

Thinking of entering Nihongo Cup 2007?

Year 13 student Harriet Russell tells the JFLCC why taking part in the contest in 2004 was a great experience, and fills us in on what she has been up to since...

It's important to have A-levels and GCSEs but everybody has A-levels and GCSEs, it's the things that show that you are able to think outside the box and

push the boundaries and go the extra mile and all those other clichés which describe a person who is not your run-of-the-mill 'very good student' that are increasingly important nowadays. Participating in something like the Nihongo Cup is an indication that you are able to be more than that. The final of the Nihongo Cup is a great experience, it's good language practice, it's an opportunity to do some public speaking and it's an occasion to meet other students who are studying Japanese (there aren't many of us so you may find yourself bumping into old friends

somewhere down the line). Of course it helps if you have a good teacher; none of what I have done would have happened if a fantastic and enthusiastic Japanese teacher hadn't suddenly appeared at my school.

Mrs Rajakumar and Harriet Russell, after winning Nihongo Cup



When did you first start learning Japanese? Does your school teach Japanese?

I remember that I was sat in a science class one day when a memo came round inviting a few of us to take part in a pilot scheme to learn Japanese. The school had applied to become a 'language college' and Japanese was to be the first of many exciting things that would happen to South Wolds. Up until year 10 Japanese is an established extra curricular activity. Students can begin Japanese from Year 7, which means that there are 3 years of extra-curricular commitment before it is timetabled. The current year 7 class is huge, and places are by application only, which shows just how keen these kids are to do Japanese in their own time and of their own will. When I first began in year 9 there was a lesson every Wednesday, which meant that we missed one lesson a week, and short lesson every Friday lunchtime. We'd been doing Japanese for an hour and a half a week for about 8 or 9 months when we decided to take the GCSE. The class contained 6 people. We were keen but we weren't particularly competent in Japanese.

How did you hear about Nihongo Cup?

I heard about the Nihongo Cup from my teacher. She told us about a competition for which we had to write a speech of about 2 to 3 minutes. The competition and its prizes were a great incentive to use all the sentence patterns we'd learned and include some handy vocabulary in an essay which we would then have to learn by heart.

What were your essay and speech about?

My speech was simple. It had been marked by my teacher but not written by her. There were no fancy grammatical patterns beyond the GCSE level. For inspiration I had used the pack that we'd been given containing lots of vocabulary that we might need to know for GCSE, one section was about geography and places, another one was food and drink. "My dream was about an island. It wasn't Africa and it wasn't France, it was my island. My friends were there too. I had lots of nice food – my favourite foods were sushi and strawberries and toast. There was a beautiful beach and I saw the sunset." It wasn't Dickens but it was obviously something that I'd written, and I clearly wasn't fantastically accomplished but my sentences and pronunciation were correct. The Chinese guy must have felt a bit cheated but I think the spirit of the Nihongo Cup is that they want people to make an effort and to be genuine.

What was finals day like?

I learnt my speech with such dedication that I can still remember parts of it nearly four years later, and on the day of the competition I didn't need any cue cards. I stood up at the front of the ballroom in the embassy, with my kneecaps shaking, and recited my bit. The speeches of the Key Stage 3 category were good because they weren't fancy, their dreams were things like wanting to go and live in Japan or wanting to visit the temples and parks in Kyoto. One girl dreamt of designing computer game characters and hoped this would take her to Japan regularly. What the younger contestants did better than us was include something quintessentially Japanese in their speech, about half of them did so. A couple of them also got some good laughs, where-as the older category was a bit more serious, although much more varied. The boy next to me was called Theo, and he spoke about wanting to go to Japan to learn kendo, someone wanted to be an artist, someone wanted to be an astronaut, and there was one girl, little bit odd, who wanted to go back to the middle-ages and in her speech made comparisons between the weapons of then and now.... The budding-artist had recently moved over from Hong Kong, and I was convinced he would win because he was practically fluent. When he didn't get third or second I had my camera ready.

So you won 1st prize?

Yes, I won a palm-top computer, a meal voucher for Soho-Japan, a lacquered picture frame and a few other bits and pieces like a manga comic book and a rubber in the shape of some sushi. Since then I think the prizes have become even more exciting, such as laptops and trips to Japan. Theo, whose dream was kendo, told me that he was just about to go to Japan for 3 weeks and actually thought his dream might be fulfilled in part.

How did Nihongo Cup inspire you?

Well, going to Japan wasn't something I'd ever seriously considered until then. The language learning and the 'cultural trip' to a Japanese restaurant in Nottingham had been good fun, but the Nihongo Cup was the first time that Japan and Japanese seemed real. Yet only a month after the Nihongo Cup Mrs Rajakumar had found a contact in Japan who was looking for sister schools in London. He was subsequently persuaded that south Nottinghamshire was just what he was looking for.

4 months after the Nihongo Cup I was on my way to Japan. 5 Japanese students plus Mrs Rajakumar were going to stay with pupils from Nagano Nishi High School.

And did it live up to your expectations?

I had never done a home stay before, my Japanese wasn't as good as I wanted it to be and I had terrible jet lag. I didn't understand why people giggled when I tried to say something in Japanese and I was desperate for a proper cup of tea and a piece of toast. Up until then 'culture shock' was something that people on Radio4 talked about, but I had it. Nevertheless, I travelled by bullet-train from Tokyo central station, I took part in a tea-ceremony, I was dressed up in a wedding-kimono, I went to a sushi bar and paid about £4 for a fantastic meal, a group of us had our photo taken in a photo booth which was comparable to a small room decorated in purple velvet, I slept on a futon every night and walked on tatami mats, I went bowling with both English and Japanese friends, did my best at slurping noodles, and wrote kanji using the real paper and brushes – the kanji I was given to write was dream, and realised how appropriate that was, and how far I'd come since I was last writing 'My Dream'.

I arrived home and realised that I'd handled a lot of my time there very badly, that I hadn't understood that cultures could be so different and that not knowing exactly what was going on perhaps wasn't a bad thing. From then on, I had to go back to Japan because I'd never failed at anything so spectacularly. The challenge was set. I continued with Japanese and revised my attitude to almost everything, culture and society, tea without milk in it, being a bit more laid back and prepared to make the best of what appeared to be a bad situation.

As well as the Nihongo Cup I've been to London for an event run by the British Council last year, which was a prize we won by making a video about sushi, and two classmates have each been to Japan through different competitions.

You have achieved a lot so far. How would you say Nihongo Cup has contributed to this?

For me, the Nihongo Cup was the major break-through in discovering all of this. At the time it was probably the single greatest thing I'd achieved, and it spurred me on to do even better stuff.

Lastly, what do you plan to do next?

I haven't really thought about what I'm going to do after university. I spend my 3rd year of university in Japan which is something to look forward to. But Japanese has been so much fun and such a massive learning curve thus far that it would be daft to not continue with it. I'll have to wait and see what happens!