



Of Course I can Speak Japanese!

A couple of months ago, I was visited by a group of middle school students, who interviewed me for a story in their school publication. We had an enjoyable time chatting about my printmaking, and it seems they picked up enough material for them to prepare their story.

As they were getting ready to leave, one of them said to me "Nihongo ga jouzu, desu ne!" Now as you know, this is the standard phrase said to any foreigner who can speak even a few words of Japanese, and is basically just a form of aisatsu, a polite expression without deep meaning.

You know what my reply should have been; I should have said something like "No, no ... not at all; it's very poor really." But we had enjoyed a happy talkative couple of hours together, so I felt confident in challenging her by saying - with a big smile - "Well, of course it is; I've been living here longer than you!"

She was flabbergasted; she is Japanese, I am a foreigner; the very idea that I've been in Japan longer than her was inconceivable! But as she was only about 15 or 16 years old, it's true! I first came here in 1980, then moved to Japan permanently in 1986; I've now been a resident for 20 years.

Do I feel more 'Japanese' than her? No, of course not. The years I have spent here are 'adult' years; in her case, the time she has been in Japan has been the time when her character and personality have been formed. She will always be Japanese; I will always be a foreigner.

When you compare our Japanese language ability - then I have to hang my head in shame. At age 16, she is very literate, can speak easily on any topic, can read the daily newspaper with little problem, and can write thousands of kanji.

And the result of my 20+ years of 'study'? I can handle daily conversation without too many problems, but a newspaper is a very large struggle indeed, and as for my writing ability ... don't ask!

And what is worse, my Japanese ability seems to have reached a plateau, and is not improving much recently at all. This is not surprising, because I don't actually do any studying; my Japanese has just been picked up in daily life. And as the years go by, this is going to become increasingly embarrassing - think of the time in the future when I will have been here 50 years ... and still can't easily read the newspaper ...

But - I just realized - I don't have to worry about that! Computers are already handling many of our reading and writing chores, and by that time, I'm sure the tiny personalized computer that will probably be buried in my glasses will handle it all for me!

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