

Reflections

William Boletta

Looking back on my academic career, I recall that my first teaching duties began in 1960, when I was a graduate teaching assistant in German at the University of Kansas. The Audio-Lingual approach was then in full bloom, and I taught two sections of Elementary German in the Language Laboratory.

Many years later, in 1985, I came to Japan to teach English, and I am now completing my twentieth year on the faculty of the Department of English at Senshu University. I sometimes think that I have learned more than the students during these past years.

I have often told my students that, although I am a teacher of English and a native speaker of that language, the most important asset I have to offer them is my experience as a student of foreign languages from a young age to the present. My first foreign language was Latin, which I started studying in junior high school and continued through high school. It was my favorite class, and I always made my best grades in Latin.

After the complexities of Latin, modern foreign languages seem quite easy by comparison. When I went to university, I studied French and German. French, of course, is derived directly from Latin, and my instructors were always careful to point out such interesting linguistic changes as the circumflex replacing the *s* in phonological changes, such as from Latin *castellum* to French *château*, and from Latin *hostium* to French *hôte*.

I found French grammar quite easy, but the pronunciation was another

matter—even more challenging than English pronunciation. My favorite professor was Dr. Benjamin Inabnit Harrison. As an upperclassman, I took his class in French phonetics and learned early on in my studies about the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). Professor Harrison also taught me French literature of the nineteenth century, and introduced me to the poetic wonders of Baudelaire, Verlaine, and Rimbaud, as well as to the fiction of Flaubert and Maupassant.

My second modern foreign language was German. Many people say that German is not a beautiful language, but I strongly disagree. I was also studying music at the time, and was enamored of the beauties of the German art song (*Lied*). During my sophomore year in college, I heard a performance of Schubert's *Die schöne Müllerin*, and it was so gorgeous that I fell in love with the German language for life. Later I discovered the aural delights of Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* and the rich vocal music of Mahler.

I went to Germany to study for a year, and my spoken German improved immensely, as well as did my capacity for eating those delicious German sausages (*Wurst*) and drinking that omnipresent *Bier*. German is still today my best foreign language, and I am happy that I can read almost anything in German. My spoken ability has flagged a bit, though, and when I went to Germany two years ago for a visit, I was surprised at how much Japanese accidentally came out of my mouth when I spoke German, much to the puzzlement of the Germans I was speaking with.

I went on to graduate school and earned an M.A. and Ph.D. in foreign languages, and taught German and French before switching over to English as a foreign language and coming to Japan. I still love foreign language study, and have studied Italian, Portuguese, Swedish, Norwegian, and most recently Dutch.

Of course, the language that I have spent the most time studying over the past twenty-five years is Japanese. Unlike many native-speaker English teachers, I have made a great effort to learn to read, write, and speak Japanese. While the

written language is, of course, a challenge for anyone, including native speakers of Japanese, the spoken language is surprisingly forgiving. Unlike German, if one makes grammatical mistakes in Japanese, people can still understand and get the gist of the conversation. I continue to pursue my Japanese studies to this day, and I feel that my knowledge of Japanese has helped me greatly in teaching my students English.

Teaching English has been a revealing experience for me. While I am a native speaker of the language, I still believe that English is one of the most difficult languages to learn and study of all the languages of Western Europe. Not only are the spelling and pronunciation exceptionally difficult, English—unlike German, for instance—has very few regularities and is filled with exceptions to the rules. It is a supreme irony that this difficult and rather eccentric language with its impossible spelling and mammoth vocabulary has become the international language of communication for the world.

I greatly admire the efforts of my students and students the world over who tackle the difficult task of learning English as a foreign language. One lesson I have always tried to drive home to my students is that English is no longer the property of native speakers. It now belongs to the world and provides an entrée into global communication by acting as the *lingua franca* for citizens of all countries.

I hope that I have been able to be of some assistance to the many hundreds (thousands?) of students I have had the privilege of teaching English to here in Japan. I wish them well in their careers and hope that I have been able to give them not only some support in improving their language skills but a perspective on the culture and mores of the English language speech community as well.

I would like to extend my thanks to my colleagues at Senshu University who have patiently put up with my eccentricities over these many years. I am grateful for the opportunity to have participated as a full member of the Japanese academic community for some twenty years, and I only hope that I have been able to make a

meaningful contribution.

Finally, in parting, I would like to say that I love Japan and the civil and courtly manners that one finds everywhere here. Japan and Japanese people have been extremely good to me. I only hope that I have been able in some small way to reciprocate the kindnesses and consideration which have been extended to me so generously over the years. I have chosen to make Japan my permanent home after retirement and plan to continue living in Tokyo in my lovely new house which I purchased last year and where I hope to continue enjoying one of my great pleasures in life: cooking delicious and beautifully presented Japanese dishes.

I look forward to a new beginning after I retire and I am sure that many new adventures still await me in my adopted country of Japan. Life is always full of surprises, and I eagerly anticipate an active and energetic retirement. I will close by sharing with you some of the wisdom of Robert Frost, who said once that everything he had learned in life he could sum up in three words: "It goes on."