

## **An Assistant Language Teacher's Impression of the Japanese Education System by Chris Hunnicutt**

My first year in Japan I worked at the low level, non-academic Ohata high school, and after that I have worked, and am still working, at the “academic” Tanabu High School. Occasionally, I still visit Ohata and a third school, Mutsu Technical High School. This brings up the first, most glaring difference in the high school education system of Japan – the separation of high, low, and mid level schools. When students graduate from junior high school, they choose a high school they want to attend and take an entrance examination. If they pass, they get in. If they fail, they can try for their second choice.

I initially hated this system and still have reservations about it. At Ohata, I found that there were bright students who belonged at a higher level school, but who had chosen Ohata High School because of economic and practical reasons. I sensed their boredom in classes that were too slow for them. However, I did learn at Ohata that all is not lost for those students who want to go to college. Although a majority of the students didn't expect to go to college and didn't try very hard in class, I was surprised at the number of students who did and received support from their teachers. I had entered that position with the impression that they were the students that the system had given up on, but discovered that was not entirely the case.

The next difference I noticed was the ease with which students can pass their classes. It is extremely difficult to fail a class. The scores required to pass are low, and students are offered re-tests when they fail. Students never get held back a grade, are only expelled for the most serious offenses, and almost never fail to graduate. Students know that they don't have to do very well to pass, so it is common at lower level schools to give a handout and get it handed back with only 10% of the answers filled in, to give a test and see only 50% of the answers filled in, and to generally see very low scores all around. I notice that students are given very little homework compared to what I remember in high school, where I had foreign language worksheets to take home every day.

Although I think it is a negative approach to say “Do well or we will kick you out,” I think a little bit of that element is necessary to motivate the students who are less inclined to do the work. In Japan the responsibility is entirely on the teachers to motivate the students. If the students don't feel like working hard, they won't, and only the charisma and skill of the teacher can change that. Granted, that is a good way to motivate students, but I believe a little threat is a good backup. Likewise, discipline is also entirely dependent on the skill and charisma of the teacher. There are few concrete punishments. It is very rare to suspend or expel students, and common Western forms of discipline, such as detention and calling parents are rarely done (according to Japanese society, teachers and not parents are to blame for students' bad behavior). They can't even remove a student who is being disruptive from class. There are only two threats the students really face. One is getting yelled at by their teachers in front of their friends. The other is their college entrance examination.

Getting into college largely depends on how well they do on a single test. This leads to my next complaint, that most classes are taught “to the test.” The Japanese education system is slow to change. In regards to English education, the government has outlined many broad, profound, forward thinking changes they would like to implement. The entrance exams, however, do not reflect these changes, which I believe may be one reason for why teaching methods by and large haven't changed much. Even most advanced classes are taught in Japanese, not English. Teachers often teach by direct translation, and they often follow the textbook strictly.

English education is in a poor state in Japan, and there are many possible explanations. Compared to other countries, including Asian countries such as Korea, whose language structure is similar to Japan, Japanese students, as a whole, perform very badly at English. Some argue that they should be taught at an earlier age (regular English classes don't start until seventh grade). Many blame the old fashioned teaching methods and tests. Others criticize the qualifications of teachers. Some say it has to do with aspects of Japanese society.

There are good points in the system. I admire the level of respect that teachers receive both from students and from the community as a whole. Even in low level schools with discipline problems, the students showed a great deal of respect and would apologize sincerely when scolded. Teachers with strong personalities can get their students to do their work. Students start and end each class bowing to the teacher. Each and every one says “good morning” when they pass you in the hall at the beginning of the day and “good job” at the end. Although it puts a strain on teachers, who often work ten or more hours in a day, I like the club system

that gives students something constructive to do with their free time.

I recently read a New York Times opinion article which extolled the Japanese education system while berating the American system. There are many things to learn about the Japanese system which can help broaden your perspectives as teachers, but I believe emulating the system is a flat out wrong idea. Almost all of my fellow foreign English teachers have come to the same conclusion – the Japanese system looks good on paper, but in the end we all prefer our home countries' systems. I believe it is because in our home countries, schools focus on student responsibility. They try to teach them to think critically, write their own opinions and learn to enjoy learning. In Japan I believe schools hand feed the students what they need to pass, and only those students who have a natural inclination toward studying (or who have good parents) really succeed.