

# A Teacher's Journey from Japanese to TESOL to Housewife to Something Else

## Entirely

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### Setting the Scene: Not an Abstract

Our life paths often take unexpected turns which surprise us upon reflection, but ideally lead us to personal and professional growth. Through a series of good and perhaps not-so-good choices, complicated interpersonal relationships, and simply being in a certain place at a certain time, I find myself a middle-aged mother of two bicultural teens, with a full-time position at a well-known private university in Tokyo, in the English Literature Department although my degrees are in Japanese Language and TESOL, teaching mostly content-based courses in subjects for which I have no formal qualification, in possession of my own desk for the first time in twenty-five years, and yet a limited-term contract employee facing another crossroads in the not-too-distant future. This paper will explore these various strands, isolating the major transition points in the larger context of one teacher's narrative in order to "focus on experience and follow where it leads" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000. p. 188).

### Introduction

When I was in junior high school, there was a popular song called "Once in a Lifetime," by the new wave group Talking Heads. The lyrics have always felt as though they were written for me, and are particularly relevant for a reflective article: "...you may find yourself in another part of the world... / And you may ask yourself/ Well, how did I get here?" (Byrne, Eno, Harrison, Frantz, & Weymouth, 1980). If I am asked to isolate the major transitions which have led me to this particular place in my journey, the list would read as follows:

1. I came to Japan as an exchange student to learn about Japanese language and culture.
2. After my college graduation, I returned to Japan as a JET Program teacher, which inspired me to become a "real" teacher. Because my husband happened to be transferred to Southern California as my contract was ending, getting my Master's Degree in TESOL in those pre-Internet days became a physically and financially accessible option.
3. I chose to stay home after my second child was born; while I had no definite timeline, the result was five and a half years as a full-time housewife.
4. I returned to teaching in 2009, and realized that academia in Japan had changed greatly. These changes, while sometimes stressful and frustrating, have led me in new professional directions, including finally getting started in research and publishing (which my long-term colleagues will agree were not required in the 1990's!) and the possibility of starting another degree program in a completely new field.

This paper will examine each of these formative experiences and reflect upon how they have affected my professional journey, in hopes of connecting with other teachers "who share a vision of the centrality of attending to lives, and the making and remaking of lives, as vitally important work in classrooms, schools, and communities" (Huber, Caine, Huber, & Steeves, 2013. p. 213).

### Stage One: Girl Meets Japan

Around 1980, I became fascinated with Japan, largely due to *Shogun*, a TV mini-series based on James Clavell's bestselling novel, which I did not read until a few years later. The series involved impossibly garish pink kimonos, Welsh actor John Rhys-Davies pretending to be Portuguese, and Richard Chamberlain as the Pilot Anjin-san, based on an actual historical figure who surely must have spoken better Japanese. The novel *Shike* by Robert Shea (1981) was popular at the time, too. Naturally, I pronounced it "Shaik," rhyming with "bike." At that time and in that place, there was no way to correct my error.

A few years later, I went to college majoring in Spanish, staying with the language I knew but deliberately choosing a school that also offered Japanese, which I planned to take as my required additional language. I started in my second year, and I knew by the end

of the first semester that I wanted to study abroad in Japan, not Latin America as I had originally intended. I found myself applying for junior year abroad in Tokyo. When I arrived, I could barely say the simplest sentences, and could write *hiragana* and perhaps ten or twenty *kanji*. I was placed in the lowest elementary class, and made rapid progress, at least in speaking and listening skill, not because of the class or the Japanese man I happened to meet (and to whom I am now married, but that is another story).

The fact is that I became a competent speaker of Japanese because of my wonderful host family, and the fact that I was downright rude to people. If someone tried to speak English to me, which any Western-appearing person in Japan can attest still happens often, I would insist, “*Nihongo wakarimasu!* (I understand Japanese!),” even when I did not actually understand and would end up making a complete fool of myself. I recall arguing with my teachers that the Japanese they were teaching us in class was strange and unnatural. “Nobody talks that way!” I would insist, while the teachers just as strongly insisted that I was speaking “colloquial, broken Japanese,” whereas what they were teaching us was “correct.” Meanwhile, on a daily basis, I was experiencing what I now know is called “othering.” Most people’s intent was good, but when I said *sumimasen* (excuse me) or *konnichiwa* (hello) people would praise my excellent Japanese. Since I hadn’t actually said much of anything, this implied that people rarely expected to hear their language coming from someone who looks like me, and they would often follow up with “*Nihongo, muzukashii desho?*” (“Japanese is difficult, isn’t it?”). I also became very tired of hearing how amazed they were that I could use chopsticks and being asked whether I could eat rice. Yes, the way that question is usually phrased in Japanese is not “Do you like rice?” but “Can you eat rice?” as though eating rice required a special physical ability.

On my first day exploring Tokyo on my own, I walked into a curry restaurant in a busy part of central Tokyo. When the waiter brought me my curry, he placed a big spoon next to the bowl. I lost my temper. Indeed, I may have raised my voice a bit, from sheer frustration that people were treating me like a “foreigner,” assuming that I couldn’t or wouldn’t want to do things “the Japanese way.” I firmly told the waiter to bring me chopsticks. Without hesitation, he did as I asked. As I sat there, feeling very self-righteous, struggling to eat the soupy curry with chopsticks, I looked around and realized that all the Japanese people around me were using spoons!

As this incident shows, I was here to learn Japanese and have an “authentic” cultural experience, and I felt I had something to prove. I was not one of those tourists stopping through on their way to go backpacking in India or the beach in Thailand.

At the same time, I started teaching English conversation, and it seemed that I was good at it. By the end of the year, I was teaching nearly every day after my Japanese class ended. Also, as mentioned above, there was a man in the picture. I vehemently denied that our relationship affected my subsequent career choices, but in retrospect I know that was simply not true, as will be discussed in the next section.

## Stage 2: Call Me Sensei

In many ways I owe my Master’s Degree to my husband. His company transferred him to Southern California just after my JET contract ended, and I went with him as a “trailing spouse.” I was the youngest and the only non-Japanese wife in the office. I had lived in Los Angeles as a child, so I qualified for the much lower resident tuition at California State University, which has a well-known TESOL program. The decision and all the required paperwork took several months, but I knew I was not yet ready to have children, and that the degree would help me find better jobs when I returned to Japan. Once I started taking classes, I truly felt that I had come home.

The program required at least two years of foreign language study, and the rooms were full of people who had lived and worked all over the world, from a Peace Corps volunteer who had worked in Cameroon, to an Egyptian journalist, to a former flight attendant. The classes helped me broaden my perspective on language learning and teaching, and contextualize my teaching experience. I began to understand why certain things worked in the classroom and others did not. In my second year, I was able to teach an adult education class composed almost entirely of Spanish speakers, a completely different cultural and linguistic atmosphere from English conversation classes in Japan.

I came back to Tokyo in the summer of 1995, degree in hand, and spent the next year at several *Eikaiwa* (English conversation) jobs for which I was now overqualified. I finally found my first university position, through a Monday advertisement in The Japan Times newspaper. Those working in academia in Japan will be aware that, as I was interviewed in late March, it must have been an emergency and my employer must have been desperate, but as I still teach for them today they are clearly not disappointed with my work. This first position opened other doors for me, and by 1999 I was teaching a total of 20 classes at several universities and colleges in the Tokyo area. At the time, and since I was still child-free and in my thirties, this was a hard schedule but not unusual.

## Stage 3: Mommy and Me

In 2003, after the birth of my second child, I became a full-time housewife and mother for five and a half years. The very word “housewife” is now considered outdated, even offensive by many North Americans, as it conjures a retrograde image of aprons, ironing, and homemade cookies. I deliberately choose to use it here, not only because it is easily understood in Japan, but also because it represents a clearly-defined identity which comes with a particular set of expectations, and still affects my thinking and behavior today. I took my children to bilingual and neighborhood Japanese-monolingual playgroups, participated in PTA when my son started at the local public school, and watched a shocking amount of Cartoon Network and Disney Channel.

I have found that my students tend to be very interested in this aspect of my background, and especially for female students I make a point of mentioning it. It helps them identify with me as a woman who has been in and out of the paid workforce, and to consider possibilities for their own futures after graduation.

In the fall of 2008, we experienced a personal financial crisis completely unrelated to the “Lehman Shock”, which happened about three weeks later and affected the entire world economy. It was time for this stage to end. I contacted everyone I knew, letting them know I was ready to return to teaching, and at the end of the year had my first real job interview since 1997. My most helpful contacts included one of my former program directors, and an old colleague who managed to get my resume to the top of the stack. I must also mention the community of my fellow foreign wives of Japanese. Any other member of this particular sisterhood will attest that it is an immensely valuable support network.

A critical incident occurred my first week back in the classroom. I had received a call the previous afternoon from my new supervisor asking me, due to a faculty emergency, to take over an additional Thursday morning class which started the next day. I quickly chose suitable materials, typed a tentative syllabus, got my children to bed, and prepared to get up at 5:30 to make a box lunch for my five-year-old daughter, who was scheduled to go on a field trip with her daycare center.

A little before 5 a.m., I was woken by a scenario most parents are familiar with: a teary child who burned with fever and had just vomited. Clearly, the field trip was out of the question, but so was missing the first day of class at a new job. At 6:00 I called my husband, who works in another city and usually comes home only on weekends, and begged him to come home. He said, “Of course!” and was on the *Shinkansen* (Bullet Train) and home by 8:30. I was able to make it to my new class, which by the way turned out to be an excellent group of students, and all of us got through the rest of the day. My daughter, by the way, was perfectly recovered by Monday.

This incident is relevant because it reveals much about attitudes toward motherhood, in academia and in society as a whole. I was lucky that my husband is both stubborn and willing to use a paid holiday to save me in such a situation. His boss apparently gave him a hard time, asking, “Is your wife’s job really that important?”

“Yes it is,” replied my husband, “It’s her first day at a new job. She needs me.” In fact, my supervisor assured me later that missing class would have been perfectly acceptable since my child was sick, but that attitude is far from universal. Putting it bluntly, a father stays home, and he is a hero. A mother stays home, and it is simply what is expected. It is unlikely that any eyebrows would have been raised if the situation were reversed.

## **Stage 4: What am I now and where am I going?**

I confess that during my time at home, I allowed my knowledge of current developments in TESOL to fossilize. Juggling two young children while teaching eight classes was a real challenge for the first few years, so I continued with what I knew: general skills-based Communicative Language Teaching. I was unfamiliar with concepts such as native speaker-ism, narrative inquiry, or critical pedagogy. Indeed, I scoffed when a younger colleague said that he did not consider himself a representative of his birth culture, that it was perfectly acceptable to let students use L1 texts in English class, that culture does not really exist anyway (how poststructuralist of him!), and that he encouraged his students to “get beyond the concept of culture, because it’s limiting.” If memory serves, I rolled my eyes at him and retorted that he was “not really an English teacher.” I still clung to my beliefs that of course native or “native-level” speakers were the ideal, and culture not only existed, but was the very foundation of an individual’s development.

Around the same time, my main employer introduced a new content-based CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) curriculum. It also became clear that, in spite of my degree and teaching experience, if I did not get started in research and publishing my days in tertiary education would be limited. Even adjunct positions now asked for a list of publications, which was not the case in the 1990’s. I was teaching three days a week at one of the most prestigious private universities in Japan, with one of the best libraries available to me, but had never set foot in that library, nor taken advantage of the intelligent, articulate, international student body to do classroom research.

Just after Golden Week, 2013, I took my first steps. One Friday, rather than going back to have coffee in the teachers’ room after lunch, I said goodbye to my friends and headed for the stacks. I was home, as I always have been in libraries, and I quickly found a quiet study desk, which I still use regularly even though I now have my own office. Writing and research have gradually become an integral part of my professional life. My years as a stay-at-home mother have served me well in this area, because I can multi-task and use small blocks of time, even twenty or thirty minutes, accomplishing tasks step by step. Nevertheless, I feel like the famous fictional character Rip Van Winkle, who wakes up from a nap (not to say that child-rearing is a nap!) and finds that he has slept for twenty years. Somehow, although the settings are familiar, the teaching world has changed without my noticing, and I am often rushing to catch up.

Among the long list of changes since I taught my first university classes and then was “interrupted” by motherhood are the following:

- People ten or fifteen years younger than me have tenure or tenure-track positions and PhDs. They see research as a given, and some have even published books.

•The part-time teachers' room is deserted ten minutes before the chime rings. My full-time colleagues tend to eat while working in their offices. No longer do my colleagues usually chat, eat lunch together, or finish their coffee and walk in a leisurely manner to their classroom; if the chime is close to ringing, they run!

•Presentation software has become the default. When I explain that I generally prefer to use paper handouts and the blackboard, I get reactions somewhere along the spectrum from blank stares to eye rolls and sarcastic comments. I am gradually developing basic 21st-century technological skills, but I still see machines as optional tools, rather than necessities.

•Among my full-time colleagues, the men are mostly married with children, quite a few with stay-at-home spouses, while the majority of the women are single or married but child-free. To quote a Japanese colleague, "You'll find all the mommies in the part-timers' room!" I have made a point of connecting with other mothers, both adjunct and full-time; we face the same challenges and speak the same language regardless of our nationality.

•Long holidays are mostly spent researching, writing, and presenting at conferences, rather than visiting family or relaxing on the beach in Thailand or Bali. (Not that I ever did that, of course.)

•Finally, in what are definitely positive developments, class size has decreased; no more multi-level conversation classes of 50 students. Also, I am increasingly asked to teach content-based or CLIL courses in subjects for which I am not trained, including gender studies and psychology.

For all the above reasons, despite being older and having more years of teaching experience than many of my colleagues, I feel as though my career is just getting started.

## Conclusion: Future Directions

Inspired by the many content-based classes I have been teaching recently, I have begun to look into further study, probably Comparative Literature or Cultural Studies. Clearly, TESOL has given me a good basis for classroom practice working with students, which should be any teacher's first priority, and it has also allowed me to see other, different possibilities for the future. Motherhood and my Japanese language background are also important aspects of the identity which I bring into the classroom. I stand at yet another crossroads, and I look forward to whatever comes next.

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