



## Nihongo Jouzu desu ne!

A couple of weeks ago, I was hired to be one of the presenters in a sort of 'seminar' put on by Japan's largest vinegar supply company. You might wonder just what possible interest they could have in my work, or what the connection is, but it's quite easy to explain. The production of their vinegar requires a stable source of pure water, and this is something that they take very seriously, to the extent that they have a group within the company whose mission it is to proselytize for the protection and maintenance of water supplies all across the country.

This group publishes a magazine entitled 'Mizu no Bunka' (The Culture of Water), and although most of the editorial content is concerned with environmental issues, they also devote a section of each issue to people other than vinegar makers who also require pure water for their work. That led them a while back to papermaker Ichibei Iwano-san, who supplies all my paper, and he pointed them in my direction. Their chief editor visited here some months back, learned just how important good clean washi is to my work, and then featured me in a story in their magazine (along with Iwano-san and some other papermakers).

That issue seems to have been received well, so they decided to hold an actual seminar on the same subject - papermaking and pure water - highlighting traditional woodblock printmaking as part of that world. I was hired to be the 'navigator' of the session, and two experts in paper production were also brought in to give presentations.

There were two parts to my own portion of the program; a spoken presentation (the other two presenters used slides, but I spoke without visuals), and then a printing demonstration, for which the attendees crowded around my tables. The woman who organized the whole thing did an excellent job, there was a good crowd, and the event came off quite well.

As we were cleaning up the room after the event was done, one of the people involved talked with me for a bit, and - complimenting me on my Japanese ability - asked me where I studied the language. I replied that I haven't 'studied' Japanese, but have just been picking it up as I go along, and he found this a reason to feel embarrassed for himself. As is the case with a great many people in this country, he studied English for six years in grade school followed by four more in university, but is still unable to hold a conversation in the language. Yet here was Dave, with no formal education in Japanese, giving an off-the-cuff presentation, making jokes, and holding the attention of a room full of people for well over an hour.

Now I'm not claiming any 'superiority' to him in this comparison. There is a very clear reason for the difference in our respective language abilities, and that is the fact that I live in the 'target' country. For him, English is just an option; for me, Japanese is sink-or-swim!

In truth though, I should be careful not to praise myself too highly here. If you were to draw some kind of graph showing my progress in the language, it would show a very low slope at first, as I rarely used Japanese in my early years living here, being an English teacher at the time. It would then show a steep climb during the years that I lived as a single parent with my children, when I was forced to use the language every day. But it is becoming clear to me that the curve flattened out quite a long time ago, and I have not made much progress at all since basically attaining a 'liveable' level of fluency.

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It's a bit embarrassing sometimes. Twenty years ago people would say, "You've been here only ten years, and yet you can speak so well!" These days though, they must be thinking to themselves, "He's been here nearly thirty years now, and yet he is still making so many mistakes in his Japanese ..."

Well, my excuse is pretty simple. I can focus on improving my printmaking, or my language skills. One of these is now 'good enough', but one is a long way from where I would like it to be.

You don't need two guesses to know which is which!

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