

IMMERSION EXPERIENCE

Japan Foundation (Short term) Scholarship

Polyglot Interview with Wendy Sheahan, Edgewater College, Auckland

Polyglot: What is your current position and what makes you passionate about teaching?

At present I am Acting HOD Japanese at Edgewater College in Pakuranga, Auckland. I love both teaching and learning languages (I am currently studying Mandarin). Communicating in another language is fun. It can open up a whole new way of looking at things.

Polyglot: How many years have you been teaching Japanese and what made you apply for this scholarship?

I have been teaching Japanese for about 15 years. Before that I was a Japanese tour guide. I lived in Japan for 3 years but that was about 25 years ago. I hadn't been back since (apart from a stop-over once on my way to England). I felt that my Japanese was starting to sound a bit old-fashioned.

Polyglot: How long was the duration of your scholarship and what time of the year? Are there any other scholarships you know about for Japanese teachers?

I was with a group of seven Japanese teachers from New Zealand and fourteen teachers from Australia chosen for a three week course in January. The Japan Foundation in Kita Urawa also has longer courses that teachers can apply for both in Japan and at their centre in Sydney.

Polyglot: How did you get to Japan, and what costs did you have to bear?

The Japan Foundation paid for all expenses while in Japan and ILANZ paid for the travel so all I needed was personal spending money. Very lucky! On week days all our meals were provided in the cafeteria at the centre and we were given a meal allowance for weekends. All transport during the course was paid for. We were even given an allowance on the day we were resource gathering so that we could take our volunteer high school students out to lunch.

Polyglot: Where did you stay in Japan, what was it like and how accessible was the centre from Tokyo?

I stayed at the Japan Foundation Centre in Kita Urawa, Saitama which is only about half an hour from Tokyo. Half of the building has living accommodation (single rooms) and the other half has the classrooms.

Polyglot: Was the course more a language course or a teaching course?

The course had three purposes: improving Japanese language ability, giving us a taste of Japanese culture and helping us to produce resources for teaching.

On our first day we were given a listening and writing placement test after which we were put into language classes. We also had classes on Japanese-language teaching methods. We were able to share our ideas with other teachers and then formed groups to produce resources. We spent a day at both a primary school and a high school observing classes, interacting with the students and talking to the staff.

Polyglot: What facilities were available at the centre?

There was an excellent library containing most texts and resources which have been produced to teach Japanese language. I also enjoyed the karaoke room where we could sing (mostly in Japanese) in the evenings. The centre has a tennis court, volley ball court and bicycles which we could use in our free time. I went out for several bike rides in the evenings. It's so much safer riding on the Japanese roads than it is in Auckland.

One of the great things about the Kita Urawa Centre is that there are people staying there from all over the world. The one thing they have in common is that they are all involved in teaching or researching Japanese language. The only way to communicate in most cases is by using Japanese so it really is total immersion.

Polyglot: Did you feel the course was relevant to the NZ Curriculum?

Definitely. We chose our own groups to work with when making resources so most of us chose to work with those who were teaching the same level and from the same country.

Polyglot: Were you able to bring back any resources or ideas you can directly use in your classes or was it all theoretical?

I have brought back so many resources that I am still sorting through them. In addition to the texts and DVDs given to us by the Japan Foundation I spent several evenings shopping at the Y100 stores buying stickers, rewards, models of food, etc to use in my classes. The teachers all compiled a list of activities that we use with our classes and put the songs we use for teaching on to a CD.

We worked in groups to produce our main resource. I worked with Craig Rosengrave (Riccanton High School) and Mika Sandford (Rangiora High School). We made resources to help students with some of the grammar points found in levels 5 and 6 of the Curriculum. We made worksheets with grammar explanations, warm-up exercises, speaking, listening, reading and writing exercises. Each worksheet begins with an image scanned from a Japanese manga. We altered the caption to include the appropriate grammar. Attached to the worksheet is a link to video footage that we took to illustrate the use of the grammar. Japanese high school students gave up their time one Saturday to help act in the video. Each segment on the video plays once without subtitles, once with subtitles and then plays with English translations.

Polyglot: Did you get any free time while there?

We had one Sunday free so I was able to visit some tourist spots in Tokyo such as Meiji Shrine and Akihabara. I also managed to catch up with a Japanese student who had a two year homestay with me twelve years ago. Also seijin no hi (Coming of Age day) is a national holiday so that was free. I managed to get out and do some shopping. So there were two free days, but actually some of the time on those days was spent working on our main assignment. It was all very busy but lots of fun.

Polyglot: How about culture? Were you able to immerse yourself in the culture?

Absolutely! We were taken to kabuki (Japanese traditional theatre), took part in a tea ceremony, had lessons in calligraphy and spent a weekend at a ryokan (Japanese Inn). We had one night staying in homestays. Mine was in Ogano (a small town near Chichibu in Saitama). I was lucky enough to attend a seijinshiki (Coming of Age ceremony).



The kabuki was definitely a highlight. We were given a lecture on the basics of kabuki the day before we went which made it much easier to understand and enjoy. We were taken to Kabukiza which is the principal kabuki theatre in Tokyo. The building is very traditional (which means that there wasn't much leg room particularly for non-Japanese) and ornate. Ticket prices are normally over \$200 so in my younger days in Japan I wasn't able to afford to go. The play lasts about five hours but there is a meal break in the middle when you can sit and eat your obentoo (traditional packed lunch).

The weekend at the ryokan was our 'field trip' at the end of the course. We went to Aizu-Wakamatsu in Fukushima Prefecture. Once again we were given a lecture on the history of the area before we went which made it so much more interesting. We travelled by bullet train to Utsunomiya then went the rest of the way by bus. We had time to look around Tsuruga Castle and the museum inside it. We also got to paint and take home our own akabeko (a red cow toy made of papier-maché which is a symbol of the Aizu area.)

The snow in January was about 3 metres deep and in the evening at the ryokan we sat soaking in the outdoor hot pool looking down at a waterfall surrounded by snow covered rocks. It was so beautiful.

Polyglot: What is the greatest benefit you see in attending such a course?

It allows you to concentrate on improving your own use of the language and gives you experiences you can relate to make your teaching more interesting. There is also time to spend developing and collecting resources.

Polyglot: And your final word or recommendation?

Thank you Japan Foundation and ILANZ. I would recommend this as the best Professional Development I have experienced. The greatest benefit that I personally got from the course is a renewed confidence in my Japanese ability. I will not leave it so long between visits to Japan from now on.

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