

# Explorations in Teacher Education

JALT Teacher Education SIG Newsletter

Spring 2006 Volume 14, Issue 1

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## **And Now a Word from...The Editor**

Welcome to Volume 14, Issue 1, the spring edition of Explorations in Teacher Education, the newsletter of the Teacher Education Special Interest Group (TE SIG) of the Japan Association for Language Teachers (JALT).

Firstly, a few words about SIG business. The TE SIG is sponsoring two main events this year, the Pan SIG conference in May and a mini-conference in October. Brian Tomlinson will be attending the mini-conference in Okayama thanks to the efforts of member Jan Visscher. Brian is Reader in Language Learning and Teaching at Leeds Metropolitan University, has published many books and articles, has presented in over forty countries and has been a university lecturer in Japan. More information can be found about these two events on pages 3 and 4.

Turning to this issue of the newsletter, this time we have three articles. One by James Porcaro, a TE SIG member from Toyama, one by Anthony Robins, former coordinator of the TE SIG and one by Michelle Segger and myself. Michelle is a recent contributor having provided the Pan SIG 2005 conference report for the summer 2005 edition and an article in the autumn 2004 edition. As part of Monkasho's push to improve the English ability of Japanese people, 100 high schools were designated as 'Super English High Schools' in 2005. James Porcaro takes a look at these schools in an article titled "SELHi Progress, Problems and Prescriptions." In "Views from another direction – Aspects of Teacher Education in Hong Kong," Anthony Robins broadens our horizons and reminds us that there is (teaching English) life outside Japan. Michelle Segger and I take a look at a Scuba diving trip in the light of content-based learning in "Not Another Homestay."

To those who have raised eyebrows because I have published an article by myself I have two points to make. Firstly, I don't do it very often; indeed this is the first time during my tenure as editor and secondly, please submit an article!

Hope you enjoy the issue.

**Simon Lees, Editor.**

## **Call for Papers**

**Deadline: June 16th, 2006 (for October 7-8, 2006)**

**Teacher Ed SIG and Okayama JALT**

**Conference on Professional Development in Language Teaching  
Okayama University, Okayama.**

The conference will focus on the various career stages that teachers may go through including: initial teacher training, being a novice teacher, and the transition to being an experienced professional. The conference will provide opportunities for practical workshops to examine how teachers can approach some of these life stages, and more formal presentations for teachers to share their research or work in progress. We also believe that narrative is a legitimate method for teachers to express their knowledge of teaching and so we welcome presenters who wish to simply share their experiences of career development. Issues that are of particular interest could include: improving our teaching, raising standards in the profession, getting qualifications, working with colleagues, leadership, time-management, dealing with stress, and maintaining motivation.

Various types of presentations, such as papers (30 or 50 mins) workshops, themed sessions or panel discussions (90 mins) as well as poster sessions are welcome.

All proposals, including number of minutes, title and abstract (max. 150 words) should be sent to [ncowie@cc.okayama-u.ac.jp](mailto:ncowie@cc.okayama-u.ac.jp) by June 15th 2006. The following information is also required: author's name, institutional affiliation, mailing address, email address, and specification of any special equipment needed.

Notification of acceptance of proposals will be made by July 31st 2006.

## **JALT Pan-SIG Conference 2006: Authentic Communication**

**May 13-14th 2006, Tokai University, Shimizu, Shizuoka**

### **Plenary Speakers**

**J D Brown** addresses the topic of 'authentic communication', in particular, he focuses on the grounds for 'why it is important to teach reduced forms'.

**John Maher's** topic is 'Knowing about Language, Knowing about Bilingualism'.

**Donna Tatsuki** asks a key question in 'What is Authenticity?'

On May 13-14th, 2006, the Bilingual, Pragmatics, Teacher Education, and Testing and Evaluation SIGs and the Shizuoka chapter will sponsor the **Fifth JALT Pan-SIG Conference**. There are three plenary speakers: J. D. Brown, John Maher and Donna Tatsuki. There will be over 50 presentations, workshops, colloquiums and posters. Please refer to the [Pan-SIG home page](#) for further details about conference themes and all other aspects of the conference.

The conference will be held in [Building 8](#) of the School of Marine Science & Technology Departments on the Shimizu campus of [Tokai University](#). Situated between eastern and western Japan, Shizuoka is only an hour away from Tokyo and Nagoya, and two hours away from Osaka by Shinkansen.

The TE SIG colloquium, will be held on the Sunday, 13:10 to 14:55. The title is "Publishing as a mode of Teacher Education" and Brian Cullen and Paul Tanner will lead the discussion. Both are active members of the TE SIG so please give them your support.

On the Saturday there are two workshops and two presentations sponsored by the TE SIG, while on the Sunday there are several poster sessions, one workshop, four presentations and the previously mentioned colloquium. Hope to see you there.

## **SELHi Progress, Problems and Prescriptions**

**James W. Porcaro, Toyama University of International Studies, <porcaro@tuins.ac.jp>**

### **Introduction**

In 2002, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (Monkasho) initiated “a strategic plan to cultivate 'Japanese with English abilities'” (MEXT, 2002). It recognized: “With the progress of globalization in the economy and in society, it is essential that our children acquire communication skills in English... in order for living in the 21st century. This has become an extremely important issue both in terms of the future of our children and the further development of Japan as a nation.” The Ministry acknowledged the inadequacy of the English-speaking abilities of a large percentage of the population and undertook a concrete plan of action “with the aim of drastically improving the English education of Japanese people.” One part of the plan was the designation of 100 Super English Language High Schools (SELHi's) by 2005. These model schools set their own goals over the course of the project period and seek to develop effective English teaching methods and curricula for achieving those ends. They receive grants of 3.5 million yen per year for the three-year program.

There are three SELHi's in Toyama prefecture: Toyama Minami HS, Fukuoka HS, and Toyama University of International Studies (TUINS) HS, which is attached (*fuzoku*) to the university at which I teach. From November 2004 to September 2005, I observed a total of twenty English classes at these three SELHi's, the majority at TUINS HS, where I am a member of the SELHi advisory committee. Within that period of time I had many hours of discussion with most of the English teachers at these schools about the lessons themselves that I observed along with many of the issues involved in the mission to advance the effectiveness of English language instruction in Japan's high schools. In addition, I myself have taught a weekly ninety-minute English class for second-year TUINS HS students as part of their SELHi program since April 2004 and I have given lessons as a guest teacher at both of the other high schools. I have taught English at college and university level in Japan since 1985.

I believe that my experiences have given me a well-based perspective from which to comment in this article on the SELHi programs in the one prefecture at least and to offer my assessment of the progress that has been made along with areas of instruction and learning

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that especially require further attention and development. I hope that high school teachers and those involved in teacher education and training will find the remarks stimulating and beneficial in guiding the advancement of English language instruction at their own schools. (For a much broader and more detailed and analytical presentation on this subject, that also includes a number of specific classroom lesson ideas and methodological directions, see Porcaro, 2006, from which most of the content of this article has been drawn.)

### **SELHi Progress**

One of the most significant and beneficial outcomes of the SELHi program at present and over the long term is that Japanese teachers of English (JTEs) at these schools have opened up their classrooms regularly for observations by fellow teachers at their own schools and visitors from other high schools as well as junior high schools and universities, and even news reporters and others, who can see and comment on their instruction and their students' work. The SELHi program has broken down the closed doors of English teaching and left behind a time when teachers rarely or never entered each other's classes or talked with each other about teaching objectives, methods, and materials and other instructional matters. Now the teachers at SELHi's are always talking with each other about English language education and constantly striving to learn more and adopt and develop more effective instructional elements in their classroom work. In addition, SELHi English teachers and administrators are very conscious of their responsibility to share with teachers at other schools in their area the educational assets they have acquired during the three-year tenure of the program.

I have been very impressed by the enthusiasm, commitment, and effort of the JTEs at the SELHi's in Toyama prefecture, and surely those at the other designated schools throughout the country have demonstrated equally these qualities. They have shown courage in taking the risks of trying new things in their classrooms and maybe sometimes failing, initially at least, to do those things with their students as well as they had hoped and planned. In this sense, they act as admirable role models for their students because learning a language, too, involves vulnerabilities and taking risks in the daily course of class work.

English has become the language of teaching and learning in the SELHi classrooms. In all of the classes I have observed, JTEs conduct the lessons nearly entirely in English, using just an incidental amount of Japanese in mostly appropriate circumstances, such as reinforcing the meaning of some new English words and expressions. For the most part, they speak well in

class, comfortably and confidently, and with good English. Students at these schools now take it as a matter of course that their English classes are taught in English.

The use of the old and ineffective *yakudoku* (literally, translation-reading, but widely referred to as grammar-translation) methodology has been almost completely eliminated from classroom English lessons in the Toyama prefecture SELHi's, at least in first and second year classes. The *yakudoku* methodology not only fails to teach students communicative English, but also, in fact, fails to prepare them properly for the English language part of university entrance examinations, which is its declared rationale. It does not teach students English grammar and how to use it well. It does not teach students how to read well. It does not even teach students how to translate well. It is an empty methodology that is largely responsible for the poor English language skills of so many Japanese people and the poor preparation of so many students for the entrance examinations. (See Guest, 2000 and Mulvey, 1999.) That is why Monkasho initiated the SELHi program! Its aim is for teachers to learn and use better and more effective approaches for English language instruction. However, in some cases, SELHi teachers still require students for homework to write full Japanese translations of English coursebook material. Although this is very regrettable, at least the translations are not used in class for traditional *yakudoku* lessons, which all the JTEs I have spoken with state they had conducted prior to the implementation of the SELHi program at their schools. Also, most teachers give students the translations of English I and II textbook readings which are provided with the teacher's texts.

Students at the SELHi's where I have observed classes have responded well to the revised instructional approaches now employed by the JTEs. Those students in my own SELHi class, too, work well with the communicative language approaches I use with them. Their enthusiasm and effort have resulted in notable accomplishments and better English language learning. At the same time, as I will describe in the following section, JTEs have struggled with a number of components of the instructional program at their schools. Indeed, I was disappointed to see that after their initial accomplishments, they seemed to have settled into a static state that was not yielding much further advance in English instruction for the students. This was especially the case with student-centered, interactive, communicative activities in pairs or small groups. However, in my last round of observations at one of the Toyama prefecture schools in September, I was very pleased to have seen significant progress in this regard. Several lessons included students involved in pair discussion over an extended period of time. Student performance and teacher management were remarkably good. A large

number of visiting teachers from other schools were present that day. In one of these classes I overheard an observer remark to a colleague in amazement about the students, "They're talking in English and they're not stopping!" Visitors to my own SELHi class, held at the university once a week, likewise have been very impressed with the students' responsiveness to the lessons and their actual language performance.

In all of these ways, the teachers and the students at these SELHi's, and surely most or all of the others across the country, are far ahead of most other high schools in putting in place a better English language program. They now have a foundation on which they can continue to raise the level of teaching and learning at their schools. Yet they face great challenges in attempting to move forward with their work. The SELHi teachers know well that they need to grow and develop in their teaching much more. Thus, in the following section I will outline some of these needs, which I have discussed frequently and at length with the Toyama prefecture SELHi teachers.

### **SELHi Problems and Prescriptions**

Japanese teachers of English need to raise the level of their instruction in terms of quality, effectiveness and variety in order to catch up with the capabilities of their students. What I mean, for a specific example, is that the students who are using English very well in oral communication in my classes, are not getting enough chance to do so in classes with some of the JTEs at their high schools. The teachers are not yet able to draw the same (or higher) level of performance from the very same students. They need to understand more the elements of English language learning that students need to practice and develop. They need to give students the chance to do much more with the English that they already know and to open up new areas of English language development for the students through better instructional methods and materials, and classroom management. In my classes with these students, all of their speaking is in English and it is commonplace that they talk with each other in pairs fairly briskly and continuously for an hour or more. As I noted above, I was pleased and encouraged to observe some significant progress in this area of instruction at one of the high schools. However, this kind of student engagement with the language is still lacking in many instances at the SELHi's in Toyama prefecture and, on the basis of some reports of observations at SELHi's in other locales, it may be fair to say it is lacking on a widespread basis.



There is often a gap between the communicative goals of the teachers' instruction and actual classroom practice. The reason is that most JTEs still have a limited repertoire of teaching methods and materials, and classroom management techniques. This is not surprising, as Browne (1998) pointed out in reporting on his investigation of high school English teachers. Only a third of them in his survey reported ever making their own lesson plans. Approved textbooks come with teachers' manuals containing detailed lesson plans that stress translation and drill-focused techniques. (See also Sakui, 2004; Taguchi, 2005.) In oral communication classes, the SELHi JTEs I observed are struggling to work with new methodologies, to develop their own lesson materials with suitable topics for their students and various types of oral expression, and to manage a student-centered, interactive classroom environment. One particular point I have talked about with them, and shown by example, is the greater effectiveness of using pair work rather than groups of three or more students and how to act as a facilitator within such lessons. They also are getting a better sense of the kind of lesson materials they can make themselves rather than using textbooks that are usually uninteresting or much above the language level of the students.

In addition, at all the SELHi's in Toyama, and elsewhere, I suspect, teachers have difficulty working with the prescribed textbooks (for example, Crown, Unicorn, Pro-Vision) for English I and English II courses. They work with a limited repertoire of instructional approaches and materials, sticking mostly with the text itself and working through it at the sentence-by-sentence level. In this way, JTEs are merely transferring their traditional methods from *yakudoku* instruction. Simple worksheets are provided for the students, but the kinds of questions given, as Widdowson (1979) notes, "require the learner to rummage round in the text for information in a totally indiscriminate way, without regard to what purpose might be served in doing so... Reading is thus represented as an end in itself, an activity that has no relevance to real knowledge and experience and therefore no real meaning." Teachers need to devise and implement much more a comprehensive, meaning-based reading approach that includes interactive, communicative activities and tasks that draw on the meaning of the textbook reading material and allow students to respond to it in their own ways. In fact, these are the kinds of reading skills required for success in university entrance examinations.

Furthermore, SELHi teachers need to address the poor fundamental English reading skills of many students. As a result of *yakudoku* instruction, many students never get past the sentence level of reading. They are stuck with slow and painful, line-by-line decoding of words with a dictionary, which, in fact, is not reading at all. Thus, they believe that reading in English

is both difficult and unpleasant, and they are discouraged and demoralized from reading in English at all. The best way to raise students' levels of English reading fluency is with an extensive reading program that uses graded readers and in which students read large quantities of material that are well within their linguistic competence. (See Day and Bamford, 1998.) JTEs need to learn about extensive reading and incorporate it in their instructional program.

Relatedly, I have seen little evidence at the SELHi's that students writing skills are being practiced much beyond sentence level. This is rather surprising given the increasing inclusion of a writing sample on the entrance exams (*nijishiken*) of top universities. Instruction in paragraph development and in a variety of genres, along with a process approach to composition, needs to be included in the English instructional program at these schools. As for listening skills, with SELHi classes conducted in the medium of English, students are now receiving a lot of aural input during lessons. However, other listening work appears to be limited mostly to playing the CD of the course text along with a fill-in-the-blanks exercise. Listening material is treated "as a set of discrete linguistic units, rather than connected, coherent discourse. As a result, sound discrimination and word recognition, rather than meaning decoding [are] emphasized" (Taguchi, 2005. p. 7). More systematic attention to listening comprehension instruction is required with approaches that include both top-down and bottom-up processing.

The role of ALTs at SELHi's, and other schools, is quite problematic in that almost all of them are without previous experience or any expertise as teachers of English as a foreign language and unfamiliar with Japanese students, and they stay just a year or two. The staggering annual expenditure for more than 9,000 ALTs throughout the country would be far better invested in long-term, intensive training of JTEs in workshops, seminars, and courses throughout the year. Instruction would be provided both to raise their levels of English proficiency and to develop their knowledge of and skills to deliver effective, communicative language teaching methodologies. First-rate, experienced English teachers, both native English speakers and native Japanese speakers, from within Japan should be employed as trainers in such programs and, above all, be assigned to work with JTEs at SELHi's and other schools on a daily basis as long-term mentors.

## Conclusion

In recent years, Finland has enjoyed an international reputation for the high quality of its education system. The principal of a school in Helsinki told a visiting reporter recently that the three reasons for her country's educational accomplishments were "teachers, teachers, and teachers" (Kaiser, 2005). Indeed, at SELHi's or any other school, it is we teachers who will make all the difference in the quality of education for our students. Teachers need to make a strong commitment to raise the level of their instruction and to motivate and guide students to make greater efforts in their learning in order to reach the highest level of achievement they can. The Ministry of Education has stated that at stake is nothing less than "the future of our children and the further development of Japan as a nation." What a great responsibility and challenge this is for us teachers of English. I look forward to my own continuing involvement with Japanese teachers of English at the SELHi's in my region. I am confident that their accomplishments will continue to mount during the tenure of their schools as SELHi's and into the future as well.

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## **Views from another direction - Aspects of Teacher Education in Hong Kong**

**Anthony Robins, Aichi University of Education, <anthonyrobins@yahoo.com>**

### **Introduction**

Being based in Japan may enable a teacher to become conversant with the education system here, but it is always beneficial to have the opportunity to gain a different perspective by looking at the teaching and learning environment in another location. That opportunity, rare for me, presented itself recently when a colleague and I had the chance to visit educational facilities in Hong Kong. Although we could gain some broad perspectives, the main aim was to look at elementary school level English, as we and other colleagues are working on materials and a curriculum in this area. I will return to current issues in elementary school English after a brief general introduction to education in Hong Kong.

### **Hong Kong Education Systems**

The Hong Kong education system and its changing nature reflects both the fact that it was a British colony until 1997 and that it is now an S.A.R. (Special Administrative Region) of China. Nine years of free and compulsory education takes place between the ages of six and fifteen, consisting of six years (primary 1-6) plus three years (secondary 1-3). An additional four years (secondary 4-7), the latter two akin to the British 'sixth form', take students to the point of university entry. 18% of the age group currently receive full university degrees, mainly taken in a period of three years and this figure increases to 60% if diplomas and 'associate degrees' are taken into account. A planned change is to switch to six years of secondary education (3 + 3), as in Japan and the U.S. This change will allow the university study period to become a uniform four years. Testing and evaluation in Hong Kong is similar to the system in Britain, with public examination equivalents of GCSEs (HKCEE) and A-levels (HKALE), as well as four 'key stages', two at primary level and two at secondary level. Publicity of each school's key stage results is limited to internal school use, compared with the wider dissemination in Britain, while the two public examinations are due to be reorganised into one Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE) with the switch to six years of secondary education. Regarding school finance and operation, I came to realise that the role of outside organisations is much greater than in either Japan or Britain, despite reforms such as sponsored 'city technology colleges' in the latter. Relatively few schools are directly run by the government and we visited two 'subsidized' schools, the Jockey Club Primary School (attached to Hong Kong Institute of Education) in the New Territories and the SHK Tak Tin

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Lee Shiu Keung Primary School in Kowloon. As the name of the former suggests, it is sponsored by the organisation catering for the interests of many in horse racing. It is a non-profit organisation, as well as being Hong Kong's largest taxpayer, so has widespread philanthropic aims. The latter school is sponsored by the Hong Kong Anglican (Episcopal) Church, reflecting the long role of religious schools in Hong Kong and indeed in pre-Communist China.

### **English in Hong Kong**

While its colonial past leads people, particularly in Japan, to imagine broadly high levels of English, the situation is more complex. As we saw, particularly at elementary schools, English teaching is now being delivered in an ESL form, where the focus is on language teaching rather than content teaching through English. While a large number of secondary schools were formerly officially 'English-medium', using English coursebooks across the curriculum, their number has been reduced to about a quarter of all secondary schools, with the majority of secondary schools now being Chinese-medium schools. Language policy is administered by the Education and Manpower Bureau, whose name indicates a perception of the close links between these two areas. The aim of education in Hong Kong is for all students to become biliterate (Chinese and English) and trilingual (Cantonese, Putonghua (Mandarin) and English).

So before moving onto particular aspects of teacher education which we saw, how similar or different is the background for English education in Hong Kong from Japan? There are certainly similarities. As before the handover to China in 1997, the population remains overwhelmingly one ethnic group, with 95% of the population being Chinese, so the role of English as an everyday 'lingua franca' is limited. Although access to English through the media is greater, with English language TV stations as well as bilingual official signs and announcements abounding in the transport arena, teachers we talked to said that basically school students had relatively little opportunity to use English outside the classroom. However, there are also differences. Partly because of the well-known diversity in varieties of Chinese, people in Hong Kong are more likely to be 'bilingual', quite apart from English, and are thus perhaps less likely to consider it the unusual or exceptional ability which it is seen as in Japan. Compared with Japan, there is a stronger tradition of tertiary study in English-speaking countries and the Chinese diaspora has led more families to have relatives in those countries. Although there has certainly been a rise in occupations in Japan requiring English ability, particularly with global tie-ups, Hong Kong's position as a major global centre makes such

requirements greater. Of key importance is the position of English as an official language. While a change towards this in Japan has been mooted, it does not seem to have widespread support. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, there is a larger pool of teachers with greater experience in English, particularly at primary level.

### **Teacher Education**

Before visiting the two primary schools indicated above, we gained an idea of initial teacher education by visiting the Hong Kong Institute of Education. It offers both bachelors' and masters' degrees, but the need to raise the status of teachers is indicated by the fact that it is still campaigning for university status and its share of finances is small compared with Hong Kong's major universities. In addition, the gender ratio of students is 90% female to 10% male.

Turning to the schools themselves, both were 'showpiece' schools, in the sense of being new and well-resourced schools with average or lower than average class size. Their students were from typical 'average' backgrounds, as it is the secondary school level, divided into three bands, where streaming really starts. However, while primary schools in Japan draw quite rigidly from a defined local area, we were told that, at maximum, parents in Hong Kong could potentially apply for up to 30 schools. Therefore, primary schools do need to 'stand out', at least partly through the flow of their students to the higher secondary school bands. Rather than being isolated, the schools we visited illustrated their role as centres of 'good practice' open to teachers from other schools, both in Hong Kong and across the border in China itself. How do they spread teacher education in the specific area of Primary English? These are the main measures:

- 1: Secondment - at the second school we visited, two teachers had successively been seconded to the Curriculum Development Institute of the Education and Manpower Bureau for periods of four months and a year. While still school staff members, this gave them plenty of time to work on practical materials, to liaise with other teachers and to build up expertise to spread to other schools and teachers through what are termed 'Seed Projects'. Rigorous selection would seem to ensure that proficient candidates are selected for secondment. According to the Education and Manpower Bureau, three key roles of teachers are now: facilitator, curriculum developer and curriculum leader.

2: Spreading the word widely - This is shown through one key method of teaching English at this level in the form of stories and storytelling (shared reading), with the use of such materials as 'big books'. Experienced teachers, included those who have been seconded (see above), tutor other teachers, publishers give presentations to teachers, and school libraries and their librarians reach out to parents to develop their story reading skills in both English and Chinese.

3: School Autonomy - Although the overall curriculum is specified and certain textbooks are approved, individual schools can use the latter or others. Schools have flexibility in areas such as management of funds and organization of the school calendar which enables innovation, based on autonomy dating from the School Management Initiative introduced in 1991 (referred to by Dowson et al (2000)).

4: Tougher measures - Teachers in Hong Kong do not have 'lifetime employment', rather the typical young teacher has a contract for one year, which is subject to renewal. Although muted by union opposition, standards are being raised by 'benchmark' tests for both new and serving English teachers. These, officially known as the Language Proficiency Assessment for Teachers (LPAT), feature questions which test both their English knowledge and their ability to explain features of the language. Although there is the opportunity to retake these tests several times, or to take up an authorized training course, under such pressure, a number of teachers decide to change their jobs. According to 'The Pearl Report', a programme aired while we were there, some 2,600 English teachers have not yet met the required standards (see below for total teacher numbers). What can be seen as a 'carrot and stick' approach is for the government to provide finance for and recognition of an average 50 hours of professional development per year to help teachers improve their skills.

## **Conclusion**

Are or should these methods be replicated in Japan? One of the greatest problems is teacher specialisation and workload. Although teachers other than English specialists have to teach classes at primary level in Hong Kong, at primary level in Japan, as at junior high level, teachers' homeroom and club activity support occupy large amounts of time. There is no history of English specialisation at this level in Japan, meaning that teachers' proficiency levels are likely to both vary and to be less than high on average, making benchmark tests difficult to institute in the near future. In contrast, according to Dowson et al. (2003),



approximately 12,500 of the total of 42,000 primary and secondary teachers in Hong Kong are teaching English.

Storytelling appeared to be an effective method there, but faces difficulties in Japan where many espouse a focus purely on speaking and listening. This view results both from the limited time available for English at this level in Japan and the desire to counteract the translation and grammar-focussed traditions of secondary English. It should be said at this stage that primary schools in Hong Kong are offering English as around 17% to 21% of the lesson time, i.e. about five to eight classes a week, far more than in Japan at present.

Regarding autonomy, although the present situation of primary English in Japan is seen as rather limbo-like, occupying time in the 'general studies' slot, as I noted in Robins (2005), it allows local areas latitude in how much English they offer and who teaches it, according to their resources and enthusiasm for the subject. Making English a required subject at the moment would seem to stretch present resources and inhibit diversity and innovation. Rather, lessons on those latter characteristics could be learned from Hong Kong by encouraging greater school autonomy and by spreading 'good practice' through the leadership of teachers who are particularly gifted in language skills and language teaching methods. The latter need to be given opportunities such as the secondment opportunities offered in Hong Kong, so that skills can gradually percolate to the wider elementary school teaching population.

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'The Pearl Report' on Hong Kong TVB (aired 12th February 2006)

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## **Not Another Homestay**

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This article is about taking students' English learning out of the classroom. We invited our students to join us in Malaysia and do an entrance level scuba course. It was not a home stay. It was not a package tour. It was not a group trip. We feel that many students get limited results when they take part in the above 'standard' scenarios. Home stays and agency-organized trips typically take large groups of Japanese who study and socialize together or remain in the cocoon of the home stay family. We hasten to add that there is only anecdotal evidence to support this statement, however, a very large number of our students have told us that they gained nothing or very little from such trips because they were with their Japanese friends and so they were speaking Japanese nearly continually. The students who joined us in Malaysia traveled independently with some support from us. We really wanted to show our students how much traveling could benefit them, both in terms of their English ability and their own personal development. On this trip the students had to get out there and communicate in order to achieve simple but important objectives such as ordering what they wanted to eat. And all the English they used while studying had real meaning - they became scuba divers.

### **Where did the idea come from?**

In an attempt to make our classrooms more content based we asked our students to give presentations about things that interested them. We gave example presentations to demonstrate about what and how we wanted the students to go about presenting. We naturally talked about our favorite hobby - SCUBA. We found that the content of these presentations was far more interesting to the students than we had anticipated. Many students expressed a desire to try SCUBA, but did not know how to go about doing it. As SCUBA instructors we realized that we were in an excellent position to introduce students to our hobby.

### **Qualifications**

We are both PADI Open Water SCUBA Instructors. This qualification allows us to teach and certify SCUBA divers. There is no reason why an EFL teacher couldn't organize trips similar to the ones we have done and simply use the onsite instructors. By being instructors

ourselves we had a good knowledge about how to organize the trip and do some pre-study. We also knew the students and some Japanese which allowed us to shelter our students if they needed some support. It is possible that a certified diver could accompany the instructor and provide similar support.

### **Why Malaysia?**

There were four main reasons for this choice.

1. It is expensive to get the open water certification in Japan
2. By taking the students to Malaysia they would experience another culture.
3. English is a very strong second language in Malaysia. Until recently it was the language used in all secondary schooling, therefore many Malaysians have a good level of English and it is still often used for doing business.
4. We had a good contact at a resort where we knew we could take our customers and use the resort facilities.

### **Organisation**

The first thing we did was to approach the universities we worked at. They were not able to give any official support to part-time instructors but there were no barriers to us promoting our own trip.

We contacted an old student who worked for a travel agency and asked her for advice. We had limits on numbers which did not fit in with travel agency packages. We needed to purchase more than 10 tickets for the same flight to get a group reduction; however we wanted to keep our student instructor ration at 4:1, so we would have a maximum of 8 students! Consequently we received no discount. We priced flights and decided to make the students themselves responsible for their plane ticket. There were two reasons for this. We have found that Japanese travel agencies tend to change prices and details after the deposit has been paid and we wanted such things to be between the students and the agency- not us. Second, only relatively independent students would choose to come if they had to take some of the responsibility for organizing the trip. We wanted confident students because confidence is important when learning SCUBA in the water!

### **The students**

Most of them have been 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> year students. About half have been English majors while the others have been from majors including agriculture, nutrition and media studies. The

English majors tended to be more outgoing and social but all students managed to communicate successfully. A total of 28 students have come on the trip in the two years that we have done it. Twenty-four successfully got their Open Water certification. The other four were credited with the Scuba Diver qualification. Two students returned in the second year to get their Advanced Open Water qualification.

### **Materials**

PADI is an international organization; as such, study materials are available in many languages. This is a great bonus for a trip such as ours. Students must learn some essential theory about our physiology and the physics relating to taking our bodies underwater. The students need to understand this theory in order to have a safe and positive experience in the water, so we gave our students the option of studying in English or Japanese, emphasizing the importance of a sound understanding of the concepts involved. This is a new context for most of the students so it is essential they build the vocabulary and knowledge in their first language (L1) if they have any doubts about their ability to understand the English materials.

### **What the students got out of it**

Independence - they had to do some of the organization themselves. They had to buy the plane ticket and get themselves to the airport and on the plane. We met them at the airport in Malaysia. They also did almost all of their communication on the island in English, including most of the practical sessions for the SCUBA.

They had to use all those everyday conversations that they had been practicing in English classes since they were junior high school students. Introductions, greetings, ordering in a restaurant, queries, filling in forms, complaints, reconfirming tickets, buying souvenirs, getting a (boat) taxi, and socializing.

They got to immerse themselves in another culture. The island we go to is small and has not been developed. There are no roads, no hotels and no shopping centers. Just small, traditional style cottages on the beach. This simple way of life was a great shock to all the students, but most of them grew to realize what a valuable experience it was to try living like this.

They could see how important English is as the language of communication. Although we were in Malaysia this is a tourist island so the dive shop staff and customers come from a mix

of countries and cultures. Last summer the students met people from: Malaysia, England, the US, Canada, Ireland, Poland, France, Norway, Korea, Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore. All of these people used English as their language of communication almost all of the time.

### **Pricing**

This is where one needs to make a decision about why you are doing the trip. Are you doing it for the good of the students or to make money? This was actually an easy decision for us to make. We kept the cost low because in taking students and certifying them we become more experienced instructors. This year one of us has been able to progress to the next level of instructor because of the customers we took and taught at the resort. In keeping the cost low we did lose some customers! Because the home stays and travel agency trips to Europe, North America and the Antipodes are so expensive, some students were worried about the low cost. We finally priced it so that just the costs of our flights were covered.

### **Conclusion**

We have enjoyed organizing these trips for the last two summers. We feel that our students get a great deal out of it, both in terms of their English ability and personal development. We have really enjoyed seeing the students change from scared Japanese tourists to English-speaking scuba divers who travel independently in pursuit of their interests.

If anyone would like to organize a SCUBA trip or a similar trip based around their hobby we would be happy to provide advice and would love to hear about any trips that are off the 'home stay' map!

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