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Job title: Programme Officer – China, Japan and Russia

Company and location: British Council, London

Industry sector: Education

Background: English Teacher for Kita Nihon GEOS, Sapporo 2000 – 2001 , British Council English Language Assistant, Shanghai, China, 2003–2004

1. What does your job involve?

The Japanese part of my job involves me in the recruiting and allocating of Japanese language assistants to UK schools. The British Council in Tokyo recruits and briefs the language assistants. I meet them when they arrive in the UK, organise an induction course for them and am available throughout the year to help them with any problems they face.

2. How much Japanese do you use in your job?

My job requires me to be aware of and advise on cultural differences and differences in our education systems more than actually speaking Japanese.

3. What has been the highlight of your Japanese career to date?

The year teaching in Japan was an obvious highlight, but since returning to the UK, the highlight has probably been my visit to Hendon School (who employ a Japanese language assistant) in North London. It really was amazing to see how widely Japanese is offered on the curriculum and how engaged the students were with their study of the language and culture. French and German were the only languages on the curriculum at my secondary school and I really envied the head start the students at Hendon were getting.

4. How has past experience helped?

Just having lived in Japan for a year exposed me to enough of the culture to be able to advise UK schools receiving Japanese language assistants and the assistants themselves. The most amusing cultural difference that I became involved in was when one Japanese language assistant wrote to accept the offer her school had made her, saying “however, I’m a poor teacher and I’m not confident that I will be able to do a good job,” or words to that effect. Her mentor teacher wasn’t accustomed to Japanese culture and literally thought we had allocated her school a really poor teacher. When I explained that such extreme modesty was a Japanese custom and that she was merely being polite, I was just about able to convince the mentor teacher that her assistant would actually be up to the job.

5. What do you enjoy most about your job?

I like the variety that my job offers. I meet and work with a variety of people from a variety of countries and professions. I get to visit schools, universities, embassies, international organisations and overseas British Council offices and meet students, teachers and people committed to international work on a regular basis.

6. What advice would you give to students hoping to use Japanese in their careers?

I would certainly recommend a period of study or work experience in Japan. I didn't speak any Japanese when I arrived in Sapporo in 2000 and although I didn't leave as a fluent speaker, I was able to speak enough Japanese to go about my daily life with relatively few problems by the time I left. If you were to arrive in Japan with a couple of years' study under your belt, a year living there would certainly enable you to make huge advances in your language skills.