

JAPANESE@NEWCASTLE

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SPRING 2024

Speech Contest Success

Second Place Victory at the 32nd Sir Parker Awards for Spoken Business Japanese

Caitlin Rollison, BA Combined Honours in Geography and Japanese, Graduated in 2017



It's been six years since I graduated with a degree in Japanese from Newcastle and three and a half years since I last worked in Japan, so my Japanese is getting a bit rusty around the edges. With that in mind, last

November, I decided to enter the 'Sir Peter Parker Awards for Business Spoken Japanese' at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, an annual speech contest for advanced Japanese speakers. The contest has been running for more than three decades and speeches can be on any theme as long as they contribute in some way to the contest's aims of furthering understanding of Japanese business culture and the relationship between Japan and the UK.

I did have an ulterior motive beyond simply practising my Japanese: as the contest is supported by the Japan External Trade Organisation (JETRO) and sponsored by various private companies including Mitsubishi, Nikkei and Japan Rail, the prizes for winners are very generous. Naturally, my aim was first prize: return flights to Japan for two people and a Japan Rail pass!

After a written application and short telephone interview in Japanese, I was selected to appear in the final contest alongside seven other speakers. Any non-native Japanese speaker can enter, so my fellow contestants came from around the UK

and ranged in age and occupation. One person even travelled from Hungary to participate in the contest. Public speaking in formal Japanese is already enough of a challenge, so I opted for a theme that I already know well from my day job working in urban policy: devolution and local government. Other speeches focused on themes including gender inequality, Japanese hospitality, and being a working mother in Japan.

On the day, the speaking order was chosen randomly and I spent a very anxious hour waiting for my turn - giving a speech on stage to an audience of 70 people is nerve-racking in any language, but especially in a foreign language. Just like taking an exam, I actually remember very little of giving the speech, the Q&A session that followed, or of the other contestants' speeches.

However, I must have done a decent job as I was awarded second prize. I quickly got over my initial disappointment at missing out on first place as second place prizes included an iPad, restaurant vouchers and items from Japanese supermarket 'Japan Centre'.

Prizes aside, I'm glad I decided to participate in the contest. Since I no longer live in Japan and don't use my Japanese skills at work it was a great opportunity to practise and reassure myself that I haven't forgotten too much. It was also a good way to practise public speaking, a useful skill at work.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dASEy9a5loQ>

Nothing to lose and everything to gain my speech contest experience

Emily Horst, BA Hons in Japanese Studies, Graduated in 2023



Do you see yourself as the public speaking type? I know I didn't when we were first told that as part of our final year Japanese classes, we would have the opportunity to enter a nationwide speech contest, the finals of which would be held in London and attended by an audience that included representatives of major Japanese companies.

And yet I said yes.

Why not, I figured? We each had to prepare a speech for class anyway, so I'd lose nothing by entering the contest. Plus, I reassured myself, I'd probably not get chosen, so I wouldn't have to confront that

terrifying thought of performing a ten-minute-long speech (and, may I add, a five-minute question-and-answer session) in a foreign language in front of that intimidating-sounding audience either. And so, rather casually, I submitted my entry.

You can probably guess where this is going.

I was invited to an online interview. And then I was invited to the finals, as one of only five finalists in the individual speech category.

After several months of preparation (my utmost thanks to the Japanese staff and students at Newcastle, who generously offered their time so I could rehearse my speech before an audience), the day of the finals arrived. Amid the other finalists' spectacular speeches and presentations, my turn inevitably rolled around, and so I took the stage.

What happened next is, admittedly, something of a blur. Though I recall my voice wavering in nervousness early on, I eventually settled in - or rather, zoned out, delivering my speech almost as if it were muscle memory. Finally, slightly more confident in the knowledge that two-thirds of the battle was over, I reached the end of my speech. The applause subsided, and the question-and-answer session began.

This felt like a polite interrogation, covering everything from my time in Japan to perceived contradictions in my argument. I often worry that I run my mouth when answering questions in Japanese so as to avoid hesitating for too long, thereby making my answers illogical; however, my concerns seemed unfounded this time, as after my category concluded, I was met with praise from staff from both Newcastle and beyond, along with, to my surprise, an apology from the interlocutor for asking difficult questions! With the weight of my time in the spotlight lifted from my shoulders, I could now try to enjoy the event a little more, and so once the nerves had fully worn off, I did so.

In the end, I didn't win any further prizes, but that's not what mattered (although I give my utmost congratulations to those who did!). What mattered was that *I'd done it*. Despite my reluctance to speak for that long, in front of that many people, in a foreign language; despite having entered so casually, not expecting to progress any further; I'd overcome my reservations, proven I could do something way out of my comfort zone, and truly given it my all, and that's something I'll always be proud of.

Taster Session at SunnyCon

Marsha Tinkler, BA Hons in Modern Languages, Japanese and Spanish, Stage 3



Between exams and preparing for my year abroad in Japan in September, my second year studying Japanese at Newcastle has probably been one of the busiest of my life, but I can say with full confidence that it's been one of the most fun, too! One of the things I find most fun about the course is all the opportunities we get to gain experience and interact with Japanese learners and culture outside of class. These opportunities usually include cultural fairs, online programmes with universities in Japan and so much more – the most recent being an offer to help conduct a Japanese language taster

session at SunnyCon.

To be honest, I was a little nervous about putting my name down to take part. Though I've always had an interest in Japanese pop culture, I'd never had the chance to go to an anime convention before, so I didn't really know how any of it worked! Luckily, another of the great things about Japanese at Newcastle is how much you get to know all your classmates (you see them every single day, after all!), so when I found out one of my

friends from class was also interested, we jumped at the chance. And I can't lie – as a student, the university pay rate was also a great incentive!

Once enough volunteers had been rounded up, Casey-sensei put us in touch with Zack, a PhD student and seasoned 'con veteran', who helped us newbies through the process. We all shared our ideas, and Zack kindly organised things. A couple of days before the convention we met up over zoom to decide who would do what and to rehearse a little before the real thing, and Zack really helped us feel at ease. What was also great about this experience was that we got free, full entry to the convention, so I made sure to arrive at St. James' Park a bit early to truly make the most of it.

When we got to the room our session was in, I was pleasantly surprised to see that we had a full setup: we had a proper panel facing out onto rows and rows of chairs, which kind of made me feel like a celebrity! Pretty soon, everyone started piling in, and I loved getting to look at all the cosplays I was seeing and trying to name the characters. We all introduced ourselves, then got to presenting. First, we covered useful phrases and greetings before

moving on to the alphabets (my job!) and then numbers. To break things up, we played hiragana bingo and Japanese 21, and it was super fun watching everyone get competitive.

All in all, I had an amazing time. Something like this is a great addition to any CV, not to mention a chance to get into a convention for free, so I'd

wholeheartedly recommend getting involved in something like this if you get the chance!



My Experience as a Teacher Assistant for the Japanese Club

Paolo Grisanti, BA Hons in Japanese Studies, Stage 3



Hi everyone, my name is Paolo. I am an undergraduate student currently studying Japanese Studies here at Newcastle University.

Before starting my second year last summer, I made the decision to try to get some experience in the work environment. Specifically, I wanted to find something I could do part-time related to Japanese. However, this can prove to be quite challenging as a student. For this reason, I had emailed Fumi-sensei about my interest to ask for advice. It was at this moment she redirected me to the opportunity to become her teaching assistant for a Japanese club held at an elementary school here in Newcastle.

The Japanese club was held in the second semester for a month once every week, and classes lasted an hour each. During the classes we usually had a presentation, which I also had the chance to present once myself. The presentations were often about Japanese language and culture, setting up the class for us to then organise games for kids to play. We played a bunch of different games that involved



chopsticks, origami or board games. It was surprising how every kid in the club was eager to learn more about Japan in every single encounter, and I can say they were lovely to work with, as they were never rude and very calm.

My favourite experience I had as a teaching assistant, was the culture festival the school had organized at the end of May. Fumi-sensei and I had organised and decorated a stall representing Japan and we taught many kids how to do origami. Among them were not only kids who participated in the Japanese club, but there were kids of all ages who had never participated in the club before, and expressed interest in joining the club next year or wanting to learn Japanese. The most popular origami we had to make was the frog origami. Overall, I think our stall was the most popular one because I can't recall a single moment where I wasn't teaching kids how to make origami.

In all honesty, before I had this opportunity I never thought about working as a teacher or in the education field; regardless, this proved to be an extremely valuable experience. I wish I could continue working alongside Fumi-sensei, and I strongly encourage anyone to give a try to this position, particularly anyone who has an interest in working in education, but even those who didn't consider this option yet. This position is very beginner friendly and proved to be a wonderful and fun experience, one that I would definitely take part in again.



My Year Abroad in Japan



Annabel Suckling, BA Hons in Japanese Studies, Stage 4



I am a person who worries about things a lot, and before I set out to Japan for my year abroad, I was worried about a lot of things. It was my first time travelling alone, and I was travelling to the other side of the planet. Strict COVID regulations were still in place. What would I do if something went wrong? What if I couldn't handle living in Japan on my own? What if I couldn't make friends? What if my classes were too difficult for me? My list of fears was endless.

But as soon as I arrived in Japan, one by one, I faced each of those

fears. My university's exchange student support team made sure that we weren't left to face the complicated registration procedures alone. I quickly settled in to the environment around me, and before long, finding my way around and exploring shopping centres and back streets was a fun adventure rather than overwhelming and scary. In my classes, I met people from all over the world, and soon found friends to go to karaoke and on weekend trips with. And of course, the class I had been assigned in my placement test was perfectly suited to me.



Language classes ran four days a week from 9am to 12:45pm, which took some getting used to, but was amazing for my Japanese. Other than those, my university also offered a huge variety of content classes. I got to study all kinds of things, from reading and analysing



Rashomon in the original Japanese in my literature class, to writing haiku poetry on the campus green in my creative writing class, to learning calligraphy. Those classes ended up becoming one of the highlights of my year abroad, and gave me knowledge and experiences I really cherish now.

The year abroad isn't all about studying though. Outside of class as well, I had some amazing experiences, like visiting a historical mountain village in

the snow and seeing the Japanese stage production of the Frozen musical in Tokyo on Christmas Eve! Even the less glamorous moments became great memories – one day my friend and I travelled to see the cherry blossom at a famous spot only to discover the whole place had been ripped up and turned into a construction site. The day turned out to be a hilarious one that we still laugh about months later.

There were, of course, challenges throughout the year, dealing with exams, homesickness, and the daily ins and outs of living alone in a foreign country, like getting my broken washing machine replaced. But those challenges were all surmountable, and by facing them, I learnt that I was much stronger than I thought. When I pushed through despite my worries, a whole country of new experiences opened up to me, and showed me an exciting and meaningful year abroad.

A Talk on the History of Studio Ghibli why are they so successful?



Dr Shiro Yoshioka, Lecture in Japanese Studies

Since around Summer 2023, I have been giving talks on the history of Studio Ghibli, in response to an invitation by Seed Talks, a company organising public lectures on various topics on culture. The first two in Leeds and Sheffield were very well attended with 150 and 400 seats respectively, which sold out very quickly. On 21 November, I finally had an opportunity to give a talk right here in Newcastle. Again, 150 seats sold out, apparently almost instantly. For the past few years, the popularity of the studio and their films has been growing fiercely: when I started to work here 12 years ago, few of my colleagues working on European languages and cultures knew of them. Now, a number of them do. The same goes for the public.

However, very little seems to be known about exactly how the studio became so successful, and the significance of its complex relationship with “anime” in its history. In my talk, based on my current research, I give an overview of the history of the studio, focusing on how the studio and their films can be placed within the history of postwar Japanese animation, and also taking the very idea of “anime” out of the box: what we call “anime” now – TV series targeting teenagers and above, involving cross-media adaptation and sales of merchandise – came into existence in the late 1970s and Hayao Miyazaki was one of the first directors who gained popularity in the fandom. But since the mid to late 1980s, with establishment of Studio Ghibli, he and the studio started to divorce themselves from “anime” and its fans to create high-quality animated features for a broader range of audiences beyond anime fans. I also emphasise the importance of Toshio Suzuki, the producer of the studio: he is the person who “discovered” Miyazaki and Isao Takahata and established them as significant animators, and played the key role for the studio’s growth by ensuring that their films are commercially successful. Eventually, Studio Ghibli and their films became a brand of their own that is clearly distinguished from other “anime” and even gained the status of “art.” Now, the name of the studio is not simply associated with specific films they created, but a whole range of cultural and artistic tastes and values, as best represented by the Ghibli Museum and the Ghibli Park.

Hopefully I will have more opportunities to give a talk at other locations in the future. If you are interested, follow the School of Modern Languages account on Facebook or Instagram for information on the next occasion. The talk is followed by a Q&A session so you will have an opportunity to ask me questions.

Contact Us

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