain a level of English proficiency that is competitive in a global economy. Advocates of the teaching of English as a lingua franca (ELF), suggest that simply by focusing on communication, Japan may be able to break this barrier. Many school lessons “remain teacher-centered and grammar-heavy, with much of the instruction conducted in Japanese” (Kosaka, 2014, web). EF Japan President Nakamura states: “To communicate is the most important thing, so we need to get rid of this barrier, especially in the workplace. Trying to communicate, trying to say what you think—not speaking perfect English—that is important” (Kosaka, 2014, web). In this model of English language learning, communication is emphasized over grammatical perfection. There is a stress on building relationships and working toward a shared goal of understanding, even if speakers use non-native variations of English. In the same *Japan Times* article, linguistics professor at the University of Tokyo, Mike Hanford, discusses the global shift toward a variety of world Englishes rather than a native speaker norm for both students and teachers of English:

In terms of research into language and language teaching—and a lot of this comes from Noam Chomsky—the native speaker is the model and the idea is to become like a native speaker for success as a second language learner,’ he says. ‘But the reality is, it is virtually impossible to become like a native speaker in another language. By setting up the native speaker as the only model, you are setting up your students to fail. (Kosaka, 2014, web)

Hanford's is a relatively recent perspective that would not have been considered a decade ago and certainly not two or three decades ago, because native speakers were considered better qualified than non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs). Even these terms have fallen out of the most current literature as recommended by the international professional organization, Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL):

TESOL strongly opposes discrimination against nonnative English speakers in the field of English language teaching. Rather, English language proficiency, teaching experience, and professionalism should be assessed along on a continuum of professional preparation. All English language educators should be proficient in English regardless of their native languages, but English language proficiency should be viewed as only one criterion in evaluating a teacher's professionalism. Teaching skills, teaching experience, and professional preparation should be given as much weight as language proficiency. (TESOL, 2018, web)

By shifting the focus from the native-speaker norm to the use of English for communication purposes, Japan may start to see a breakdown of the English proficiency barrier.

A study of nearly 700 students from Korea, China, and Japan revealed that "...Asian students consider their English education as not practical for their needs and focus too much on grammar and passing the university entrance exam" (Life, 2011, p. 26). Despite good intentions for relevant English instruction, a heavy concentration on grammar has tended to leave students with a lack of confidence in real-life situations. In Japan, the Ministry of Education states: "...the guiding principle of Japanese English

education is to develop students' basic practical communication abilities such as listening and speaking, deepening the understanding of language and culture, and fostering a positive attitude toward communication through foreign languages" (as cited in Hamada, 2011, p. 16). However, it appears that despite the intentions of the educational system, basic communication abilities remain underdeveloped.

According to a 2014 test carried out at 480 public high schools in Japan, it was discovered that the English skills of students in the last year of high school were far below government targets ("Disappointing Levels of English," 2015). In fact,

Students' English proficiency was especially low on the more active, productive skills of speaking and writing....The difficulty with speaking and writing reveals once again that junior high and high schools continue to teach English to pass university entrance exams, instead of working toward students' learning functioning and creative English. (para. 3)

It is not surprising that teaching methods would play an important role in the outcome of English education and test performance. A conventional and customary method in Japan, the Grammar-Translation method is widely employed to teach English in schools. This method is defined by the British Council as:

A way of teaching in which students study grammar and translate words into their own language. They do not practice communication and there is little focus on speaking. A teacher presents a grammar rule and vocabulary lists and then students translate a written text from their own language into the second language. ("Grammar Translation," 2018)

Zimmerman (2014) adds that “The primary goals of this approach were to prepare students to study the classics and to pass standardized exams. Students were not expected to use the language for communication” (p. 290). The introduction of the ALT into the language classroom is a step in the right direction to combat disproportionate use of this method; however, it is a method upon which many Japanese teachers rely and may not be able to comfortably alter.

A second method known as the Audio-lingual method is commonly used when students have access to audio technology in the classroom. This method stresses listening and pronunciation, and features include dialogues, mimicry and memorization, and controlled vocabulary (Celce-Murcia, 2014). The idea behind this method stems from Skinner, and the notion in behavioral psychology that “learning is based on getting learners to repeat behaviors (verbal or nonverbal) until they become fully learned habits” (Celce-Murcia, 2014, p. 6). While there may be appropriate times to incorporate both the Grammar-Translation and Audio-lingual methods, neither method allows for full creative, functional use of the English language. A shift toward the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach seems to be the goal of the Ministry of Education. CLT “is an approach to language teaching that emphasizes learning a language first and foremost for the purpose of communicating with others” (Duff, 2014, p. 15). CLT might be more achievable in an English as a Second Language (ESL) setting as compared to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) setting; however, without method reform in an EFL setting, student proficiency in productive skills such as speaking and writing is unlikely to improve.

Cultural issues to consider

With respect to teaching English as a foreign language in Japan, it is imperative that North Americans pay attention to the cultural issues that may affect their success both in the classroom and in the teachers' staff room. Japan is a country with a rich history entrenched in tradition, and Holland (2015) points out that "it would be beneficial to examine deep-rooted Japanese values that more than likely will transfer over to the classroom" (p. 20). In contrast to Western ideals and the value placed on individual achievements, Chesky argued that "Japan is a collectivist society; individuals are encouraged to conform to the standards of others and be a part of the group" (as cited in Holland, 2015, p. 21). Japanese school children are not encouraged to raise their hands or give their personal opinions in the classroom. On the contrary, it is more important to maintain group cohesion and avoid any chance of disagreement or embarrassment—answer incorrectly and embarrass the self for making a mistake; answer correctly and embarrass the self for displaying superiority to others. Nozaki noted that "Japanese students have an interesting combination of both a fear of making mistakes and a fear of outperforming others" (as cited in Holland, 2015, p. 24). In other words, drawing attention to the self—either positive or negative—can be problematic or cause stress in the learners, especially for adolescents who are already struggling (Gardner & Davis, 2014) to develop their sense of self.

In *Bridging Japanese/North American Differences*, Gudykunst and Nishida (1994) discuss linguistic knowledge in relation to misunderstandings between Japanese and North Americans, stating: "If, for example, North Americans can speak Japanese, but do not understand the Japanese culture, they can make fluent fools of themselves" (p. 2).

Japanese culture is intriguing, yet filled with subtleties. Making the effort to study and speak the Japanese language will be appreciated, surely, but noticing and adapting to the culture will prove to be extremely beneficial to North Americans residing in Japan. Miller and Steinberg said: “When people communicate they make predictions about the effects, or outcomes, of their communication behaviors; that is, they choose among various communicative strategies on the basis of predictions about how the person receiving the message will respond” (as cited in Gudykunst & Nishida, 1994, p. 8). It is the observation of regularity in the culture—the norms, values, and rules—that allows predictions to be made. Gudykunst and Nishida go on to say:

The relative value placed on using personal and social information for making predictions is one of the major differences between the ways Japanese and North Americans communicate. To illustrate, North Americans emphasize personal information over social information in predicting others’ behavior, whereas Japanese emphasize social information over personal information. (p. 9)

A great deal of importance is placed on social roles and group membership in Japan, and behavior is often linked to one’s group. “In order to overcome the potential for misunderstandings that can occur when social identities predominate, communicators must acknowledge the cultural differences, as well as try to understand them and how they influence their communication” (Gudykunst & Nishida, 1994, p. 11). A foreign guest in a Japanese school ought to consider the cultural implications influencing both communication and behavior of their students and colleagues. In addition, the foreign guest should be aware that his or her behavior is being noted and attributed—positively

or negatively—to the perception of the *gai kokujin* or foreigner as well as the country of origin of that foreign guest.

In the context of teaching at an all-girls school in Japan, there is a significant aspect of the material culture worth noting. A study by Burdelski and Mitsunashi (2010) examined the use of the word *kawaii* in a Japanese preschool and suggested that the teachers' uses of the word in assessing the social world shaped the children's understanding of what *kawaii* is. An adjective meaning 'cute' or 'adorable,' *kawaii* is "used to describe things, such as animated characters, infants, animals, and natural objects, that have certain qualities and features" (Burdelski & Mitsunashi, 2010, *Kawaii* section, para. 1). The concept has wide appeal in Japanese society and is apparent everywhere—characters and icons promote everything from snacks to businesses to government campaigns. "The country even has a 'cartoon culture ambassador' (a robotic cat named Doraemon) and has named Hello Kitty its official tourist ambassador to Hong Kong and China" (Chen, 2016, web). Burdelski and Mitsunashi maintain that "...*kawaii* is an important aspect of gender identity in young children, particularly girls" (*Kawaii* section, para. 5) and is "tied to empathy and relationships" (Conclusion section, para. 3). An understanding of the ways in which Japanese children—girls in particular—are socialized into the *kawaii* culture will prove beneficial when working with students from this population.

Coming from cultures that place value on student participation and active learning, ALTs in Japan need to consider the Japanese educational system itself. According to Saito, "The basic instructional pattern of Japanese education can be described essentially one-way with the teacher presenting information while the students receive and

memorize it” (as cited in Holland, 2015, p. 23). While some may argue that language learning cannot occur within this system, it is something that we must bear in mind in the context of teaching Japanese ELLs. Finally, it is important to remember that as foreign guests in Japan, we must not impose our own values, but adapt to the ways of the culture.

Chapter 3

Autoethnography

Chapter 3 is the autoethnography in which I introduce both written and visual artifacts.

Daily Schedule

Mukogawa Women's University is located in the city of Nishinomiya, in Hyogo Prefecture, Japan. The school was established as Mukogawa Girls' High School in 1939, and by 1948 it consisted of both a junior high school and a senior high school.

Mukogawa Women's University was established shortly after in 1949, and finally a co-ed university kindergarten was added later in 1979. Because of the sister-city relationship between Nishinomiya and Spokane, Washington, my hometown, the university founded Mukogawa Fort Wright Institute, a branch campus in Spokane for Mukogawa students to study abroad and enroll in English immersion programs. Fortunately for me, it was my ties to MFWI that led to eventually being hired as an Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) at Mukogawa Women's University Junior High and High School.

In 2010, I had been hired to teach eighth grade English on the secondary school campus near the university in Nishinomiya. There were ten sections—seven of these were “Intelligent English” (IE) courses, two were known as “Super English” (SE) courses, and finally, one section was called “Super Science” (SS). The fact that Mukogawa offers these “super” options for both English and science is kind of a big deal—the program was fairly new when I was hired, and it is an attractive option for parents who are searching for the best education for their children. Students are tested upon admission to the school (and each subsequent year), and based on test results are placed into a

corresponding section. The true beginners were enrolled in Intelligent English, and I had a total of about 225 students in IE as well as about 70 in Super English. There were about 35 in Super Science, where students focused on science, and I met with them once a week for English. To place into either the Super English or Super Science courses, students had to apply specifically to the course and pass an entrance exam.

In Japan, the academic school year begins in March, so it was half-way through the school year when I began in September. I was to be replacing an ALT who had been teaching for the previous two years and who also happened to be a friend and former coworker of mine from Spokane. She helped to prepare me to take over her classes with a detailed note regarding the course schedule:

Mukogawa Daily Life
Let's enjoy teaching life.

8:25 Morning Bow

Be at your desk in the staffroom by 8:25 for the morning bow. This is where all the morning announcements are given. You will bow at the beginning and at the end of the meeting. After that the grade you are in will have a small informal meeting.

8:35 Homeroom

You will follow either Ms. Nakahara or Ms. Ito to the homeroom. In the homeroom, Super English students read Extensive Reading Books. This is silent reading time. You can walk around the classroom or organize the extensive reading books on the book truck.

8:45 Classroom Bow

Students will stop reading and return their reading books to the book truck. Depending on the teacher, students will either bow or say, "good morning" to you. Ms. Nakahara has the students stand and say, "good morning." Ms. Ito has the students bow and say "*onegaishimasu*." Morning announcements will follow. If you have anything to say to the students about class that day, please do it now. Usually I don't have anything to say, so I talk about a news topic, or I recommend a book from the book truck. At the end of homeroom, the students will bow or say, "good bye".

Class Schedule

1st 8:55
 2nd 9:45
 3rd 10:45
 4th 11:45
 Lunch 12:45
 5th 1:35
 6th 2:35
 End 3:25

Books in use: *Bridge Work*, *Phonetics*, *Phonetics Workbook*, *Total English*, *Tactics in English*

Super English Class M2-8 Ms. Ito

Class M2 - 8 is super cute. They are very sweet and shy. Ms. Ito isn't a strict teacher, but the students listen to her well. At the beginning of the class you will cover Primary Phonics for 10 – 15 minutes. I usually do about two pages. You can use PowerPoint in the classroom. Don has the teaching guide for this book. On Fridays I do Super English Journals. All the journaling information is on your desk in the seminar building in the pink folder. The students have Journal notebooks where they write and keep track of their journaling. They have a graph that they fill in at the end of the journal to keep track of their word count. The remainder of the class is devoted to *Bridgework* and *Total English*. Ms. Ito teaches these lessons with your help. Just follow her lead. You will be in charge of playing the CD and helping with pronunciation. I would advise you to learn how to use the media in the classroom. It can be a valuable tool. Also, remember to carry two AA batteries with you to class. Sometimes the remote batteries are dead and it is a real pain to track some down when you are in the middle of class.

Super English Class M2-9 Ms. Nakahara

Class M2-9 is shy. Ms. Nakahara is a strict teacher, but the students really like and respect her. The class follows the same format as M2-8 Ms. Ito.

LL M2-3, M2-4, M2-2, M2-1 Ms. Watanabe

The LL classes are the regular English course classes. You will be using *Tactics in English*. I really like this book. Ms. Watanabe is very kind. She also is a part-time teacher at the University in the Education Department. The class is basically taught by you. You are in charge of the lesson plans and teaching the class. Ms. Watanabe will translate if the students do not understand. I use PowerPoint often in class. The students have name cards that they will need at the beginning of class. I usually go to class about 5 minutes early to set up the media. Bring the name cards with you, have the students who are “*nichiban-san*” (day duty) pass out the name cards before class. I use the name cards for one—learning their first names, and two, keeping “points” on them. If they answer a question correctly

they get a stamp. At the end of the quarter I give a small prize to the student with the most stamps. I then use the SAME name cards for the next quarter, but use a different stamp. You can buy the stamps at *Daie*, or any paper goods store. Class 2-1 is noisy.

LL M2-6, SS M2-10 Ms. Ito

This is the same as above, just with a different teacher. Ms. Ito is a great teacher, but she can be difficult to work with. The students like her.

LL M2-5 M2-7 Ms. Nakahara

These are the same as above, just with a different teacher. As I said before Ms. Nakahara is strict, but the students like and respect her. Class 2-7 can be a little noisy. ***We DO NOT use the stamps in these two classes.

English Club usually starts at 4:10 and *usually* goes until 5:00. The English club teachers take turns being on duty. This means that if there is a problem during club, there is a teacher available to help.

My advice to you while teaching here

1. Run everything by Phillip first.
2. Learn PowerPoint.
3. Don't talk to your boss, no matter how good your Japanese is—unless you have Phillip, Mr. Suzuki, or Mr. Oka with you (J. Anderson, Personal communication, August 2010).

I met with each of the IE sections (1-7) and the SS section (10) once a week for an English listening class, and the SE sections (8-9) I met with every day for both homeroom and regular English class. In the IE listening classes I prepared a PowerPoint lesson for each unit that displayed the new vocabulary from their book, answers to the listening tasks, and other images and material that was relevant to the chapter. While I was the main teacher for the listening classes, a Japanese teacher would be present in the classroom for translation help as needed. As a new teacher, I was grateful for the assistance; however, I wondered if some of the teachers provided a bit too much translation at times. Taking care to provide instruction that I thought students would understand, it was discouraging when I felt that my English was at times tuned out in

favor of the Japanese translation to follow. It seemed that when the students knew the Japanese was coming, their motivation to listen and attempt to comprehend was reduced. In the SE classes, I began with either a short phonics lesson, a 10-minute journal, or some kind of group discussion, and for the rest of the class, I would assist either Ms. Nakahara or Ms. Ito as needed. Most lessons were heavily grammar-based—sometimes I would read texts aloud, and sometimes Ms. Ito would ask me to walk around and help students individually.

Uesuto Sensei

In Japan, a person's signature is symbolized by what is called a *hanko* or a stamp or seal.



Figure 2. *Hanko* or name stamp. <http://jpinfo.com/16248>

The end of the *hanko* is carved with the *kanji* or Chinese characters that make up a person's last name, and each of the staff members were required to use one to sign in every morning in the official attendance book in the staff room. For some of the teachers with foreign names, selecting the proper *hanko* took some creativity, and usually they had

to be custom made. My last name was easy—West. *Nishi* (西), the Japanese word for west, is also a surname, and the *hanko* is readily available most places that *hanko* are sold, including the *hyakkin* or 100-yen shop. Each morning, I would stamp my *kanji* seal in the attendance book on the table next to the *kouchou* or principal, along with a greeting: “*ohayou gozaimasu*”—good morning.



Figure 3. Staff nametag "*Uesuto*."

In Japanese, there is a /wa/ sound, but there exists no /w/ followed by any other vowel. The /we/ is formed by combining /u/ and /ε/. My nametag at school spelled out my last name, West, in *katakana*: ウエスト. It was pronounced /uɛsuto/, and students and teachers referred to me as “*Uesuto Sensei*.”

A New Teacher

Being back in Japan was a comfortable feeling for me. I had good friends to meet and places to explore—daily life was easy. There is a peaceful ambience that makes me feel very at home. However, this comfortable feeling vanished when I stepped into the classroom for the first time. Although I had been working with Japanese exchange students and had completed some online TESL training courses, I did not have classroom experience—that was foreign to me—and I did not know what to expect. On the first day of actual teaching, I walked into the eighth grade SE class with Ms. Ito. Each class had a leader and a subleader who were responsible for helping the class to settle down and prepare for the lesson. As we walked into the room and headed to the front of the class, the voices and chatter died down and the leader’s voice called out:

Mokusou shite kudasai. 黙想してください (Please engage in silent meditation.)

Kiritsu! きりつ! (Stand up)

Rei. れい. (Bow)

The class bowed in unison and stood patiently, waiting for my greeting. This was the format in all of the classes at Mukogawa—each class began with a quiet reflection time of about 10 seconds followed by a group bow.

“Good morning!” I called out, unsure of what to expect in response.

“Good morning, Ms. West” a chorus of voices answered back.

“How are you?”

“I’m fine, thank you. And you?”

“I am fine too! Thank you. Please sit down.”

I was with class eight and Ms. Ito, who was the homeroom teacher. She spoke English well, in a dignified manner, and had a nice smile. She welcomed me and we got along well, although something about her demeanor and confidence while teaching was slightly intimidating to me. Ms. Ito had asked me to start with a brief phonics lesson, picking up in the book where the class had left off before summer break a few weeks prior. I had been thinking about some of the strategies I might use to teach phonics, and was fairly confident that I had a decent plan for the first day of class. In an attempt to incorporate a game of “telephone” into the lesson, I asked students in the first row to choose one of the words from their book and to say the word to the person behind them, who would then pass on the word to the next person, and so on—the goal being that the students in the last row would be able to relay the original word. I thought the instructions I provided were clear and that students understood; however, I failed to have them close their books, and most students were confused and simply pointing at the word in their book rather than pronouncing and listening to the words. That it would be so difficult to explain the simple directions for this activity, I did not anticipate. A part of me thought Ms. Ito might step in and help explain the instructions, but she stood off to the side, watching with a smile, and what I might refer to as amusement. While my idea fell flat on the first day, it was an important learning experience for me. I needed to work on a few things—starting with slowing down the speed of my speech, repeating instruction, and modeling.



Figure 4. Months of the Year Song. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5enDRrWyXaw>

Music in the classroom

January, February, March, and April...these are the months of the year.

I was walking through the school hallways when I heard the familiar musical tones of a music video I had shown in class. We were studying a unit on dates and time and I turned to the all-powerful YouTube to find a supplemental teaching aid. Music had always been helpful for me when studying Spanish and Japanese, so I wanted to incorporate a song into teaching the months of the year. It was a major success! I used the same song for all my regular listening classes, and in each class, the students were engaged in learning—singing along and actively taking in new vocabulary. It was a simple song with a catchy tune, and I heard students reciting the months in this way outside of English class long after we had finished the unit.

Students say the darndest things

I loved to read through student journals. They always came up with great lines, and teaching 8th grade Japanese girls was nothing if not entertaining. Below I include some of my favorite lines from student journal entries.



Danielle West Nozaka published a note.



December 19, 2010 · ⚙️ ▼

classic quotes by Japanese jr high school students part 1

"Sashimi is very not dericious"

"I get on train and sleep. It's so warm and good for sleeping"

"My favorite seazun is spurinter"

"My hero is my dog! Because when I'm sad, she worries for me"

"If I would have many small dog, it's so ok. Because most small dog don't stench"

"If I could have a cat, my sister's hamstar is eaten by cat"

"I'm interested in dog food's taste. Is it tasty or bad?"

"I sleep at 10. I see the dreams"

"I graduationed santa when I was 12"

"I hate father. I so so mother and little sister and little brother"

"I like small peoples. I like baby. Baby and small peoples are very very cute"

"Small pig is little chubby. I like this body"

Figure 5. Students' journal quotations.

Interacting with my students was the best part of each day, and they never failed to make me smile. The students in each section stayed together all day—the classroom was their own and the teachers rotated from classroom to classroom rather than the students.

Whether they liked it or not, the class was a group or a family of sorts. Each class section

that I taught had its own unique class personality, for example: IE Class Three was sweet, but quiet; IE Class One was noisy and tended to lose focus; IE Class Seven was energetic and talkative, but seemed excited about English. It followed that each class had a mixture of students: those who were out-going and talked openly with me, those who smiled shyly and did their best to answer me when I talked to them, and those who could not or would not speak to me in English.

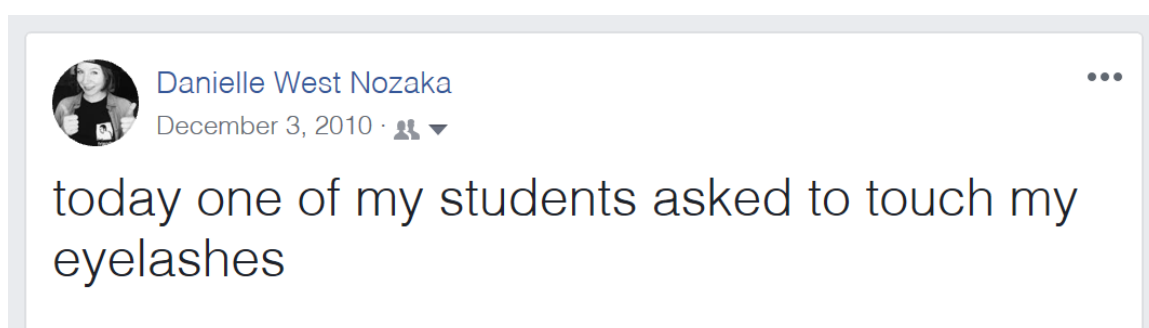


Figure 6. Facebook post.

After I had been teaching at Mukogawa for several weeks, I started building rapport with students. During class, when students were doing pair work or filling in answers, I would walk around the classroom to assist with questions and to get to know the students a little better. One day as I was strolling the aisles I heard some students chatting.

Matsuge nante iu? まつ毛何て言う? (How do you say eyelashes?)

Then, I received a slightly unusual request: “*Sensei, can eye lash touch?*” Using their electronic dictionaries, these students had searched for the word “eyelash” and were asking me if they could touch my eyelashes. Initially, this made me laugh, but because of

their curiosity and effort to use English to ask me, I obliged. I used the opportunity to teach the students to say, “Can I touch your eyelashes?” In Japanese, the grammatical structure of a sentence is subject, object, verb (SOV), and occasionally students will place the verb at the end of the sentence when transferring from the Japanese (L1) to English (L2).

In all the classrooms, up front next to the blackboard, there was platform for the teacher. A podium rested on the platform, as well as a computer with a stereo system. At the beginning of every class, I would step onto the “stage,” prepare any media, and then wait to greet the class. On one particular winter day as I was standing in front of the class, I noticed a student in the first row—she was staring straight ahead with a sleepy, dazed look. I smiled and said hello, and she muttered, “*Sensei futotta*,” which translated means, “Teacher got fat.” I laughed as the comment caught me off-guard in that moment, but I realized she was not talking to me directly and it seemed as though she was making an objective observation with no malicious intent. In Japan, it is not uncommon to talk about weight gain or weight loss in a matter of fact manner. In a sense, it is a familial subject—when people start commenting on your weight, take solace in the notion that you might be considered a part of their in-group.



Figure 7. Check-in at Mukogawa Women's University High School.
“A student told me that my English pronunciation was really good.”

When I first started teaching, I debated whether or not I should let the students know that I could understand Japanese. I did not want to use Japanese in the classroom because of a) my own insecurities about making a mistake in front of the students, and b) my desire to encourage students to speak only English with me. However, at times it was necessary to use Japanese either in the school or in the neighboring community, and eventually some students started to figure out that I could speak their language. As eighth graders, they were only in the second year of English study, and for some, English just was not something that made any sense yet. A student in one of my afternoon classes was

quiet and withdrawn. She did not show any effort to participate in class and would not speak—the look on her face said she would rather be anywhere else but stuck in English class. I wanted to try a new approach, so I started chatting with her in Japanese a little bit here and there to see if there was a way to reach her. Instantly, her eyes lit up and her attitude changed in subsequent weeks. She did not start speaking English, but she did start communicating with me—albeit in Japanese. Ni (2012) discussed the relationship between affective factors and the process of second language acquisition. “Attempts should be made to lower the affective filter and let learners feel less stressed and more confident in a comfortable learning atmosphere” (p. 1508). It was important to me that my students felt comfortable in class and in talking to me in order to achieve any level of language acquisition.

Similar to many junior high school students across the globe, many of my students enjoyed talking about popular music. During a conversation with a student one day, I had casually mentioned the name of a popular singer and she said to me:

“Sensei, eigo no hatsuon meccha yokatta desu” (Teacher, your English pronunciation was really good).

She and a few other students proceeded to give me names of famous artists to listen to the way I pronounced the name.

“Maikeru Jakuson wa?” マイケル ジャクソンは？ (How about Michael Jackson?)

“Michael Jackson.”

“*Sugoi!*” すごい (Great!)

I pronounced a few of the names thrown at me in the best native-English I knew how, and apparently my skills were enough to really impress.

Sports Day

Undoukai or sports day is an exciting all-day event involving the entire student body and school staff. Mukogawa's sports day was held at one of the university owned tracks about one mile from the junior high and high school campus.



Figure 8. 9th grade students on Sports Day

There was a rehearsal for the *undoukai* because parents and grandparents were invited to attend and there was a very specific schedule and order of events. Each grade had specific routines and performances—students waited in anticipation of the year that their grade would perform *Soranbushi*, a traditional work song of Hokkaido, for example. Students

were divided into teams and accumulated points throughout the day based on spirited routines and events, such as relay races, games, and performances.



Figure 9. Posing with students after a dance performance.

I posed with some students who were preparing to perform a traditional dance with paper flowers. All of the year nine students participated in this dance and were split into different groups based on the corresponding colors of their costumes.

Rules

There were a few rules that needed to be observed at Mukogawa. For example, upon entering the school, it was important to stop and bow at the gate—this is a sign of respect for the school. After entering, it was required to change one's shoes. This meant that the shoes we wore at school stayed in a locker at the school and we wore different shoes on the commute to and from school. This was true for both students and staff and

was a sign of reverence designed to keep the school grounds clean. Speaking of clean, the students and staff were also responsible for keeping the school itself clean. Students cleaned their classrooms each day, and every two months there would be an all-school cleaning event. As the foreign teachers, we were sent out into the community with a group of students and metal tongs to pick up trash in the neighboring area surrounding the school.

Students were expected to maintain a neat appearance. Their hair could not be distracting, meaning it could not be dyed, and, if it was long, it needed to be pulled back. They could not have visible piercings and could not wear make-up of any kind. Uniforms had to be clean and they were not allowed to roll up their skirts or sleeves. Some of the Japanese teachers were stricter regarding student appearance and behavior than others.

There is a word in Japanese, *yorimichi* or side-trip, which refers to making a detour on one's way to or from an intended destination. In Japan, school children are taught to go to school and come back home without making unnecessary stops or wandering around. One reason for this is that the school takes responsibility for the students on their commutes, especially considering the fact they are dressed in the school uniform. Near the school campus there was a mall called Lalaport, and occasionally I would stop by on my way home from work to pick up groceries or to browse in the shops. One day, I stepped inside the mall restroom and happened upon one of my students—still in school uniform—washing her hands at the sink. I smiled and said hello, but she looked scared and asked, “*Sensei, okotteimasu ka?*” (Are you angry?) I assured her that I was not angry and I was confused as to why she assumed I would be upset by running into her in the bathroom at the mall. At that point, I recalled an unwritten rule that Philip had once

mentioned about students spending time at the mall after school. Philip was a British man in his early 50s who had been living and working in Japan for 25 years. He spoke fluent Japanese and had been teaching English at Mukogawa for many years. Because of that, he was the unofficial leader of the foreign teachers. Philip was often a liaison for the foreign teachers in dealing with the Japanese staff and provided me with helpful insight during my time there. Additionally, I was fortunate in the fact that I had many Japanese friends to serve as what Pipher (2002) referred to as a cultural broker, or someone to explain the culture. I asked a Japanese friend of mine if that practice of not going out in uniform after school was one of Mukogawa's rules or a common practice in Japan. She said it is not only a Mukogawa rule, but that it is common sense among Japanese people and something parents teach their children early on.

Requests or strong suggestions

On occasion, native-English speaking teachers might be asked or invited to help with something or attend an event. These "invitations" are better described as strong suggestions that are being presented as humble requests. Nuances like this are understood within the culture, but can be difficult to navigate for those North Americans who go to Japan with the presumption that they can communicate within the parameters of their own cultural values. In order to earn a favorable reputation among the Japanese staff, it is best to remain agreeable and consider others in every situation. This may seem like common courtesy in any cultural setting, but it is important to understand the finer details of the Japanese culture. Staff members are expected to arrive early and to stay late, to help out with all school events, and to attend all meetings and parties. You are not part of that department and you do not teach high school classes? Go to the meeting anyway.

You do not understand Japanese and half of the teachers are sleeping during the meeting?
That is OK—you show up because that is what everyone does, and that is what you should do too.

I recall one day—I had just arrived at school in the morning, and a teacher from a different grade level was walking toward me in the staff room. He wore glasses and had shiny black hair; I had seen him, but had never spoken to him before. After a brief greeting, he explained that there was going to be an oratorical contest in the auditorium that day and he asked if I would read a children's book on the projector during the intermission. The book was in English, so naturally, he was hoping the native English-speaking teachers would take this duty. I immediately agreed, as I could see he was already holding a *Curious George* book in his hands and he seemed anxious. He was relieved, because one of my native English-speaking colleagues had just refused his request before he asked me, and he seemed surprised from that display of direct rejection.

Super English Classes

Mukogawa was one of the select area schools that offered the option for what was called a Super English course.



Figure 10. Local newspaper article.

Figure 10 is a snapshot of a local newspaper featuring an article about Super English and the way that the class is designed to be conducted only in English. A photographer had visited our class one day, and I did not know what the purpose was until several weeks later when a friend of mine spotted me in the picture and sent me this photo.

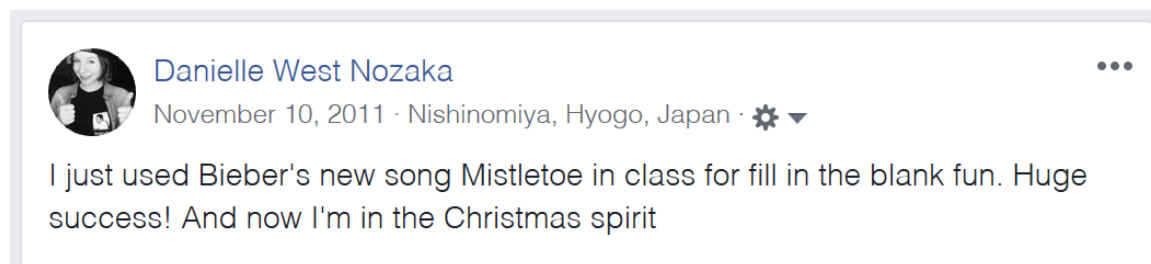


Figure 11. Facebook post after class.

I met with the SE classes on a daily basis, so these were the students I spent the most amount of time with. Most of the time, I co-taught these classes with an English-speaking Japanese homeroom teacher, but there were a few times when the homeroom teacher was unexpectedly absent from class and I was able proceed with any lesson I desired. I kept a few extra “fun” lessons just for times like these, such as cloze exercises featuring lyrics from popular music. Aware of the fact that a few of my students were big fans of Justin Bieber, I surprised them with a listening exercise based on the song, “Mistletoe”. We listened to the song first and students attempted to fill in the blanks that they could identify. Next, we discussed the answers and the meaning of the lyrics. Finally, at the end of the class I let them view the music video, anticipating the delighted shrieks when Bieber appeared on the screen.

On a different occasion, I created some excitement in the classroom when, in a similar activity, I introduced a song by the (then) new boyband known as One Direction.

I had created a cloze exercise to go along with the song “One Thing”. I think the students liked the catchy song, and I know they were crazy about the music video.

Sometimes in the SE classes I would lead discussion for a conversation or warm-up exercise.

•What do you think about piercings and tattoos?

•If you got a piercing or a tattoo what would your parents say?

Figure 12. PowerPoint discussions questions.

Figure 12 is an example of a PowerPoint slide that I used as a prompt for a discussion about piercings and tattoos. In Japan, piercings and tattoos are becoming more widely accepted, but still remain somewhat of a taboo issue. The students had various ideas about piercings—many of them hoped to have their ears pierced one day, but were not in favor of piercing other body parts. Feelings about tattoos were mixed, but most students agreed that their parents would have nothing good to say about their daughters getting tattooed.

I often tried to find fun warm-up activities or worksheets that coincided with something that students were learning at the time, for example adjectives and descriptive words.

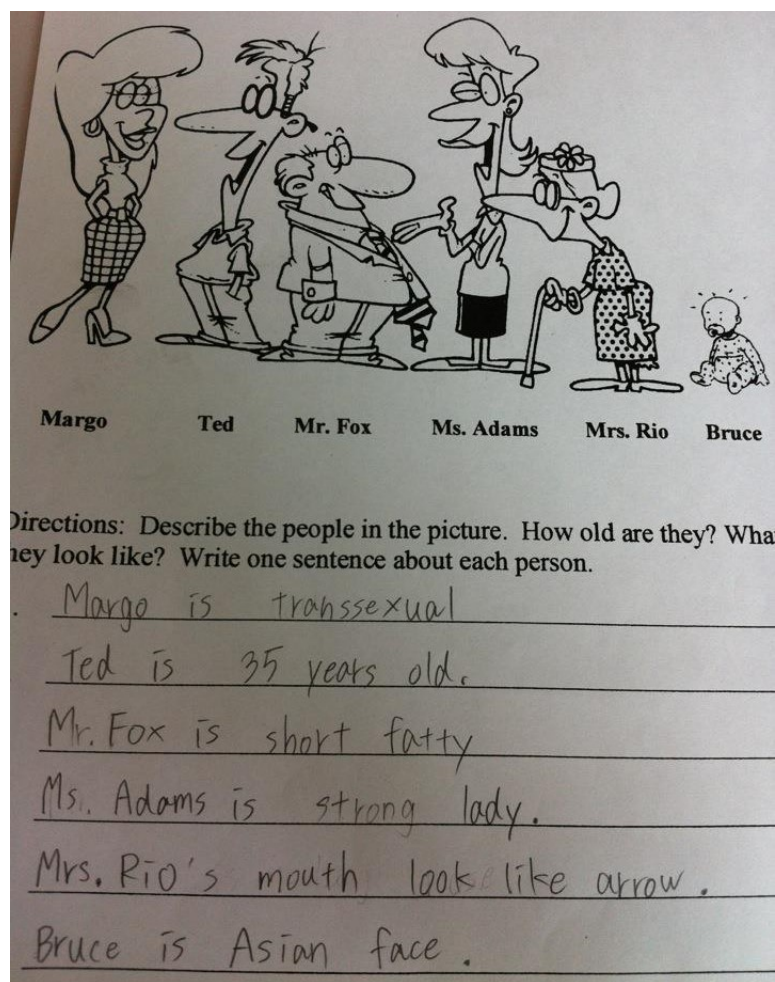


Figure 13. A supplemental lesson.

Figure 13 is an example of a supplemental handout in which students were asked to write a sentence describing each person in the accompanying picture. Their charming answers never failed to make me smile. The Japanese language does not use articles such as “a” or “an”, and is occasionally omitted when students write in English.

School Trips

Day excursions and overnight trips alike are a very important part of the Japanese educational experience.



Figure 14. 9th grade field trip to the World Expo Park in Osaka.

School trips are very well organized. In figure 14, students are waiting patiently in straight lines at the World Expo Park in Osaka. There was a great deal of organization and planning that went into student field trips, and I think there has to be in such a high-population-density country like Japan. Students are taught the importance of order and arrangement from a young age.



Figure 15. 9th grade school trip.

The 9th grade class trip, which takes place each year in May, is a trip to Kyushu, and includes Nagasaki and Kumamoto Prefectures. In Figure 15, I posed with Class 8 in front of the grassy hills at Mt. Aso in Kumamoto. I was able to make this trip twice in my two years, and I loved the chance to see Kyushu, which is the most southwest island of Japan's four main islands. We also visited the Nagasaki Peace Park—the site that commemorates the WWII atomic bombing of the city in 1945.



Figure 16. School trip: On the bus.

The school trip consisted of a ride on the *shinkansen* or bullet train, as well as time spent on charter buses. I enjoyed traveling with the students and chatting with them outside of the classroom setting. Figure 16 is a snapshot to remember a particularly entertaining conversation that took place with two of my students on the bus. We were talking about our lives and where we lived and trying to come up with the most creative life stories. The student in the forefront, who I will refer to as Hana, told me that she lived with monkeys and bathed in the Mukogawa River. We had a lot of laughs that day. I remain in contact with Hana, and she is now a third-year university student in Japan.



Figure 17. School trip: Boating in Kyushu.

While in Kyushu, I had the opportunity to join the students on the traditional Japanese rowing boats known as *Peron*. *Peron* is a sport that has roots in Chinese dragon boat racing, and each boat has a drum. One person beats the drum, while everyone on the boat takes part in a chant. I had a turn being the drummer of the boat—keeping the beat proved more challenging than I expected.



武庫川女子大学附属中学校 第3学年 修学旅行 平成23年5月31日～6月3日 in 九州

Figure 18. School trip: Teachers.

Figure 18 is the 9th grade teaching staff posing outside one of the hotels in Kyushu. Accommodations on the trip were outstanding—bedding ranged from luxurious futons at one hotel, to a western style bed in a room with a gorgeous night view atop a hill at another hotel. Students shared rooms, but all the teachers had an individual room. I was tired by the end of each day, but still the teachers stayed awake until about midnight each night—reflecting on any incidents that happened that day and deliberating over the plans for the following day. While I did not really have any specific duties or responsibilities on the trip, I was pleased to be able to go and spend more time with the students outside of the classroom.

Gifts

Gift-giving is an important part of Japanese culture.



Danielle West Nozaka added a new photo.

February 29, 2012 · 2 people

I love gifts from students



Figure 19. Gifts from students.

For example, while traveling, it is customary to buy souvenirs for family, friends, and colleagues, and many life events or occasions call for specific gifts to be given.

Sometimes, small tokens of appreciation are given, as was the case with the items from my students in Figure 19. One student started making me cigarette characters out of paper, complete with faces. I do not know what prompted these gifts, but I began a collection.

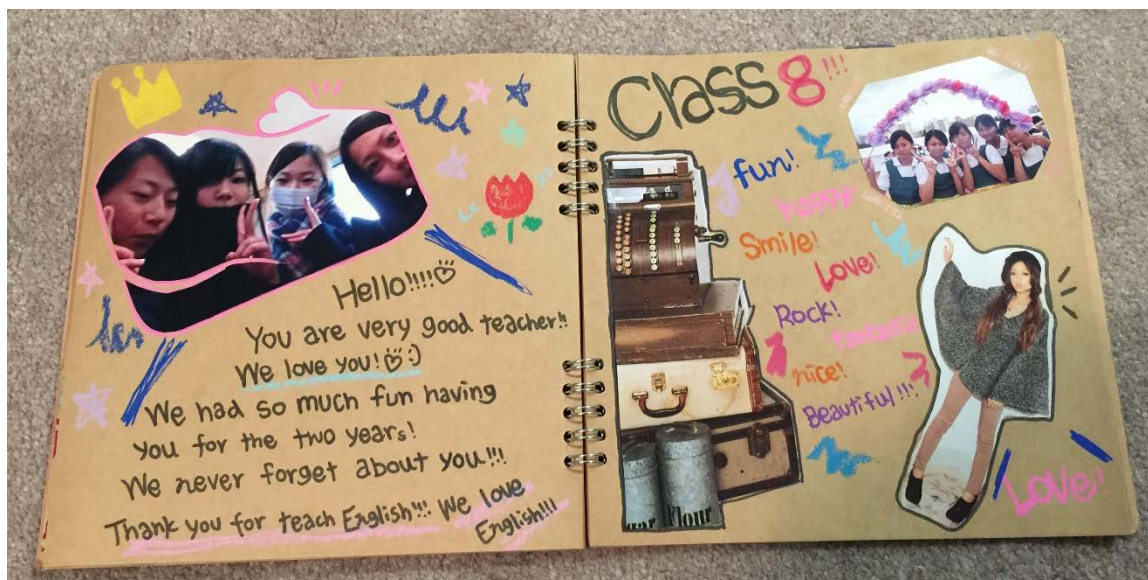


Figure 20. Scrapbook from Class 8.

Figure 20 shows a scrapbook that some of the students made for me when they graduated from 9th grade in March of 2012. 9th grade was the last year of middle school—they would be moving up to high school in April, but I was going to remain in the middle school wing and welcome a new group of incoming 9th graders. I was surprised to receive a kind and thoughtful scrapbook from a group of students in the class.

The campus

The school campus was beautiful and very well-kept. In the spring especially—when the *sakura* or cherry blossoms are in full bloom—the grounds were lit up with magnificent pink buds.



Figure 21. *Sakura*—Cherry blossoms on campus. “This year I’m part of the orchestra club.”

The buildings were made of red brick, and there were 3 levels in each building. Students took pride in their school and were responsible for the cleaning and pristine appearance of the campus.

A sign that was displayed on one of the drink vending machines in the cafeteria:



Figure 22. A vending machine in the school cafeteria.

As a teacher, I had the option of going off campus to a nearby supermarket to buy lunch, or to bring my own. Occasionally, on days that I did not bring anything, I would make my way over to the school cafeteria. The food there was always good, and the daily specials would usually sell out once the crowds of students made their way over. During my second year at Mukogawa, a bakery was added in, and all the best baked goods were sold out by 3rd period.

Figure 23 depicts the 9th grade class of the new school year, which begins in April. Class pictures were taken outside on campus in front of the *sakura*, which bloom in April.



Figure 23. Class picture.

Friendly notes

Some of the students would write me notes and deliver them to the desk in my office. In Figure 24, a student wanted to plan a day to eat lunch together in the cafeteria. She was also Lady Gaga's biggest fan and asked me about the meanings of a song's lyrics. We often talked about popular music. I will call this student Rui, and Rui was a student with an infectious enthusiasm for life. She loved American culture and took every opportunity to talk to me and the other foreign teachers. Last year, I had the opportunity to see Rui again when she was a student at MFWI in Spokane.

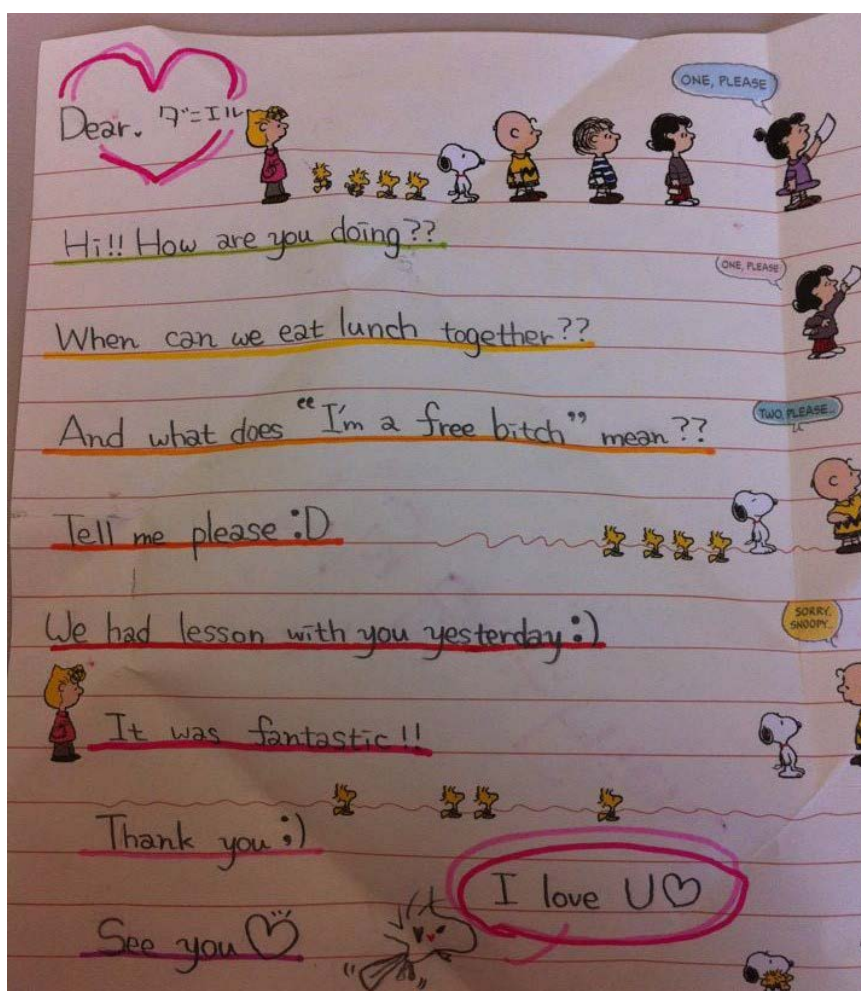


Figure 24. A note from a student.

It was especially cute to receive this note addressed to both myself and Delaney Holland. Our names were written in Japanese—I found it funny that Delaney was called by her last name, Holland (ホランド), but I was called Danielle (ダニエル).

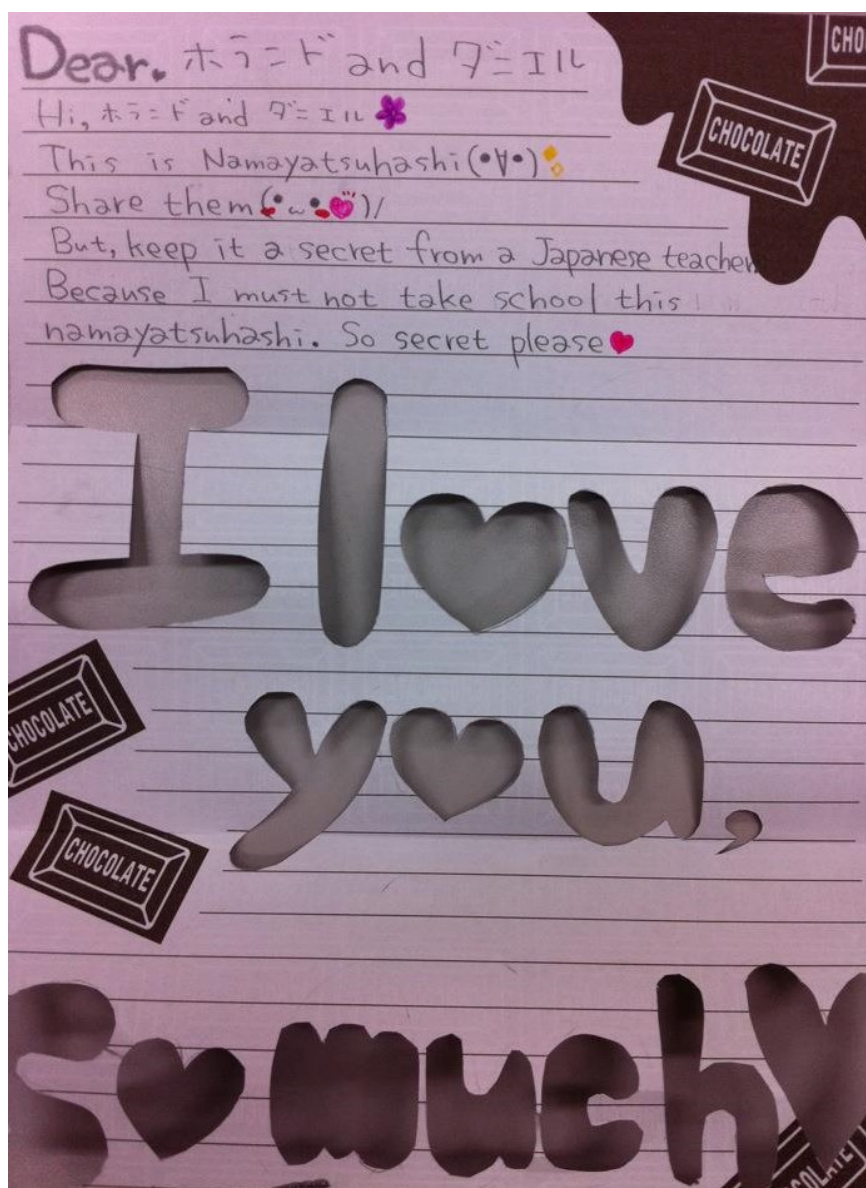


Figure 25. A note from a student.

One of the students had gone to Kyoto and brought back *namayatsuhashi*, a famous Kyoto sweet. Students were not supposed to bring sweets or snacks to school, but took a risk to offer us this *omiyage* or souvenir.

After announcing that I would be going back to the United States after the summer holidays, I received an abundance of sweet letters from my students.



Figure 26. Goodbye notes from students.

Japanese people value the act of giving and receiving handwritten letters and notes—a practice that seems to have been lost at times in the modern era of technology and mobile phones. Their thoughtfulness is something I will always treasure.

Leaving Japan

On the day that I left Japan I wrote a note to my friends and students in that I had the privilege of spending time with for the two years that I was teaching at Mukogawa.



Figure 27. Last day in Japan.

Even though I'm going back to my home country today, it doesn't feel like it! No way!

Before I go, I want to thank my friends. The time that I spent in Japan has been so fun and the time that I've spent with all of you is my treasure. Friends are important and I will never forget all the fun times and all of your kindness. It's because of you all that I love Japan and Japanese people. Because I will see you again, I will not say goodbye. I really love you all.

Secondly, to my students—

Thank you for these two years! I hope you all know how important you are to me. Thanks to all of you I wanted to come to school every day. Keep working hard in your English studies! And keep in touch, please. I love you!

Every so often, I hear from some of my former students and I am reminded how lucky I am to have had the opportunities I did.



Figure 28. A more recent message from a former student.

Naturally, the students that I taught have gone on to do many different things—some are finishing their university degrees, some are working, and some are living abroad and using English on a daily basis. If they remember me into their adult lives and can recall even just one positive memory of English class with me, I think I succeeded at least in some way.

Chapter 4

Discussion and Reflections

In carrying out ethnographic work, TESOL calls for researchers to disclose their assumptions about the culture and to provide information about their own backgrounds that might have had an impact on shaping their views and opinions, which might influence the interpretation of data collected. In this chapter, I will revisit the initial assumptions I had made prior to embarking on an education journey as an ALT at Mukogawa Women's University Junior High and Senior High School:

Assumption 1. I would have no problems with the culture.

For the most part, this assumption turned out to be true. It was not always easy to conform to the prescribed ways of the culture, but because of my previous experience in Japan and with the Japanese students, faculty, and staff at MFWI in Spokane, I was never shocked or surprised by the expectations on the job or by student behavior. For example, Holland (2015) was surprised by the expectation placed on teachers to stay in the building until at least 5 PM each day, even if classes were over and there was no prep work to be done. I was neither surprised nor negatively affected by this expectation which was clearly stated in the contract I had signed. Likewise, we foreign guest teachers understood that we were outsiders as foreigners and we had our own small “international” building with our own desks, computers, microwave, Wi-Fi, refrigerator, bathrooms, and empty classrooms that were used for after school English cafes or extracurricular club meetings.

Yumi Nakata (2014) simply explains that “the concept of Uchi Soto is one of the most unique aspects of Japanese culture. This concept is the key to understanding Japanese society and it explains why Japanese people behave the way they do and how they view foreigners in Japan.” She continues: “So what is Uchi Soto? Uchi (内) literally means home, while Soto (外) refers to outside. The core concept revolves around the idea of dividing people into two groups, an in-group and an out-group” (web). Nakata, however, says that this concept does not exist in the United States, but I would argue that it does to a certain extent, so it was not difficult for me to understand and adjust to. For example, more recently, when I moved to Kennewick, Washington, I noticed that I felt like an outsider since I was born in Spokane—only 150 miles away. Still, I was not an insider and was not part of any group who had grown up there, so I did not feel I was automatically part of the community. Further, the fact that I am a relatively shy person made me feel connected to the Japanese culture and helped me understand the Japanese students and colleagues even better at MFWI and in Japan. I felt as though I was both an insider and an outsider to the culture, and I can say the same thing about American culture.

Assumption 2. I would understand the ways in which the girls learned and communicated.

Being a Resident Assistant (RA) for groups of approximately 12 girls and living on the same floor with them meant that I got to know them very well and to see all aspects of their lives, even down to how they organized their nightly shower rotation. I do believe that the vast amount of time I had spent with Japanese students both in the United States

and in Japan—for about three years as an RA and as an English tutor and exchange student in Japan—prepared me well to work with this particular population of students. Living in the dorms both as an RA and an exchange student at Mukogawa Women’s University in Japan, I learned about the girls and the more intimate details of their lives, so there were no surprises for me when teaching for two years in Japan, though the girls I taught were 8th and 9th graders. I saw my students as simply younger and more inexperienced versions of the university students that I had come to know and understand very well.

Assumption 3. I would be an effective and empathetic English teacher.

I hope that this assumption rings true and that I was an effective teacher. As a new teacher, I did not have prior experience in the classroom, but I believe that an ability to connect with the students made up for what I lacked in formal training. I had a pretty good idea what the students were interested in, and I tried to create materials that would be engaging in a relatable way. One of the ways that I did this was through the use of music in the classroom. According to Howard Gardner (1983), musical intelligence runs parallel to linguistic intelligence, and I know from personal language learning experience that music can be an effective memorization aid and language learning tool. Additionally, because I have studied both Spanish and Japanese, I felt that I was able to understand and empathize with both the frustrations and enjoyment that accompanies language study.

Assumption 4. Understanding Japanese would afford me some special insight into the students’ challenges and errors.

Understanding some important aspects of the Japanese language was a valuable tool for pinpointing problem areas in the students' acquisition of English. For example, Japanese grammar consists of a subject-object-verb order, and sometimes errors are produced when students transfer from the L1, Japanese, to the L2, English. Moreover, Japanese does not contain auxiliary verbs, and verbs do not change according to the person or number of people, leading to the possibility of omitting the -s in the present simple 3rd person. Articles are often omitted as well, and there are no plural forms of nouns. Taking what I know of the language into consideration, I believe that I have the ability to recognize and intuit the questions and problem areas of Japanese ELLs.

Assumption 5. Students would be able to answer basic questions such as “how are you?” and would be willing to come and talk to me.

This assumption proved to be both true and false. The students that I taught were of varying English levels—some could carry on a very natural conversation, while others would fall into a state of panic if I addressed them directly in English. At the beginning of each class I would greet the students in the same way: *Good morning/afternoon. How are you?* To which they would reply: *I'm fine, thank you, and you?* However, I was very surprised when, in a one-one-one setting, some students could not produce an answer when greeted in this same fashion. In this case, context played an important function when it came to English use. As far as students approaching me, it was very dependent upon the student. Many of the more outgoing students did not hesitate to interact with me and often gave me sweet notes and souvenirs. Students who were interested in American culture—especially music and media—were excited to discuss popular music and TV dramas with me. Some of the more reserved and quiet students hesitated to initiate

conversation with me, but because I identify with that personality type myself, I did my best to make myself available and offer them comfortable opportunities to speak with me.

Assumption 6. I would not experience homesickness or loneliness in Japan.

This assumption was true. Japan is a second home to me, and while I missed my family, I was never homesick or lonely. I am sure this has a lot to do with the fact that I had previously lived in Japan for one year as a student and had studied the Japanese language at Mukogawa Women's University as an exchange student from EWU. Fortunately, I had many friends in Japan and many opportunities to occupy my free time exploring the country and trying all the best food. I was also invited to many Japanese friends' homes where I could experience the culture from the inside with former students and their families. There was no time to feel bored or melancholic—I remember Delaney Holland telling me that I seemed to be a different person in Japan—that I had transformed into a more social and outgoing individual than she had known me to be in the United States. While I think I possess the same personality qualities no matter where I am, it is true that I felt at ease in Japan and in the presence of Japanese friends. On several occasions, these friends told me that I seemed Japanese in the ways I interact, think, joke, and behave. My friend Serina—a Mukogawa alum—thinks that I am like a Japanese person because when we are thinking about food, I do not state an explicit opinion about what I want to eat and instead I say, “*nandemo ii*,” anything is okay. I try to blend in wherever I am—to not disturb or inconvenience others. In Japan that is easy for me. Intuitively, I avoided confrontations and I knew the appropriate times to talk and the appropriate times to remain quiet—such as on the train, for example. As the youngest child of four children, I was really easy-going and always looked up to my siblings who treated me well, which

might have helped me grasp the *kouhai/senpai* concept of cooperating with older members and accepting their guidance and help when needed. In Japanese, the *kanji* or Chinese characters that make up *kouhai* (後輩) literally mean “later comrade”, and the *kanji* for *senpai* (先輩), “earlier comrade”. Carrigan (2017) notes that this top-down system of management “is one of the reasons why so many foreigners struggle to fit in with traditional Japanese companies.” He goes on to say that “on the face of it, the whole *senpai-kouhai* thing can seem a bit oppressive—and indeed it can quite easily give way to bullying if there is sufficient oversight” (web). This idea of roles and of showing respect to those who paved the way before them is evident throughout a Japanese person’s life, in both their professional and personal lives. In the school, the *senpai-kouhai* relationship was obvious when students in the hallways stopped to bow and let the upper-class *senpai* pass first. In the after-school club activities, the *kouhai* usually had extra duties and responsibilities and showed great respect to their *senpai*. The system is accepted and respected in Japan, and it is understood that everyone will continuously fulfill both roles. A failure to acknowledge some of the deep and multi-layered facets of the Japanese culture such as this concept can lead to a sense of oppression—possibly causing undue stress and bringing with it negative attitudes about the culture. Taking on an ethnocentric mindset or dwelling on the superiority of one’s own culture and ways of doing will likely lead to a state of homesickness or loneliness while living abroad. In her book, *The Middle of Everywhere: The World’s Refugees Come to Our Town*, Mary Pipher (2002) recognizes twelve “attributes of resilience” that help newcomers adapt to American life. These traits of resilience are necessary for the EFL teacher in Japan as well—particularly “positive mental health”, an “ability to calm down”, and “flexibility” (pp. 288-289).

Reeves (2004) affirmed: “Pipher reminds us that we can actually learn optimism and increase emotional intelligence” (p. 4). Being able to maintain a positive outlook was so helpful for me. At times, we were assigned duties at the last minute, or we were obligated to attend events and parties in our time off. I made the decision to make the most of each situation without complaining, and when I had a positive attitude, I ended up having fun. Similarly, knowing what I needed to do to calm down and recharge was equally important. I met with my friends regularly, explored the city, and found ways to enjoy nature too. Finally, a flexible attitude is key while teaching in Japan—I realized that to have the smoothest possible experience, it would benefit me to adapt and help wherever I was needed.

Assumption 7. As an assistant language teacher, I would receive guided input and support from the Japanese teachers.

This assumption proved to be mostly false. As I discovered on my first day of teaching, the Japanese teachers I worked with did not spend much time planning lessons with me, nor did they intervene or provide feedback on my instruction. However, this was variable depending on the teachers that I worked with. For the first year and a half of my time at Mukogawa, the homeroom English teachers that I worked with were very experienced Japanese women who had their teaching down to a science, and who had some experience with ALTs. In April of 2012, I began the school year with a new group of teachers, and the homeroom English teachers I was working with were both men. The dynamics were somewhat different with the male teachers in that they seemed to have a different vision of my role. They seemed to want to do co-teaching with me. By that time, I had much more experience; however, and it is possible that I was simply more

comfortable and confident. Additionally, because it was my second year, it is possible that these teachers gave me more to do. During my second year, I had the opportunity to teach the Intelligent English listening classes with a particularly inspiring Japanese teacher who I will call Mr. Miyagi. Mr. Miyagi was enthusiastic and kind, and the students loved him. He never raised his voice as some of the other teachers did—he was calm and fun-loving, yet commanded respect in the classroom. I worked with him for only a short time, but he seemed better equipped to include me in the lesson planning and teaching. One reason for this might have been his exceptional English skills and the fact that he had spent time studying in the United States and was very comfortable interacting with foreign guests. While all of the teachers were kind and eager to welcome me and create spaces for me to teach in, I did not take much initiative that first year because it is my nature to sit back and observe and see where I might be needed. By the second year, however, I was able to do more to help the teachers and to lighten their loads.

Assumption 8. There would be more CLT (Communicative Language Teaching) in the classroom, and the Japanese teachers would use me for authentic communication with students.

This assumption was mostly incorrect, although I was able, after some time, to create my own opportunities for authentic communication with students. There were times when I felt that I was an unused accessory in the classroom; however, it is possible that the Japanese teachers simply did not know how to incorporate a native-speaker into the lessons and were expecting that I, as an American, would have asserted myself more. Nevertheless, I felt that there was a greater emphasis on the Grammar-translation and Audio-lingual methods than on CLT. The efforts of the government to focus more on

CLT is well-intentioned, but at this point, most of the teachers have not been trained in the method. As a novice teacher, I did not know always know how to make myself useful while working in tandem with Japanese teachers—by nature I tend to observe and remain in the background so as not to appear that I am trying to take over. My time in the classroom went very smoothly and there were no problems, but I do wish that I could have helped more.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Chapter 5 is a discussion of what I have learned over the course of my time spent in Japan and the completion of graduate school, and includes the answers to my research questions, as well as the limitations to the study, recommendations for further research, and final reflections.

Research Questions

- 1) As a novice English teacher, what strengths did I bring to the teaching of English to junior high school girls in a private girls' school in Japan?

The strengths that I brought to teaching at Mukogawa were an understanding of the Japanese language and culture, as well as my ability to connect with the students and earn their trust. The students welcomed me and shared their interests and personalities with me. I tried to make learning English fun and practical in a way that would inspire the students to think about how they could use English in their future endeavors.

- 2) How did a major in international studies help me to teach this population?

My international studies degree incorporated a concentration on Asia studies and minors in Japanese, Spanish, and government. Incidentally, I have a minor in chemistry as well, but that has not yet proven to be particularly beneficial in terms of teaching English as a foreign language. My undergraduate studies consisted largely of courses related to international communication, Asian history, economics, and language study. I do believe that these areas of study helped me to gain a deeper understanding of the history of the country I was living in as well as

insight into the language and culture. Study abroad was encouraged in my major, and the year I spent living in Nishinomiya, Japan and attending Mukogawa Women's University was perhaps the most influential and helpful decision on my path to becoming an ALT and then beginning the MATESL program.

3) What challenges, if any, did I face not having been an English major?

I do not believe that the fact that I was not an English major presented any specific challenges. In teaching English as a foreign language to junior high school students, advanced grammar was not really a factor. By that time, I had completed English courses as part of my undergraduate degree, and I found that I had sufficient knowledge to teach at the level for which I was hired.

4) What did I find was successful in motivating my students to learn English as a living language?

I found that students were motivated to learn English as a living language when they could connect their interests to English or when they could use English for meaningful communication. For example, many students loved popular music in English and would be excited when they could connect new vocabulary to lyrics in a song. I brought popular music into the classroom and taught them the lyrics and the meanings behind the lyrics. Some students loved popular book series such as Harry Potter or Twilight and were determined to read the English versions. Other students were bored by textbooks, but would light up when I asked them a question about their favorite character or musical artist. Students responded well when, each morning in the homeroom, I would tell them about something I had

recently read about on a news site—usually a funny story or something about animals—and they seemed to enjoy anecdotes from my personal life as well.

5) What did I learn from teaching this particular population in Japan?

While I do hope that I was able to positively impact the students that I taught, I certainly learned so much from them. My students were energetic, eager, and thoughtful—they lovingly showered me with all kinds of cute gifts, notes, and smiles. I was constantly amazed by their creativity and their sincere hearts. They loved to be acknowledged and to be appreciated for their gestures. I learned that even the students who never said a word to me in class could share articulate thoughts in English in a handwritten note. Japan is a culture of shame—many people have an inferiority complex when it comes to their ability to speak English and end up not speaking at all. This does not mean, however, that they have nothing to say. In addition, shame leads Japanese people to take responsibility for the actions of their group. I remember one day in particular—it was the last period of the day, and a few of the students in my listening class were especially talkative and rambunctious. Both myself and my Japanese co-teacher that day, Ms. Takeda, had asked the students to calm down and be respectful for the rest of the class period. The students respected Ms. Takeda—a young, new teacher—but on this day, these students' behavior was beyond reproach. Sufficiently frustrated by the end of class, we ended the lesson and walked out of the classroom as the final bell was ringing. The next day, the class leader came to apologize to me in the staff room—she was a model student and was in no way part of the disruption that a few of her classmates had caused. In her best English, she told me how sorry she

was for the actions of her class the previous day. I was so touched by her apology, and I will never forget the look of shame and disappointment on her face and her willingness to take the blame on behalf of the class—even though in my mind she had nothing to do with the incident.

6) How did I change in these two years, and what caused the change?

The two years that I spent teaching in Japan was a period of considerable growth for me—both professionally and personally. As a new teacher, I gained confidence in the classroom and in relating to students. My understanding of the culture was expanded to new levels—I interacted with teachers, students, and parents, and got to be a part of numerous school functions including *undoukai* or sports day, *bunkasai* or culture festival, *oosouji* or big clean-ups, and *shuugakuryokou* or school trips. I had previously been a student in Japan, but going back as a teacher allowed me to discover different perspectives of Japanese culture. While teaching I had opportunities to practice public speaking as well. At the end of my two years at Mukogawa we had one last all-school outdoor assembly before the summer vacation, and the principal had asked me to give a farewell speech in Japanese. I asked one of my Japanese friends to help me prepare a speech and I was both delighted and honored to address the student body and express my gratitude for the experiences I had in those two years. I was able to create friendships and relationships with my students that have continued to this day—I have even been able to meet some of my former students who are now English majors at Mukogawa Women's University and have been to Spokane to study at MFWI.

7) What recommendations do I have for those Americans preparing to teach English in Japan?

The first recommendation I have for new teachers going to Japan would be to keep an open and positive mind. Things are going to happen that are out of your control—rather than allowing yourself to be frustrated by these things that may be caused by cultural differences, find a way to appreciate the way things are done and think about the reasons why that may be so. As a new teacher, it is important to remember that you are essentially the *kouhai* in terms of your relationship with your co-teachers. Be helpful, but do not impose your own values and ideas when they are not asked for. As the *kouhai* and foreign guest as well, you will be well taken care of—maybe in ways you do not think you need—but, be gracious and accept what is offered. The senior faculty have a sense of duty to care about your well-being—appreciate this, and take care not to cause unnecessary trouble for them. Secondly, show interest in the culture. Many Japanese people are more than happy to teach you about Japan. Also, many Japanese people are shy and reserved and may or may not approach you first. Get to know them—you might be surprised by the depth of personality and the humor you can unleash in the appropriate setting. Realize that you cannot easily establish trust and become part of an in-group without patience and effort, but when you do build that trust, you will have friends for life. Find a friend or group of friends who can act as your cultural broker. Japanese culture can be complex and sometimes it can be difficult to determine the appropriate behavior in any given situation. Because you are an outsider, you will not be expected to inherently know exactly what to do—you may even find that Japanese people are interested in the fact that you do come from a different cultural background. As a student

in Japan, I was once pulled over by a policeman while riding my bicycle with a friend on the back, a practice known colloquially as *niketsu* or two rear ends. While it is a common sight to see, it is illegal. The policeman stepped off his motorbike and checked the numbers on my bicycle to make sure it was not stolen, but then, instead of lecturing us about what we had been doing, he smiled. “*Miami Vice!*” He said, followed by, “*Do you know Harrison Ford?*” Lastly, be adventurous and have fun. If you can, see the different areas of Japan. Each prefecture has something unique to offer and the way of life varies tremendously from the city to the countryside to the seaside. Be mindful and considerate in the way you conduct yourself, and you should not have any trouble.

Limitations of the study

One of the limitations to the study is the fact that there are no student voices involved. Similarly, there are no colleagues’ voices and no written feedback that was given to me as a novice teacher. Without any feedback, is it possible to objectively measure my performance and effectiveness as a teacher? Moreover, in consideration of Japanese culture I wonder about the procedure for requesting a recommendation when there is no official supervisor.

Suggestions for future research

While this autoethnography consists of retrospective journaling, possible future research might be conducted as a concurrent diary study. Daily journaling would provide the researcher with much more information from which to draw upon. Keeping a daily journal—spending just five minutes a day writing about my experiences in Japan—would have provided more insight into my experiences. Additionally, future research might

include student journaling as well, perhaps in the form of a dialogue journal in which peers have a chance to respond. Finally, one possibility is to study relationships between teachers and students and observe how the friendship might grow or change over time.

Final Reflections

Japan will always have a special place in my heart. The people, the culture, and the language have had a profound impact on my life for as long as I can remember. Not only that, but Japan is where, as a young adult, my teaching career began—I will carry with me the memories I made there as I continue learning and growing as an educator. Altan and Lane (2018) analyzed “teachers’ narratives about their significant life experiences” to determine “which events the teachers believed contributed to the constructions of their habits of mind and are reflected in their teaching practices” (p. 239). The authors examined teachers’ disposition in terms of habits, referring to the 16 habits of mind as defined by Costa and Kallick (2000). I will consider three of these habits and apply them to my own teaching disposition:

1) Applying past knowledge to novel situations

Starting out as a novice teacher in Japan, I drew upon the knowledge that I had acquired through previous experiences working with Japanese ELLs. I was able to navigate cultural issues and errors caused by negative transfer from Japanese to English based on what I had learned from living with Japanese students and from my own attempts to study the Japanese culture and language. I have no doubt that my past knowledge was a tremendous help for me as a new teacher of Japanese students, despite having had no previous teaching experience. One cannot truly

learn and improve except by experiencing, reflecting, and applying the take-away from those reflections to each new situation. Teachers will not always plan a perfect lesson, but modification is a necessary part of the learning process. I found that throughout my time as a teacher in Japan, I was continually learning and adjusting to discover the best possible approaches. More recently, as a substitute teacher in the United States and as a graduate student in the TESL program, I have been able to pull from my experiences as an ALT in Japan. It is this continuum of knowledge acquisition and application that allows us to live deliberately and to be the best versions of ourselves.

2) Finding Humor

Without the ability to find humor in most situations, I would not be able to live a complete and meaningful life. I believe that laughter and optimism are necessary to sustain us as humans and to remind us what we have to be grateful for. While teaching in Japan, there were hard days and times when I did not feel like laughing; however, when I interacted with my students, it was easy to find reasons to laugh and reasons to think about why I loved teaching. The smiles, the notes, the gifts, and the creative things they would say never failed to amuse me. While the idea of humor can vary across language and culture, smiles and laughter are universal and can connect humans on a most basic level. An ability to find humor is often associated with a positive attitude as well as flexible thinking. I used every opportunity I had with my students to include humor and laughter in our lessons, and in turn, I believe my students were able to relax and enjoy learning English in a positive setting. I laughed at myself when I made mistakes

and I hope that allowed my students to feel that it was perfectly okay if they made mistakes too.

3) Persisting

To persist is to diligently persevere on any given task, even when the outcome is uncertain. Often there are only two choices: quit or persist—and only one of the options will lead to success. The Japanese term *gaman* is often translated as “perseverance” or “endurance”. This concept is an important aspect of Japanese values. Shimabukuro (2011) states:

But while *gaman* is often discussed in terms of individual survivance, it has, at its base, an ethical commitment to a collective good....That is, people *gaman* in order to avoid inflicting additional psychological or emotional strain on others by endlessly (and thus, selfishly) complaining about something *everyone* is experiencing. (p. 652)

This Japanese notion of *gaman* out of consideration for others resonates with me.

Humans persevere and endure hardships and often become stronger because of it, but *gaman* recognizes that everyone experiences challenges and has to make the decision to keep going and move forward. Complaining may simply cause undue strain on ourselves and on others and negatively frame our thinking. This is not to say that we ought to suffer alone—we all need support and friends to talk to. I was so very thankful to have wonderful colleagues to work with and who could identify with some of my experiences as a North American teaching English in Japan. I remembered that I was not alone, made the choice to be content, and realized that the only thing to do was to make the most of

every situation. In the classroom, if one activity did not work well, I tried something different. There are often circumstances that cannot be changed, but with persistence and *gaman* we can control our reactions and attitudes and better our character.

Altan and Lane (2018) conclude that “students need teachers who can prepare them for living in the modern world. More than knowledge and skills, teachers need constructive dispositions to support student learning and classroom management” (p. 246). It is my hope that through all my experiences—both in teaching and in life in general—I have continued to develop positive habits of mind, and that these habits might be revealed in my own disposition as both a teacher and as a human being.

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Nishinomiya, Japan

Assistant Language Teacher

TUTOR AND MENTOR EXPERIENCE

Mukogawa Fort Wright Institute
(Sept 06-Dec 07) & (Feb 09-Jun 09) & (Sept 12-Jun 13)
Spokane, WA

Resident Assistant

- Led nightly English tutorials M-Th evenings
- Planned group activities and community outings

SFCC International Peer Mentor
(Jan 06-Dec 06)
Spokane, WA