

Grant Nielsen (Teacher Training Studies)

PRE-MONBUKAGAKUSHO SCHOLARSHIP LIFE AND JAPAN

I attended a high school in Adelaide in the 1970s and started my Japanese language learning adventure there at the age of 12. Although I did not particularly appreciate the opportunity at the time, it is clear that it was a blessing to have been exposed to Japanese language and culture at such a young age. I first visited Japan in 1981 and I was hooked in no time. I started my career as a high school teacher in 1983 and continued to visit Japan in various capacities over the following years. A particular highlight for me was the Japan Foundation Program in 1985 in Tokyo. Rubbing shoulders with fellow Japanese teachers from around the world was a privilege for me to experience.

TEACHER TRAINING PROGRAM PREP - OSAKA FOREIGN LANGUAGES UNIVERSITY

I was fortunate indeed to have a friend who had participated one of the first MEXT Teacher Training Programs available to Australian teachers. She raved about her experience in Yokohama and I was determined to apply whenever I could. As is often the case in life, awareness of opportunities makes all the difference and so I made enquiries about the program directly to the embassy in Canberra. Despite the education department authorities offering no support, I managed to complete application procedures including an assessment of my Japanese language skills according to the Japanese Language Proficiency Test.

I was told on the phone of my successful application that would see me studying at Naruto University of Education for a year preceded by a 6 month preparation time at Osaka Foreign Languages University. I had been to Osaka a couple of times for brief visits but to that time I had never been to Shikoku. Even Japanese people have an expression about Shikoku that gives the impression that, 'Shikoku is the last place you visit.' I did not know much about Naruto, but it became part of my favourite line of 1992, 'Sou naru-to omowanakatta-kedo...'



Osaka was great. Tokyo had been the centre of my experiences in Japan until that stage of my life so Osaka was a new adventure in many ways. I lived in a dormitory with other overseas students on scholarships like me. Most were under 30 and the majority of the 100 or so at the Kansai Ryugakusei Kaikan were from Thailand but with a sprinkling from a huge range of other countries. One of the true joys of being part of a program like this is sharing the experience with people from all over the world. My time in Osaka in particular was such a multicultural one. In my dormitory were 6 students from Mongolia. I think the population of Mongolia is only 3 or 4 million and 6 of them were in my dormitory!

My time at the Osaka Foreign Languages University changed my whole view of learning and teaching Japanese. I had 6 months of intensive Japanese language learning. After teaching Japanese at a high school in Adelaide for 10 years it was my turn to be a student again; and I loved it! The first revelation came during a kanji class. All of the characters were familiar to me but when asked to write them on a blackboard from memory I found myself floundering. I realised how limited my knowledge of kanji really was. I had focused on just the 200 or so I was required to teach at school for so long. More to the point I was so lacking in understanding of the components of kanji. I became determined to learn all 2,000 standard kanji and really understand the logic and connectivity of kanji. Word cards were my primary method of attack. I would spend time looking up the details of all the characters I saw during the day in my classes and on the signs around town and on trains. I built a collection of word cards covering 1,600+ kanji in fine detail. I used every spare moment in the day testing myself. And it worked.



*Studied at Osaka
Foreign Languages
University and
Naruto University
of Education from
1992 to 1994*

*Currently
Japanese Teacher
at Immanuel
College, Adelaide*

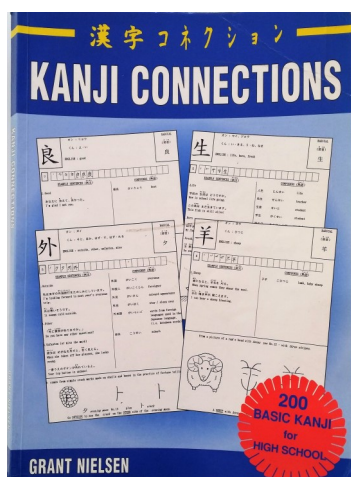


TEACHER TRAINING PROGRAM – NARUTO UNIVERSITY OF EDUCATION

I had a wonderful time in Osaka and I was sad to leave and go on to a place I knew almost nothing about. Naruto is a small town in the least well known of the prefectures of little known Shikoku. It is famous for its whirlpool tide which at times can be seen quite clearly from boats in the waters off Awajishima. The people of Tokushima Prefecture I met would underline the lamentable state of the infrastructure of their home with the fact that they were the only prefecture without an expressway. I soon worked out that Naruto was a good place to study. As the locals would say, 'There isn't much else to do.' In particular the university was located on an island that used to be farmed as a salt field. The island had very few facilities but ride on the 'watashi-bune' saw you across the channel and just 5 minute 'mama-chari' ride to supermarkets.



KANJI CONNECTIONS



My area of study was 'Kokugo' (Japanese language) so it was not perfectly in tune with my teaching but it was a refreshingly new perspective for me. Through my intensive study of kanji in Osaka I had developed a clear goal for my studies at Naruto University of Education. I wanted to create a text to teach Kanji using the method I had embraced in learning over 1,500 characters in about 5 months. The method focused on identifying the components of characters from the set of characters taught in the South Australian curriculum and explaining them in detail. Where they existed as individual characters I would introduce them as such as part of the emerging textbook.

It was 1993. I was using a desktop computer for the first time in my life. In the International Students Office we had the one computer to share among a dozen of us. It seemed like a huge task at the time to make a page full of notes to explain each of 200 kanji and a set of example vocabulary and example sentences. It needed art work, stroke order guides and to be saved on floppy disks using the preferred Japanese language software of the time 'Ichi-Taro'. With lots of help the kanji textbook 'Kanji Connections' was born.



I presented the findings of my year of research to an audience of academics in Tokushima and finished up with enough material to publish a textbook when I returned to Australia in 1994.

The year in Naruto also involved numerous visits to local schools as representatives of both Australia and the program. In the summer I joined in with the local festival and learnt the famed dance 'Awa Odori'. I dabbled in calligraphy and tea ceremony as well and had an education in the life and customs of Paraguay, Indonesia and Singapore through my great friends from other lands residing in the Naruto University of Education community.

REFLECTIONS

My 18 months in Japan from September 1992 was one of the treasured times of my life. It meant a deeper understanding of Japan, friends from around the world and the chance to create a resource to enhance the teaching of the Japanese language. It developed me as a teacher in many ways that could never have happened by staying in Australia.

It is sad that the authorities in public education in South Australia in the early 1990s knew so little about the program. I hope we have progressed since then. I was the only teacher on the program of over 40 teachers without any financial assistance from his own country. Such was the degree to which the training was valued in other countries that they all offered at least half salary and many full salary while their teachers were being trained and looked after in Japan. It seems totally obvious that training for teachers fully funded by the Japanese government is a bonus for Australia. To connect Australians with another advanced economy for no cost to us seems too good to be true. It is also a wise investment for Japan. I love and respect Japan all the more for the experiences they have so generously given me.