

SYMPOSIUM AT THE THIRD ANNUAL JASEC CONVENTION
“VIEW FROM THE FRONT: ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN JAPAN”

Mark Jewel, Waseda University

The third annual JASEC convention, which was held on the campus of Kinki University on October 15, 1994, opened with a symposium in which a panel of native-speaker language teachers discussed a number of issues central to the teaching of English in Japanese schools. The four participants were Kim Kanel of Kinki University, Anthony P. Newell of Waseda University, Richard Paulson of Musashino Women's University, and Tamara Swenson of Osaka Jogakuin Junior College. The present writer served as moderator.

The discussion itself was divided into three separate sections, each followed by its own question-and-answer session. This format was chosen both to stimulate audience participation and to elicit a variety of comments from the participants. Judging from the lively and informed exchange of opinion that resulted, this deviation from the standard Japanese pattern of individual presentations followed by a single question-and-answer period can be said to have proved quite successful.

The first section consisted of short self-introductions from the panelists touching on their professional backgrounds, their motivation for coming to Japan, and their present status as English teachers. These self-introductions were sufficiently detailed and colorful to make each panelist stand out as a distinct individual, but they also showed that all the panelists shared a strong sense of commitment to language teaching--a point that received special emphasis when it was noted that the participants had a total of more than 60 years of teaching experience among them.

The next two sections took the form of panelists responding to questions posed by the moderator and also to the responses of their fellow panelists. Nominally, the second section focused on an assessment of the current state of English language teaching in Japan, while the third moved to a discussion of recommendations for change. Given the close relationship between these two topics, maintaining a clear distinction was of course not always possible; but the division nevertheless proved useful in isolating a number of issues currently being faced at all levels of the Japanese educational system.

The specific issues thus isolated and examined are summarized by the panelists themselves in the following pages. Here it seems best simply to indicate the general course of discussion by reviewing the questions initially posed by the moderator (and it should be kept in mind that time restrictions prevented every panelist from responding to every question). For the section on the assessment of current conditions, participants

were asked first of all to address--or re-address--the basic question of why Japanese students should be required to study English. Next they were asked to comment on the recent changes in the English curriculum mandated by the Ministry of Education. The third question involved defining the role of the foreign teacher in the Japanese educational system. These general questions were then followed by a request for panelists to identify the single most important problem they personally faced as English teachers, and to describe several of the advantages and disadvantages of the English program at their own institutions.

For the section on recommendations for change, panelists were asked to consider whether the sort of reform being undertaken by the University of Tokyo, based on a standardized curriculum, really represented the best option for the future. Further questions centered on what should be done to improve the traditional entrance-examination system, and how foreign teachers and might be used more effectively to increase students' competence.

Again, it should again be stressed that these questions only provided the starting point for a discussion that in the event turned out to be extremely wide-ranging and which benefited from a wealth of practical experience on the part of the panelists. One hopes it does not sound too self-serving to venture the opinion that the views presented in the following summaries represent an important contribution to the field of English language education in Japan.