

EPISODE 1 TRANSCRIPT

*Hello, everyone. I'm Sonia Paul, and welcome to the first episode of Shizuoka Speaks. We're investigating what happens behind the scenes of language education in Japan-- the personal experiences, educational viewpoints, and different cultures--and what that means for Japan and it's future in an international context.*

*And we're examining this all from a local level. We're coming to you straight from Shizuoka City, in Shizuoka Prefecture, Japan.*

*I know what you're thinking, and yes, this is definitely some heavy material! That's why we're breaking it up and bringing it to you in installments.*

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*Today's topic: What is it like to be student in a Japanese public school...one who's studied outside of Japan? Because that's how we can get some perspective, right?*

*15 year old Jyouji is half Japanese and half Chinese. One of his favorite hobbies is beatboxing.*

*Until 2008, Jyouji had spent the majority of his life studying at various schools in China and Hong Kong. His most recent school before returning to Japan had been an international school in Beijing. We talked at his junior high school in Shizuoka City last spring.*

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Sonia: What's it like being in a Japanese school, like a pure Japanese school, after having the experience of an international course?

Jyouji: The rule in the pure Japanese school is really complicated. The school that I studied in China or in the international course in there, they just need us to be good at study. Only be good at study. But in Japan, what the teacher told me is, Japanese school, they got this system that is not just help the students that be good at studying. They also have to help the people, how to be...a like, gentleman? Like, be kind to friends or keep your words.

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*Hmm. "Be a gentleman?" It may sound strange, but what Jyouji is describing comes right out of Japan's Fundamental Law of Education. That's that document that states the purpose of education in Japan. The first article of it reads as follows:*

*"Education must be carried out with aiming at the full character development of all people and at nurturing citizens who, as the builders of a peaceful nation and society, will cherish truth and justice, respect the value of the individual, value hard work and responsibility, have independent minds, and be physically and mentally healthy."*

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*So, that was a bit long; let's think about it. Here's that first line again: "aiming at the full character development of all people."*

*From this, it sounds like the purpose of education in Japan is, basically, to raise good Japanese people. Hardworking. Morally upright. And if that's the case, then performance--tests, quizzes, grades--might not have the same value in Japan as it does in some other countries.*

*It sounds ridiculous--grades NOT important in school? But there is some truth to that in Japan.*

*First, what you need to know is that the Japanese education system is divided into four stages. First stage: six years of elementary school. Second stage: three years of junior high school. Third stage: three years of senior high school. Fourth stage: four years of university. Of course, students must demonstrate a certain amount of academic knowledge to make it from one stage to the next. For example, to get into high school, junior high students must pass entrance exams that test on a variety of subjects.*

*But, high school in Japan is actually optional. Only the first two stages of education, elementary and junior high school, are compulsory. And within elementary and junior high school, all students, no matter how they perform, graduate to the next grade. Teachers don't use grades to assess overall learning as much as they do to see how students are doing in relation to each other. So, for example, a grade of a 50 on a final exam--which would be failing in the West--is acceptable in Japan. And this has to do with that emphasis on character development.*

*There's a special word for this kind of education in Japanese. It's called kokoro.*

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Susan: I studied English in university.

Sonia: So how long have you been teaching?

Susan: Maybe more than 10 years?

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*That's Susan, a Japanese junior high school English teacher. As you might guess, Susan is not her real name...but, it is her name during English class.*

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Sonia: I read somewhere that the Japanese education system focuses on kokoro development? So, what does that mean?

Susan: So, the students feelings, or what do they think is all from their kokoro...or thinking. So, if they don't want to say, or if they don't have any ideas about themselves, they don't say anything. So...we have to grow their kokoro, or thinking.

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*Grow their thinking? That sounds weird, right? But, kokoro is a difficult word to translate into English. Even people who are fluent in both Japanese and English have trouble explaining it...because kokoro has many nuances.*

*Kaoru Okamoto, the former Deputy Director of International Affairs for Japan's education ministry, developed a working definition for the word. It's stated in his book Education in the Rising Sun.*

*He writes, "Kokoro is a concept with a wide range of connotations, including heart, mind, soul, spirit, attitude, value system, and humanity."*

*So, when Susan says thinking...she really means **all** of this as well.*

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Susan: ...So...we have to have our own ideas about everything, but,...I think...not so many students, but some students don't have their opinions. "What do you think," when I ask them, "What do you think," so they can't answer. "I don't know," only "I don't know." But that's the problem. Maybe the educational department thinks that that is the problem, so we have to...grow up their feeling, or thinking.

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*So, by growing up their kokoro, teachers are really trying to raise students with strong minds, strong spirits...people with good hearts and values.*

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Sonia: So, and this is throughout the entire education system in Japan?

Susan: Yeah.

Sonia: Is there a special kokoro for English, or does English somehow focus on kokoro development more, you think?

Susan: Yeah, in the third year students' textbook...

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Clip: class recitation

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Susan: ...So long time ago, people in Japan do the same thing--they use thank you everywhere. But now, Japanese people don't say thank you so often.

Sonia: Really!

Susan: Yeah, so that is a problem.

Sonia: Do you know why it changed?

Susan: Mm..it's very hard to answer, but...in Japan, we have many things. We can get many information, or we can get many things easier than old time, so we don't thank.

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*When you take all this into account, teachers in Japan aren't just teaching academic subjects; they're like parents--they're raising their students to be **good** people.*

*...Which is something that is hard for some students, like Jyouji, to get used to.*

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Jyouji: The system in Japan is difficult for me to study...it take really long time for me. Like, I was in the basketball club, and I...I'm not a kind of a good boy. I'm doing many troubles every day, and my teacher is always shouting at me. At last, I didn't got kick out, but I just, I don't want to be in the club, so I like, retired.

Sonia: It's difficult, but do you like it, or do you think there's a point?

Jyouji: It's...ahh...I still, I can't find the point. It's really difficult for me. Because, when I was in China, I'm...I'm totally free, and I do whatever I like, but when I come to Japan, the life is not so easy. Like, this button--

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*That button being the top button of his school uniform.*

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...when you, when you open the button, you got trouble. The teacher will find you and call you, or when somebody on the street saw you, they will call you to the school...

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*Jyouji's point is that he doesn't like the rules. And in Japan, rules are very important--even a rule like buttoning up your uniform jacket all the way to the top.*

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Sonia: What about like the way that they teach? Do you notice any differences in the way that Japanese teachers teach in comparison to the other teachers you used to have?

Jyouji: I think the way that they teach is the same way. But something the students don't know, the teachers will tell them until they know. Like, after school, they will still teach the students. I think it's--this kind of style that Japanese, the teaching way, I think it's a really good thing...The teachers in other country or the schools in other country--the school I know is just you have to be clever. And the study. They always said, just study study study, every day, I have to study. I'm, you know, I don't like to study very much.

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*Jyouji doesn't like to study very much, but he confessed something during our interview: He desperately wants to improve his English.*

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Jyouji: My biggest wish is to let my speaking be better, and the second thing is I wish I could write English better.

Sonia: Why do you want to improve your English?

Jyouji: Because the biggest country and the most population country is China...Now, I think Chinese is easy for me to speak and easy for me to communicate with the people over there, but English is...it's in the future, but when I improve my English, I think it's easy for me. So, I am thinking to go to university in U.S., and came back to Japan to be an English teacher.

Sonia: Oh, really.

Jyouji: Yeah.

Sonia: Why do you want to become an English teacher?

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Jyouji: Because...I like English...and I like to teach. So I think it's a good chance for me to make my English better to be an English teacher.

Sonia: Like, you want to be an English teacher in Japan?

Jyouji: Yep.

Sonia: Why in Japan, why not in any other country?

Jyouji: I think, the way of Japanese people speaking English is, I think...you know, the sound is not right...do you think?

Sonia: It has a Japanese accent.

Jyouji: Yeah, yeah, it's like...you know, 'apple?' They say like, "appuru ." The accent is really like...weird. So I just want, wanted to change the way that the Japanese people speak the English.

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Sonia: So do you think studying English in Japan is better or worse than studying English in say China?

Jyouji: I think it's worse...because when you wanted to make your English better or your language that you wanted to speak better, you must have a good speaker near you. Like, if I wanted to speak like if I wanted to make my English speaking better, so I wish I can have a good English speaker around me, but in Japan, say in my class? There's not so much good English speakers. They just know how to write. So, if I studied in China, I think the international school? Around me is not just Chinese people, there's half Chinese and half American, or the pure American. They can speak English very well. So, they're tracking me to...Like, tracking me to speak English is make me better.

Sonia: What do you think about your English teachers, though? Like, do you talk to them at all?

Jyouji: Yeah, I talk with them, but...their accent...when I talk to them, my accent will be worse than them. Because, um, I'm a bit shy. When I speak proper English in front of them, they will say, "WOOO!," like that. "You're...oh man, you're so cool." I don't like that. I'm a really shy boy.

Sonia: Are you ever embarrassed at...knowing the pronunciation better than teachers, or...you're shy, but are you also just afraid of making them look bad?

Jyouji: Yeah. I like, um...I think my speaking is better than the teacher in this school, so...so I'm just following the level of the teachers.

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Sonia: How often do you speak English?

Jyouji: I don't speak English, pretty much. I only speak English when the ALT comes to my school.....

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*ALT stands for Assistant Language Teacher. ALTs team-teach with Japanese teachers or teach their own English classes at Japanese schools. They are usually native speakers of English.*

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Jyouji: I don't speak, I read, and read with a loud voice. English books, like Harry Potters...reading the books to not forget the English.

Sonia: Do you think your opinions are the same as those of other Japanese students?

Jyouji: I think they can't speak English very well, so I don't think my opinions is similar to the Japanese students.

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*It's one thing to learn English. But to actually speak it? Jyouji's right: it's a whole other story. Susan had a lot to say about it as well.*

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Sonia: What do you think are the biggest challenges for studying English?

Susan: It's to use English more often...So, I want to help them to express themselves with their confidence. But, it's very hard for them to use English because we are Japanese and we study at Japanese schools.

Sonia: Do you think this struggle changes with age?

Susan: Yeah, maybe the younger is better.

Sonia: Why would the younger be better?

Susan: Because they don't have the shyness.

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*Ahh, shyness. The Japanese are notorious for it. And remember what Susan said earlier when we were talking about kokoro?*

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Susan: Not so many students, but some students don't have their opinions. "What do you think," when I ask them, "what do you think," so they can't answer. "I don't know," only "I don't know." But that's the problem. Maybe the educational department thinks that that is the problem, so we have to...grow up their feeling, or thinking.

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*Students are shy about using English. But they're having trouble developing their own opinions and communicating them even in Japanese. Knowing this, Japan's objective for foreign language studies is a bit interesting. Again, it comes from the education ministry; it reads like this:*

*"To develop students' basic practical communication abilities, such as listening and speaking, deepening the understanding of language and culture, and fostering a positive attitude toward communication through foreign language."*

*So actually, the purpose of studying a foreign language--at least the main purpose as set forth by the education ministry--is not mastery of the language itself. That first line says it all: "to develop students' basic practical communication abilities."*

*With English, as with education in general in Japan, the goal is for each student to develop his or her own self. And expression is a part of that.*

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*Of course, though, the way that teachers execute this philosophy is different from school to school, and teacher to teacher. And it's a philosophy that's challenging for students used to a different kind of environment...*

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Sonia: Do you like the way that you're learning English?

Jyouji: Yeah, I'm still thinking a bit weird, but I'm enjoying.

Sonia: Do you want to travel anywhere?

Jyouji: Yes.

Sonia: Where do you want to go?



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Jyouji: New York...I wanted to watch NBA, you know? New York is a biggest city in America--it's one of the biggest cities in America. You know, in Shizuoka, I can't see many tall buildings. I wanted to see, and like, buying something in America...eating hot dogs...like, hamburgers or something. It's...I think it will be fun.

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*Indeed....it's always fun to see a place with new eyes.*

*Much thanks to Jyouji and Susan for sharing their views with us. Stay tuned as we cover more topics related to language, learning, and living in Japan. On behalf of Shizuoka Speaks, I'm Sonia Paul. Thank you for listening.*