

[Activity Report]

## Report on a Visit to Three British Universities

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### Introduction

In September, 2006 Paul Butler-Tanaka went to the United Kingdom in order to visit three British universities; University of the Arts London, Bath Spa University, and Canterbury Christ Church University. The purpose of the visit was twofold. One purpose was to assess the three universities, and the cities in which they are located, as possible venues for a future English study abroad trip for Jin-ai University (JU) students, and the other was to conduct research into the teaching of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in the U.K., with particular reference to Japanese students.

The principal reason for considering an English study abroad trip to the U.K. arose out of some students being unable to take part in the eight-week program at California State University, Fullerton, due to the program coinciding with scheduled seminars at Jin-ai University. Therefore, following discussions among the English-teaching faculty members, it was decided to see if it would be possible to offer the students a course in the U.K. during the spring break. Butler-Tanaka was given the task of searching for suitable universities that offered a General English course at that time of year. It should be borne in mind that the academic year in the U.K. runs from September through to June. Butler-Tanaka found that although most universities in the U.K. offer General English courses many of them are available only during the summer and of those that offer courses during the academic year many of them require students to attend for at least twelve weeks, which of course is much longer than the time the students would have available. After an extensive Internet search of U.K. universities, three that offer courses of an appropriate duration, and which are located in places that would be likely to appeal to the students, were located. The three universities are those referred to above and there follows separate reports on each university.

### Report on University of the Arts London

The University of the Arts London was established in 2003 by the amalgamation of six distinguished art and design colleges and is one of the largest arts universities in Europe. Prior to visiting the three universities, it was Butler-Tanaka's opinion that University of the Arts London (UAL) would probably be the most suitable of the three. It was felt that due to it being situated in the fashionable West End of London, near the popular shopping area around Oxford Street, it would be an attractive setting for any students wishing to study English in

the U.K. Indeed, Butler-Tanaka's first impression of the facilities at UAL's Language Centre was very favorable. The classrooms were well equipped and both the classrooms and the class sizes were of an acceptable size; not so big so as to make communication difficult and not so small that students would feel uncomfortable. At the time of the visit construction of improved facilities was underway. The improved facilities would include additional computers for use by students, a snack bar, and a student meeting area.

The first UAL staff member Butler-Tanaka met was Ms. Clare Montgomery, the International Marketing Manager. A lot of the information provided by Ms. Montgomery was already known to Butler-Tanaka through his perusal of UAL's website and his email correspondence with Ms. Montgomery. For example, Ms. Montgomery explained that in addition to General English, JU students could also take the 'English Plus Art and Design' course which runs for four weeks from the start of each month, which was something that Butler-Tanaka was already aware of. However she did say that it would be possible for JU students to do one week of General English before starting English Plus Art and Design even though the minimum time for the General English course is two weeks. Ms. Montgomery also talked about the activities and excursions offered by the Language Centre which include trips to Paris and Amsterdam and to well-known sightseeing places in the U.K. on weekends, and to places of cultural interest around London on Fridays. She also advised that outside of the summer the Language Centre has about 100 students, many of whom are from Asian countries, particularly Taiwan, Korea, and Japan. About 20% of the students are Japanese.

As the International Marketing Manager, Ms. Montgomery's focus was more on the business-side rather than the academic, and a lot of the information she passed on related to numbers of students and the ways in which UAL recruits students, e.g. in Japan they use the services of a Tokyo-based agency. A more academic focus was provided by Mr. Richard Thomas, whose title is Operations Manager which in effect means he is the Director of Studies. Mr. Thomas emphasized that although the students do use a coursebook they are also given projects to carry out which are then presented in class. The projects involve the students conducting their own research into an aspect of London that interests them. The author also met two other members of the teaching staff and found all three to be very professional and well-experienced teachers. Although none of them had any experience of teaching in Japan they all have experience of teaching Japanese students, in fact one of them has taught Japanese and other Asian students at a university in Brisbane, Australia.

As stated in the opening paragraph, one reason for Butler-Tanaka making this trip to the U.K. was to assess not only the universities but also the cities in which they are located. Undoubtedly, many students would be excited at the prospect of visiting London, however Butler-Tanaka found that whilst London has many obvious attractions and benefits, there are also distinct drawbacks to going to London for a study abroad trip. The most evident

drawback would be cost. Whilst it was not possible for Butler-Tanaka to visit any of the homes used for homestays, all of them would necessitate the students using public transport, principally the London Underground subway system, to travel between the homestay and UAL's Language Centre. This would of course add greatly to the cost of the trip and, furthermore, would expose the students to potential danger. The risk of encountering dangerous situations in London is undoubtedly greater than in any other part of the U.K., and this risk has been heightened in recent times by the threat of terrorism. Nonetheless, London is a vibrant and stimulating city and would provide the students with a memorable experience. However, it is worth noting here that cost of tuition fees and accommodation at UAL is at least \54,000 more expensive than at the other two universities.

Finally, comment should perhaps be made about UAL's unconventional structure. As stated above, it was created by the amalgamation of six colleges of art and design and, therefore, it does not have a central campus. Each college is run independently under the umbrella of the UAL, and the Language Centre is, in effect, another college. Students attending the Language Centre, therefore, would have little or no contact with students attending the constituent colleges of the UAL and would most likely only have contact with the other 100 or so students also taking English classes at the Language Centre.

### **Report on Bath Spa University**

Bath Spa University was granted full university status in 2005 after many years as both a teacher training college and an art college. The city of Bath is thought by many to be one of the most beautiful places in Britain and the whole city has been a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1987 due to its impressive architecture and history. Therefore, it was felt that it would provide an enjoyable and memorable environment for JU students.

Upon arrival at Bath Spa University (BSU) Butler-Tanaka was met by the Head of the English Language Programme (ELP), Mr. Martin Jones and the Head of Studies, EFL Language Activities, Ms. Hannah Walker. The rest of that morning was spent in discussion with Mr. Jones who also showed Butler-Tanaka around the ELP building and the adjoining Bath School of Art and Design, which is also part of BSU. Both buildings are part of a row of large four storey houses dating from the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Due to the age of the buildings, and the fact that they are protected because of their architectural importance, they do not have elevators and walking to Mr. Jones' office on the fourth floor, up an old and narrow stairway, could become tiresome if you had to do it several times a day. Fortunately for the students most of the classrooms are located on the first and second floors. The classrooms were certainly large and bright enough and had the sort of equipment one would expect to find in an EFL classroom. Mr. Jones also showed Butler-Tanaka the newly refurbished cafeteria which is in the basement of the building. Whilst the cafeteria's facilities could not be

faulted, the cafeteria itself was rather small. As it is meant to serve not only the ELP but also the School of Art and Design, it would probably become quite crowded during term time. At the time of the visit there were only a few students attending classes at the ELP, and classes had not yet begun at the School of Art and Design. Therefore, there weren't many students around, although Butler-Tanaka was able to speak to two Japanese students who were nearing the end of their time at BSU. They both said that they had very much enjoyed their time there and that their English had benefited greatly. However, when asked about Bath itself they weren't so enthusiastic and they complained about Bath being too small and too quiet. Seeing as both of them were from Osaka it is easy to understand their feelings.

In the afternoon, Mr. Jones took Butler-Tanaka to BSU's main campus which is located in the countryside, about seven kilometers from the center of Bath. The main campus is called Newton Hall and is set in parkland designed in the 18<sup>th</sup> century by the famous landscape architect Capability Brown. Whilst the setting is indeed beautiful, it is also the principal reason why BSU was not chosen as the location for the English study abroad program. Despite the rural setting; the land is owned by Prince Charles and therefore the construction of new buildings there is strictly controlled; the Newton Hall campus had a much livelier atmosphere than the campus in the town. If JU students were to go to BSU then it seemed evident to Butler-Tanaka that they would not enjoy the feeling of being part of university life there. They would be separate from the main campus and therefore would not be able to interact with other students to the same degree that they would be able to if they were on the main campus.

At Newton Hall, Butler-Tanaka was introduced to Ms. Rosalind Davies, the Head of Undergraduate Course for International Students and also the Deputy Head of International Activities. Ms. Davies invited Butler-Tanaka to the welcoming ceremony for foreign students taking foundation and degree courses at BSU. Butler-Tanaka listened to a speech given by the Vice-Chancellor of BSU, Professor Frank Morgan, and he was also introduced to the Head of International Activities, Professor David Coulby. In general, the welcome Butler-Tanaka received at BSU was much friendlier and more collegial than at UAL. Although Butler-Tanaka had a much more favorable impression of BSU, the problem of the English Language Programme not being part of the main campus certainly counted against it.

### **Report on Canterbury Christ Church University**

The city of Canterbury is one of the oldest towns in England and like Bath it has 2,000 years of history. At the center of the city is the cathedral, also a UNESCO World Heritage site, which was founded in 597 AD by St. Augustine who was responsible for bringing Christianity to England. The city itself is quite small with a residential population of 40,000. However, the city has two universities and several colleges and language schools, therefore the student

population adds a further 20,000 people to the city's population. The cathedral, and the city's literary connections with Chaucer, Marlowe, and Dickens, means that it is, like Bath, a major tourist destination visited by people from around the world.

Canterbury Christ Church University (CCCU) was established as a teacher training college in 1962 and was granted full university status in 2005. It has 14,000 full and part-time students. It was founded by the Church of England but it is now open to people of all backgrounds and faiths. In 2005 there were over 1,000 non-British students from 80 different countries studying at CCCU.

Upon arrival at CCCU, Butler-Tanaka was met by the Manager of the International Office, Mr. Yvan Fontanel. Of course, Mr. Fontanel showed Butler-Tanaka around the university and, as almost all of the buildings date from the 1960s and later, the impression Butler-Tanaka got was that CCCU was a bright, modern, and bustling university. This impression was undoubtedly enhanced by the fact that the first day of Butler-Tanaka's visit was enrollment day for new students and therefore the place was much busier than either BSU or UAL had been. Butler-Tanaka was particularly impressed with the cafeteria which was very spacious and is open all day. The menu offered a broad choice of dishes from various countries. Also worthy of note were the student computer facilities which included some computers with Japanese language operating systems. However, perhaps the most noteworthy aspect of the campus was the fact that it is just a five-minute walk from the city center. Butler-Tanaka was assured that the university would try its best to accommodate JU students in homestays close to the university. Therefore, the students would be in a position to fully utilize both the facilities of the main campus and of the city center. It would also mean that the students would be better able to interact with other CCCU students, both British and non-British. In order to aid such interaction, the International Office stages weekly get-togethers on Wednesday evenings where different nationalities take turns 'hosting' the event and providing food from their countries. Of course, the International Office also offers a program of excursions and other social events.

Before taking Butler-Tanaka to the English Language Teaching Centre (ELTC), Mr. Fontanel introduced Butler-Tanaka to Dr. Martin Hyde, the Deputy Director of the International Office. Butler-Tanaka found Dr. Hyde not only to be quite knowledgeable about Japanese students and their needs, but also to be very open and approachable, as were all of the members of staff that Butler-Tanaka talked with at CCCU.

The English Language Teaching Centre is located in a building that features in the famous Charles Dickens novel 'David Copperfield'. At the ELTC, Butler-Tanaka had an interesting meeting with the Director of Studies, Ms. Jane Wright, who impressed Butler-Tanaka as being an extremely knowledgeable and experienced teacher. Some of the classrooms at the ELTC

did appear to Butler-Tanaka to be a little smaller than those at BSU, but as class sizes are limited to 15 students the rooms were of an adequate size. Butler-Tanaka was able to observe one of the classes and although Japanese students were the largest single nationality group in the class they constituted less than half of the total number. The other students came from a diverse range of countries, including countries in Eastern and Western Europe, North Africa, and other Asian countries. Canterbury itself is only 90 minutes from London and is close to the European mainland. It has convenient access to Europe from nearby ferry ports and from Ashford International Train Station via the Channel Tunnel. Therefore, it attracts many students from outside the U.K. and has quite a cosmopolitan atmosphere. Butler-Tanaka spoke with two students from Switzerland who were attending a language school in Canterbury for the second time and who spoke very highly of the city. In their view, not only was it a good place to learn English but they also said that they felt safe and comfortable there. Also, at the time of Butler-Tanaka's visit, there were two groups of Japanese students attending classes at the ELTC. One group was from a junior college in Hiroshima and the other was from Musashino University in Tokyo. The students had only just arrived at CCCU and when Butler-Tanaka spoke to some of them he found them to be very excited to be there and had only positive comments to make.

Upon his return to JU, Butler-Tanaka recommended to his colleagues that Canterbury Christ Church University be chosen as the venue for the proposed English study abroad trip to the U.K. His principal reasons for recommending CCCU were as follows:

1. The fact that the students would be on the main campus and therefore be better able to mix with other students.
2. The proximity of the campus to the city center.
3. The impression Butler-Tanaka had of Canterbury being a cosmopolitan city and yet having a relatively safe environment.
4. Canterbury's proximity and ease of access to both London and mainland Europe.
5. The fact that the fees at CCCU are the lowest of the three universities visited by Butler-Tanaka.

Butler-Tanaka's colleagues accepted his recommendation and the availability of the trip was subsequently made known to JU students. The current situation is that five students, all from the Department of Communication, have declared that they wish to go on the trip. The proposed plan is that the students would leave Japan on March 2<sup>nd</sup> and return on April 2<sup>nd</sup> and would have four weeks of full-time study at 21 hours per week. Butler-Tanaka, with the assistance of Ms. Chie Yahashi, is in the process of making the necessary arrangements for the trip and is dealing directly with Mr. Fontanel at CCCU.

## Report on Interviews with Teachers at the three Universities

At each of the three universities Butler-Tanaka interviewed two teachers in order to gain an insight into the teaching of EFL in the U.K., with particular reference to Japanese students. The teachers were asked eight questions, which were as follows:

1. Have you ever taught English abroad? If so, where?
2. If you have taught English in Japan, what are your reflections on teaching there?
3. Again, if you have taught English in Japan, can you say what, if any, differences you have noticed in the behavior of Japanese students there and their behavior in the U.K.?
4. If you haven't taught in Japan but have taught abroad, then what are your reflections on teaching a homogenous class abroad as compared to the mixed nationality classes in the U.K.?
5. Again, if you have taught abroad, then what are your views of the impact on students of 'English-only' classes in the U.K.?
6. Could you give me your impressions of the classroom behavior of Japanese students in the U.K.? How do they compare to students from other countries? In particular, are they more or less likely than other students to volunteer responses? Are they better or worse learners? Are they more or less confident?
7. Do you use any different techniques with Japanese students that maybe you would not use with students from elsewhere? For example, do you use more display questions than referential questions? Are you more likely to make use of role play activities?
8. When Japanese students are in groups of mixed nationalities, how would you characterize their behavior?

As the teachers' responses were uniformly similar, it will probably be appropriate to summarize them rather than deal with each teacher's responses separately. One surprising similarity was that whilst all six of the teachers interviewed had worked abroad, none of them had worked in Japan. However, one teacher did say that she had taught Japanese students at a university in Australia. In general, all six teachers said that when Japanese students first arrive, they are lacking in confidence and are unwilling to express their own opinions. Pilcher (2003) in his recommendations for dealing with Japanese students in the U.K., stated that "role play and drama activities were very useful for Japanese students and that these activities would help improve their confidence and help them to overcome their shyness in speaking English." This ties in with what the six teachers related to Butler-Tanaka; they all said that large group or whole class activities are not effective with Japanese students and that they respond better in small groups or in pairs. One teacher at UAL, in response to question seven, concerning teaching techniques, stated that she finds that she needs to monitor Japanese students' writing quite closely as they are prone to elementary spelling errors which she believes are due to L1 interference. Also in response to question seven,

several of the teachers noted that repetition was important with Japanese students to ensure that they have fully understood what is being taught. Question seven also asked about the use of display questions and all of the teachers interviewed said that they do not need to use such questions as once the students have overcome their initial shyness they willingly respond to referential questions. The teacher who had taught Japanese students in Australia stated that in her opinion, once Japanese students have become used to the freedom of being outside Japan their confidence and sociability increase, to the extent that some of them revel in being a little outrageous and the center of attention in the classroom. However, she did qualify that by saying that maybe the Japanese students who go to the U.K. to study English are possibly more outgoing than average by virtue of the fact that they, voluntarily, choose to study abroad.

Questions six and eight both covered similar areas in that they refer to how Japanese students compare with students of other nationalities. With regard to their classroom behavior, one teacher noted that when students are in pairs of the same nationality they are likely to have the same gaps in their knowledge of English and are therefore unable to help each other with points of English that they do not understand. Therefore, it is standard practice in EFL classrooms in the U.K. to pair students of differing nationalities so that they are able to help each other. One point made by Richard Thomas, the Operations Manager at UAL, was that EFL students in general, and Japanese EFL students in particular, need to learn how to learn, i.e. how to ask questions, how to gather and process information, and how to, as he put it, be “self-sustaining”, in other words, how to independently make their own decisions about learning. All of the teachers interviewed referred to the need to create a comfortable atmosphere in the classroom, in order to encourage students to “come out of their shells”. This concept of a comfortable, or ‘safe’, learning environment is one of the themes of Gray and Leather (1999):

“By safety we mean a learning context in which the students will feel that nothing too ‘frightening’ will happen to them, that they will not be pushed into making fools of themselves, of losing face. The concept of face (kao) is extremely important in Japanese culture and teachers need to be aware of its power and resonance.”

Several of the teachers said that some groups of students, for example Brazilians and Italians, have to be calmed down as they can be over-eager and the less gregarious students, such as the Japanese, can be overwhelmed by their enthusiasm. None of the teachers Butler-Tanaka talked with thought that Japanese students were worse learners than students from other countries. The uniform response was that although, generally speaking, to begin with Japanese EFL students lack confidence in their speaking ability, once they have overcome their initial shyness and have lost their reluctance to speak they quite often become very lively members of the class.



However, whilst it appears that, in general, Japanese EFL students are capable of overcoming their shyness in the classroom, outside the classroom their behavior appears to be different. Most of the teachers noted that Japanese students tend to mix particularly well with other Asian students but do not mix quite so well with students from outside Asia. There are obvious cultural and linguistic differences between Asian and non-Asian students but the reasons for this apparent lack of interaction between them may not necessarily be the fault of the less gregarious Asian students. There may be a willingness to interact on the part of the Asian students but perhaps the non-Asian students are unwilling because of pre-conceived stereotypical views that Asians are reticent and conservative.

After interviewing the six teachers, Butler-Tanaka concluded that one of the main differences between EFL classes in Japan and in the U.K., apart from the obvious differences relating to the nationalities of the students and the absence of Japanese language use in the U.K., was that of the relationship between the teacher and the students. Whilst Leather (2000) states that, "In the classroom, learners from all cultures need a measure of safety", she also says that with Japanese learners "This need for safety seems to be particularly pronounced". Although the teachers who spoke to Butler-Tanaka all agreed on the importance of creating a comfortable atmosphere in the classroom it is perhaps open to conjecture as to whether U.K. teachers' idea of a comfortable atmosphere is the same as that of Japanese EFL students. Pilcher (2003) wrote that "Interpersonal factors... can critically affect how a class runs". He also reported that all of the Japanese students he interviewed said that "The personality of the teacher was fundamentally important". Such an attitude may not be held so strongly by students, or teachers, in other countries who may believe that lesson content and not the teacher's personality is "fundamentally important". If Japanese EFL students studying English abroad do have a disappointing experience then perhaps this apparent disconnect between Japanese and non-Japanese views of what is more important may account for a study abroad trip possibly not meeting a Japanese student's expectations. However, the responses of the six teachers interviewed all point to the experience of attending English classes in an English-speaking country as being a rewarding and stimulating experience for Japanese students.

## References

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