
LETTER FROM TOKYO

Murray Henman

Today is Hiroko's last lesson at our school. I'm partly surprised that she has stayed this long. She's been coming here regularly for a few years now and her improvement has been frustratingly slow and painful. But what surprises me even more is that she doesn't want to leave. Despite her slow pace, she enjoys learning English and comes two or three times a week. It's only the fact that she can no longer afford the expensive lessons that she is leaving at all.

Hiroko is what is called 'stuck in level'. She has taken every lesson in this level at least two or three times - and with little improvement to show for it. She has been getting better, but continues to make basic mistakes that should have been ironed out ages ago. These are the standard problems Japanese have with English; missing plurals, wrong or absent articles and prepositions, and highly irregular tense.

In her defence however, I have taught students at other schools who make Hiroko look like a prodigy. Some students have done every lesson in each level so many times, you can see teachers' faces wince when they open the file. When teaching Hiroko and other slow learners, most teachers struggle to try to find a new or different way of doing the same lessons they've done before. There must be other ways of helping them understand the correct usage of the target language, hoping they don't get bored. But in reality, we really have no idea what to do.

Why not? We're not teachers. Not real teachers anyway. Very few 'English teachers' in Japan have teaching experience or have teaching degrees - or even done a Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) course. The only reason we have a degree at all is because it's a government requirement for a working visa.

We all the standard three days on-job-training before being shunted off to whatever branch we are allocated for the next 12 months. It's like being taught to swim by being thrown into the deep end of the pool. You either sink or swim, though in many cases, it's not so much swimming as struggling to keep your head above water. Once you've settled in, most teachers switch into cruise control, which gets them by but ignores most students' real needs.

Our company doesn't seem to mind this. They say they want us to be better teachers, but this encouragement isn't supported by any genuine measures. Any non-teaching time is time they aren't earning money. As my friend described it, they are the McDonald's of English teaching.

Like McDonalds' employees, most English teachers in Japan are young and fresh, many straight out of university, or a couple of years later. Some have come because they couldn't find a job back home. Some have come in order to save some money (which is possible even in a place as expensive as Japan). Some are eternal travellers, trying yet another country in which to live and work. Some guys have come because they've heard that Japanese girls are hot for Western guys and are hoping for some Asian action. And a precious few have come because they are genuinely interested in Japan and want to learn more about this fascinating country.

We're all native English speakers from all around the world. About half of us are from Australia or New Zealand and the other half are from the northern hemisphere countries: England, Canada and the USA.

After work finishes that night, I meet up with some other teachers for some station drinking. Deterred by the excessively priced drinks at most bars and the claustrophobic size of most Japanese apartments (or in my case, a sociopath flatmate), many teachers take advantage of Japan's liberal licensing laws. Positioning ourselves at the train station exit and buying cans of beer from the nearby 24-hour convenience store, we hang out and chew the fat.

Station drinking is not (at least as far as I discovered) illegal in Japan, but it is certainly unusual. While most Japanese are far too polite (or apparently intimidated by big Westerners) to comment or even stare, we get the occasional glance from suited salary men, on their way home after a long day at the office, extended even further by the ridiculously long commutes some Japanese undertake.

As in all cultures, drinking in Japan is a great social lubrication. For new teachers, it is also a great networking opportunity. You meet your co-worker's flatmates, but also your flatmates' co-workers, creating an ever-expanding extended family. However, we rarely meet anyone from competing English teaching schools. Along with our school's strict non-socialisation-with-students policy (more often observed in the breach than adherence), this creates a rather insular experience of Japan for most teachers.

I'm fortunate that I live with Dave from Birmingham. Not only is he a very friendly guy with lots of drinking buddies and has been in Tokyo for a year already, but he's also a supervisor. This means I get to meet a number of other supervisors. (It's so much easier working at a school when you're already drinking companions with the boss.) I feel like I've been initiated into some men's group.

Dave's group includes a wide variety of people. Derek is a Kiwi who spent two years on a fishing boat between school and university. He swears and drinks like a fisherman, but would do anything for you and is especially helpful to new teachers. There's Big Dave (known because he's of a larger build than my flatmate), another

Pom to whom I once lent my mobile phone battery, not realising at the time that I'd never get it back. Craig is from Sydney and misses the rugby and cricket. He loves talking about the latest gossip from back home, which most of us know nothing about. Steve is from New York and is one of the few with a genuine interest in Japanese culture. He also knows all the good restaurants in the area and likes to explore the local streets at lunchtime, rather than stay in the staffroom.

Station drinking is where I derive most of my good information about living and working in Japan; from the people who have been here for a few years. Important things like how to get a mobile phone, where to get your re-entry visa, where the good clubs and bars are, where and what to see in Japan.

Today, the guys are discussing their upcoming holiday in Hong Kong. Or to be more accurate, a weeklong sex and booze-up. That's certainly the impression that I'm getting. Certainly I don't think they're going for a cultural exchange.

Apart from visiting the family back home, South East Asia is the preferred holiday destination for a lot of English teachers. It's close, convenient and very cheap relative to the yen. Some teachers find work (teaching English of course) in other countries when they've had enough of Japan.

Craig, however, might not be able to go on the holiday. He is having issues with his Japanese wife. She claims that he can't afford to go. I suspect that she knows what he's going to get up to with the boys.

Many of the long-term teachers (which is any longer than 18 months) have Japanese girlfriends or wives. They tend to be those who already love Japan or have come to appreciate the country. Some are learning or already speak the language. The rest of us stay until we have had enough, saved enough, had our holidays, then move on to new or old things. For the professional traveller, it's another stamp in the passport and another set of experiences for the travel journal, but with more travel credibility than two years in Willesden Green.

Tokyo was my last stop in six years of living overseas, travelling, and occasionally returning home for short breaks. I feel immensely privileged in my travelling life, having walked past Big Ben and Westminster Abbey everyday on my way to work in London, to have lived through and seen amazing acts at an Edinburgh Festival, and to see Mt Fuji from my bedroom window (on the rare days when the eternally polluted Tokyo sky was clear).

After living in London and Edinburgh for three years, Tokyo was quite a change. Apart from the obvious changes in language and currency (one easy to adapt to, the other not so), the job and societal expectations made me think more about where I was – and how my behaviour was perceived. Behaviour that is customary in

Australia can be seen as rude or ignorant in Japan, and that which is normal in Japan seems most curious or bizarre to me.

Despite the frustrations in planning lessons for Hiroko, I'll miss her. She had the one feature that all teachers love to see in their students – an enthusiasm and eagerness to learn. I'll also miss my other students, watching them get better, listening to them talking about their lives in Japan. After all, I didn't come here to teach. I came to see the place and meet locals. When you get paid for it, it's even better.



Murray Henman, 35, has travelled extensively but not extensively enough. He loves photography, cinema reading history, and walking through new cities and towns. Currently residing in Brisbane, he is refining his extensive list of new places to travel to and exploring the financial means of doing so. His other projects include a calendar of his photography, and far too many book and movie ideas that can ever be written.

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