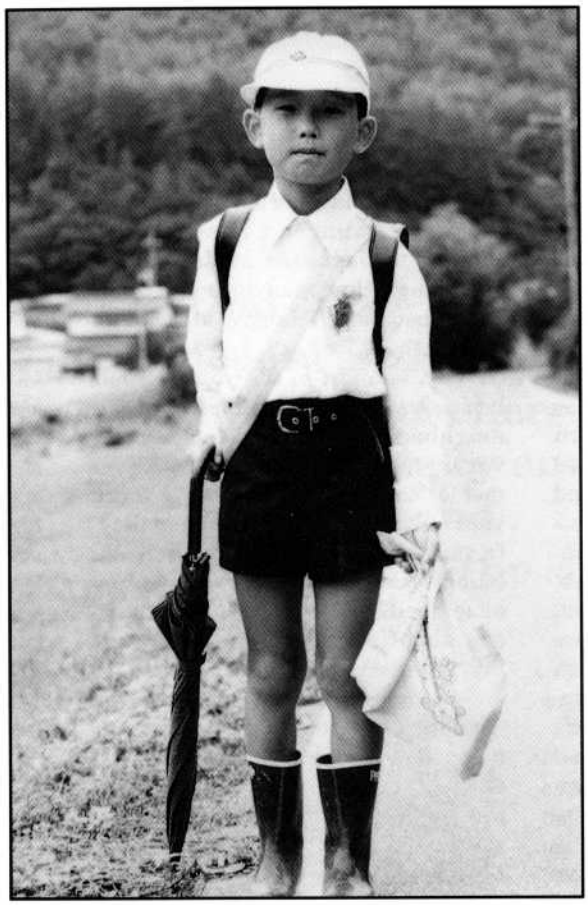


Onegaishimasu, Rinn-Sensei!

"Please teach us," the students in a rural Japanese school implored. The visitor from Oklahoma found herself learning as much as she taught.

by Lynn Grigsby

My first encounter with one of my Japanese students occurred in August 1990 upon my arrival in Takahashi city, the rural community that was my home for a year. I was on one of the local trains when young Suzuki-san approached me, politely introduced herself and with great pride said, "Kon'nichiwa! Eigo hanashimasu." (Hello! I speak English.) When I introduced myself as the new Takahashi Kôkô (high school) English teacher from the United States, Suzuki-san burst into tears.

"Oh, you're Rinn-Sensei (Lynn). I know you!" she exclaimed through her tears. I quickly realized that these were tears of joy and that the Japanese Exchange & Teaching Program (JET) involved much more than just teaching English.

Established five years ago, the JET program is largely an international relations plan put into place by the Japanese government. I had requested placement in a rural area. Today, I am even more convinced that my decision was a good one, for in the country one can truly sample the way of life of a nation's people. And for many children in the small rural towns of Japan, the English teacher is their first contact with a foreigner.

I loved my little town of Takahashi (population 24,000), a castle-town nestled between rice fields and mountains, complete with wild monkeys. Here in the heart of cultural Japan, strong in tradition and history, was a lifestyle entirely different from my own. The house I lived in sat at the foot of a hill that once was the site of a Samurai's peacetime home (rumor placed the

house on a former Samurai execution/burial ground).

At the senior high school where I taught three days a week, most of the students had studied English from three to five years. However, their conversational ability was very limited. Initially, they were very shy and afraid to act independently, a trait of the Japanese. But gradually, as I got to know them, they opened up. I was pleased to learn that my students in Japan shared many of the same ideals, values and creativity of their U.S. counterparts.

Twice a week I visited smaller mountain towns in the surrounding area, teaching at agricultural, technical and night schools. These students were less motivated in their study of the English language. Their enthusiasm was reserved for farming and the like. One student at my technical school offered his explanation of why Japanese men are shorter than "gaijin" (foreign) men. "Japanese rice is unique to Japan. It is short and sticks together. American rice is long and loose," he said. I found this concept fascinating.

Students at Kawakami Agriculture School gave me a tour of the school farm—the chicken pen, which housed black, fluffy chickens from China; cows; rice fields; and hothouses, where vegetables and orchids are grown year round. Later I introduced them to peanut butter sandwiches. The students had never eaten peanut butter sandwiches; it was very "American." What a change from sushi! I also told my students about my first date. Dating is a relatively new concept to Japanese students, who spend their time studying.

Occasionally, I taught at a junior high school, where I was a real novelty, as most of the young people had not yet ventured far from their neighboring rice fields. Their favorite questions: "Have you ever met Michael J. Fox?" "Can I touch your hair?" "Do you have a boyfriend?" "Can you eat with hashi (chopsticks)?" "Do you like Japanese food?" They were very curious about America and also about my impression of their country.

In all these schools, my greatest challenge was keeping the students' attention, which required a great deal of creativity. I felt I must always be "genki" (lively), always on stage. Because I spent three days a week at Takahashi Kôkô, I was able to work more freely with these students. Several of our projects come to mind.

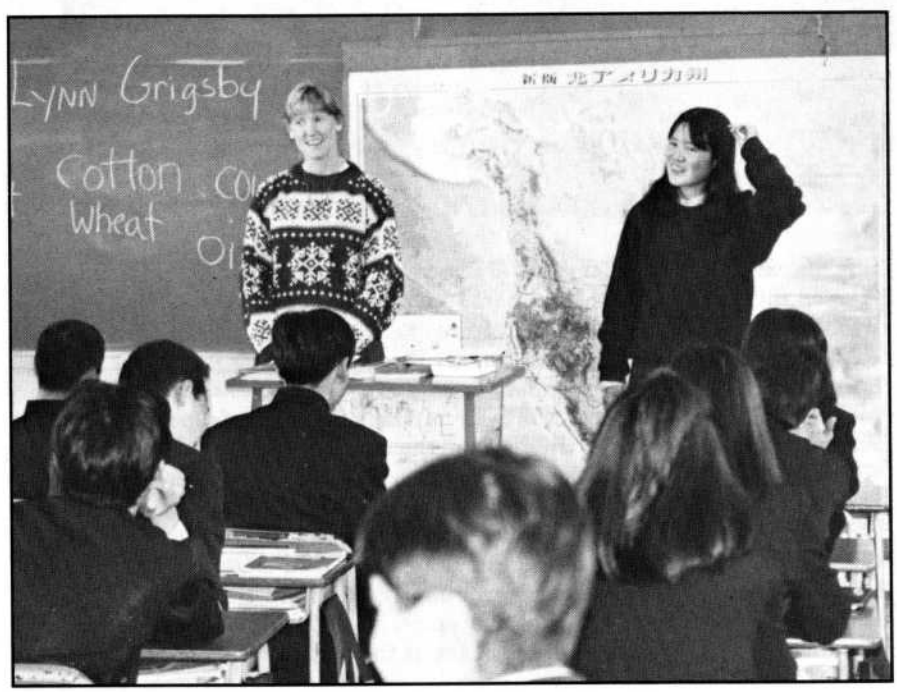
The first involved Halloween, a tradition unique to the United States. Some of the commercialism has reached Japan, but for the most part, the students knew little about the custom. During the month of October, I spent the first few minutes of every class talking about Halloween and drawing pictures so the students could visualize what I was talking about. When the holiday week arrived, all nine of my classes made Halloween masks of orange construction paper. I was thrilled to see the students' interest and originality.

On Halloween day, a student ran up to me and said, "Rinn-Sensei, today is Halloween! I have a present for you." She handed me a piece of pumpkin pie she had baked. I went to the local supermarket later that evening and bumped into two students. They both said in their limited English, "Today it is Halloween in America. Students wear masks like the ones we made in class—and costumes. And, they go to doors (they showed me with their hands, 'knock-knock')." Then they looked at me with sad eyes and said, "We don't have Halloween in Japan."

As I went on down the street, my fishmarket friend passed me in his truck yelling, "Arigatô, Dômo Arigatô," thanking me for the little paper ghosts I had given his children the night before.

As December drew near, I told the students about Christmas in my family—everything from decorating the house to baking cookies. They were very interested in Santa Claus. During the month, I asked them to write short essays on "What O-Shôgatsu Means to Me." O-Shôgatsu is the Japanese New Year holiday, usually comprising the first three days of January. Through these essays, I found that O-Shôgatsu is to the Japanese what Christmas and Hanukkah are to Americans.

I also shared some Grigsby family tradition with the local bakery owned by the Watanabes, my Japanese host family. One weekend in early December, we made Christmas cut-out cookies. Ironically, my mother's Christmas cookie recipe came from a Japanese woman who was a neighbor in Ponca City, Oklahoma, when I was two years old. My mother remembers the cookies for their "pink-perfection" frosting and



At left, Lynn describes her home state Oklahoma to a class at Shido Kôkô, in one of the smaller mountain towns where she taught twice a week.

"One of the greatest differences I noticed was the respect young people show their teachers and elders. . . . Respect, loyalty and discipline go hand-in-hand . . . in homes as well as the schools."

ABOVE: An ichinensei (first-year) student at the Takahashi Shôgakkô (elementary school) is eager to answer her teacher's questions about a Japanese story.

BELOW: Takashaski Kôkô (high school) students model Halloween masks they created during one of Rinn-Sensei's lessons on holidays in American culture.

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elegant decorations. We made dozens of cookies, and I delivered them to the Takahashi Kôkô teachers and my local friends, who had been so nice to me—the photographer, my haircutter, the ladies at the cleaners, my sushi bar friends, the fishmarket master, the stationery shop owner, members of my shorinji-kempo (similar to karate) class and a few others. This was only my small token of thanks to these people, and most of them gave me gifts in return, a Japanese custom.

Another big project was "Show & Tell." Each week, seven in each class brought something to share—in English, of course! Their choices were amazing, usually dealing with cultural activities or hobbies. One girl brought a harmonica and played a Japanese song for the class. They shared mosquito incense and bug sprays; obentos (lunch boxes); cds; pictures of their pets; classical and origami (Japanese paper art) and fans. One baked chocolate chip cookies, explaining how she loved to cook.

The Japanese education system is very different from the American system. One of the greatest differences I noticed was the respect young people show their teachers and elders. "Sensei," which indicates respect, is a title given to a teacher or someone with a particular trade. My students always called me "Rinn-Sensei," even away from school. The Watanabe children always referred to me by that title also. Occasionally I was called "Rinn-chan," which means "younger sister," another way of showing respect. In the Japanese culture, respect, loyalty and discipline go hand-in-hand and are evident in the homes as well as the schools.

All students are required to study English. They wear uniforms and carry matching bookbags or backpacks. Academics is definitely a priority, although the students are highly encouraged to participate in after-school clubs ranging from softball and martial arts to tea ceremony.

To begin class every day, a student representative yells, "Kiotsuke," and the rest of the class rises to attention. Then all the students bow after the student leader yells, "Rei." In unison, the class responds, "Onegaishimasu" (please teach us).

During holidays, students are given ample homework, and those planning to attend college often take special classes during the breaks. They also must enroll in after-hours cram courses known as "Juku"; there is little leisure time. Almost everything is geared to-

On the last day of the term, each of the 41 senior girls in Rinn-Sensei's class brought their American teacher a single red rose, which symbolized their love.

ward the college entrance exam, and the pressure mounts not only on the student but also on the student's family as well. This is one of the most prevalent criticisms of the Japanese government's education system, and they are well aware of the problem. Aside from this, I believe there is much we could learn from the Japanese system.

In addition to teaching English, I learned a great deal about the everyday lifestyle of the Japanese. In order to achieve an adequate proficiency in the language and culture and teach them about my way of life, it was necessary to be totally familiar with their lifestyle. The more I became settled in, the greater my desire grew to learn about their country, which is very beautiful. Sakura—cherry blossom season—was my favorite time of year.

Japan is large in terms of population (125 million), but it is small in size—about the size of California; every square inch of land is used as efficiently as possible. Japan is also the land of the vending machine, approximately five million of them—one for every 23 people. Most are outdoors, supplying products ranging from Japanese "sake," beer and soft drinks, to toothbrushes, cosmetics, shampoo and pornographic magazines. The machines selling alcohol are turned off between the hours of 11 p.m. to 5 a.m. to discourage juvenile drinking.

Almost everyone in Japan owns a bicycle with a front basket and squeaky brakes. I am proud to say that I owned one myself. Automobiles are usually small and white—very Japanese!

Everyone loves to sing "Karaoke." Ordinary people use what talent they have—or in cases like mine—what they don't have, belting out lyrics to prerecorded songs in special karaoke "sunaku" (snack) bars. Knowing the words to the songs is not necessary, as they are displayed on large television screens. Elvis and the Beatles always were extremely popular. I cannot count the number of times I was asked to sing "Love Me Tender" and "Yesterday."

I thoroughly enjoyed all of the Japanese food—nandemo tabemashita (I ate anything). I will miss sushi, sashimi, taco (octopus) and Ika (squid); especially kurukuru zushi ("conveyor belt" sushi). I will even miss green tea (ocha) and bean snacks, a delicacy I had not tried before going to Japan.

Most everyone in Japan eats with chopsticks and enjoys sushi and sashimi (thinly sliced raw fish without rice). Many people, especially the young ones, love "Macudonarudo" (McDonald's).

I mentioned "gaijins" (foreigners) earlier. Whenever I did not understand something, I would just shake my head and respond, "Wakarimasen." The Japanese would compensate by saying, "That's okay, you're a gaijin. You're not expected to understand completely." Chuckle! Chuckle!

Gaijins always carry an alien registration card. They usually have problems with leg room on buses and trains, since they are very tall! Gaijins practice very hard to learn the art of bowing ("o-jigi"). If a gaijin speaks even one word of Japanese, he or she hears, "Joozu desu ne!" (You are very skillful).

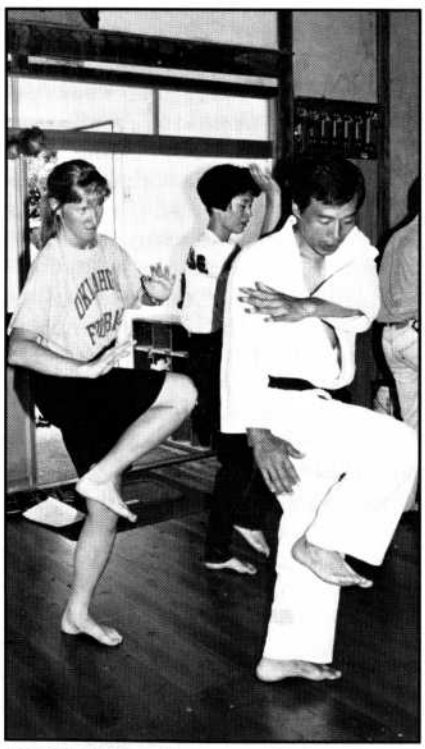
Gaijins cannot believe how hot Japan is during the summer season and how cold it is during the winter with no central air conditioning or heating. The winter was frigid, and I found it to be the most difficult of my experiences in Japan. Kerosene heaters and electric carpets, tables (kotatsu) and blankets help protect most from the cold, but not me.

Gaijins have trouble slurping their noodles and "koohi" (coffee). Gaijins always giggle at the sight of "Western" toilet instructions, not to mention Japanese "squat" toilets. Living in Japan was one "Bikkuri Bôken" (surprise adventure) after another.

Learning the unique aspects of the Japanese culture added spice to my everyday life, and I studied the language constantly. Each week I joined one of my classes in practicing shodô (calligraphy). Even the boys enjoyed studying this ancient art form. It was a nice opportunity for them to help me. Twice weekly I joined a junior college shorinji-kempo class. This was exciting because it put me with another age group. They spoke little English, if any.

I also studied "sadô," the tea ceremony, basically a religion. The entire ceremony is conducted on the knees, including entering the room, and my knees tired. Guests enter and are seated in the room according to status and seniority, typical of most Japanese functions. I now see why it takes years to learn the art of the tea ceremony. Every item is held a certain way. Every item (the art, flower arrangement, tea bowls,

On the way up Mt. Fuji, the slogan was "Sâ, Genki o dashite" (only one hour from the top—"put forth all your energy!"). On the way down, having achieved their objective, Lynn and fellow American Spencer Dodington take a long break.



ABOVE: When Lynn travels, her camera is always focused on the children of her host country. Here a young Japanese boy rests after carrying the children's shrine during the annual Mikoshi Festival in Takahasi City.

BELOW: Lynn adds to her martial arts skills with a class in Shorinji-Kemp at an International Camp.

tea itself) is admired by each guest. So the guest, in addition to the host, has a very important role. Normally, everyone wears a kimono, the traditional Japanese costume. What I learned was but a small part of this 400-year-old Japanese ceremony.

Someone asked me recently to name my single most memorable experience in Japan. Certainly climbing Mt. Fuji was an adventure to remember. There were three of us—myself, another OU graduate, Mark Hamilton from Anadarko, Oklahoma, and Spencer Dodington from Texas. The "official" climbing season had come to a close, and the first snowfall was upon us. Bikkuri Bôken! The buses no longer ran to the mountain; we had to taxi from Mishima (about one hour) to Station #5 (approximately 9,000 feet), the starting point. Our driver turned out to be our greatest pal. When we began about 9 p.m., it was pouring down rain. He promptly supplied a flashlight and called a friend, who sold us some cheap "Luke Skywalker" rain jackets and pants.

The climb was fairly difficult because of the loose volcanic rocks and also because we were climbing at night. The rain stopped, and we had a breathtaking sky all to ourselves with only the moon and stars and a few other crazy fools out for the same adventure. At 2:30 a.m. we came to a closed hut that blocked the wind. Mark and Spence had no gloves, and by this time, snow had covered the ground. We huddled together for about an hour, wondering if we were going to make it.

We arrived at the 12,000-foot summit at about 4:30 a.m., and the sun began to rise about 5:15. What an exhilarating feeling to know we were among the first in the world to watch that day begin. I highly recommend the climb to the top of Mt. Fuji, especially to watch the sunrise. However, I must say, beware of the "Bikkuri Bôken." In other words, take warm clothing!

Another memorable event occurred during "Tsuyu," Japan's official rainy season. I went rice planting, in Japanese, "Taue." It poured down rain the whole day, so I wore huge rainboots up to my knees, plastic rainpants, a raincoat and a rainhat, all in bright purple. Fortunately a machine did most of the work; we only filled in where the machine missed.

There is a real art to rice planting. You must hold the seedlings, grown in a greenhouse, in the left hand, then pull three-to-four strands apart and drop them down into the

ABOVE: Not all Lynn's lessons were learned in the classroom. During rice planting time, she braved the rainy season and flooded paddies to stick the seedlings into the mud.

BELOW: Throughout Japan, Lynn found that the familiar "peace" sign had become popular among children as a greeting for American visitors.

mud. You basically stick your whole hand into the mud, where all kinds of small water animals are swimming around. It was a real balancing act too—a couple of times I almost went in head first!

Although they plant during the rainy season, the farmers flood the fields beforehand, because a tremendous amount of water is required to grow rice. This sticky rice, unique to Japan, is very important to the Japanese religion. It is offered to the gods yearly, and the Emperor has his own sacred field.

One of my most touching experiences came during my last class. I had told the 41 girl students in the class that they could do anything they wanted since it was their last lesson. They had me close my eyes and face the chalk board. The tape recorder came on as they told me to turn around. They began to sing "Eli, My Love," a beautiful Ray Charles song made popular during my year in Japan by the Japanese rock group Southern All Stars. Tears came to my eyes. Then, one by one, each student brought me a red rose, and in her own way, thanked me. Two of them read letters they had written, and they gave me a wall hanging signed by each student. After class, several students approached me. They wanted me to understand that the red roses symbolized love. Despite the very large language barrier, we had developed a strong friendship.

I was extremely lucky to have been posted in the countryside of Japan. The Japanese teachers with whom I taught English, and the other teachers at Takahashi Kôkô and my other schools, the students and the people nearby and in Takahashi City, whom I saw regularly, all became my friends. At one time or another, they all helped me adjust to a radically different lifestyle. In this non-English-speaking area, there were times when it was simply impossible to express myself. However, there always seemed to be someone to help, even if the problem was as minor as raising the seat on my bicycle. I never have met more gentle, caring individuals.

I will miss the everyday things: the school bells; the chatter of students in the teachers' room yelling, "Sensei, Sensei"; the squeaky bicycle brakes; the "Kon'nichiwa!" (Hello!); the "Gaijin-san" (polite for foreigner); the bows; the "surippas" (slippers one wears indoors); the "Arigatô gozaimasu" (thank you very much); eating lunch at Murakami-san's camera shop. Most of all, I will miss the smiles of my friends and the many laughs we shared.

Having the opportunity to live and work in a non-English-speaking culture so different from my own has given me an insight I could have gotten no other way.

The 18th-century Italian dramatist Carlos Goldini said, "He who never leaves his country is full of prejudice."

He must have had my Japanese experience in mind.

• *EDITOR'S NOTE: As a student correspondent, Lynn Grigsby took* Sooner Magazine *readers on a Washington, D.C., summer internship, as a Congressional staffer on a mission to Pakistan, as a Rotary fellow to Australia, and here as an English teacher in Japan. Grigsby presently is one of five OU graduates studying for advanced degrees at the London School of Economics. There is no sign that she intends to settle down and get a real job.*