

CHAPTER 2

Keynote Lecture Part 1: History of JALTA (Japanese Language Teachers' Association)

Matsuo Soga



Chionin, Kyoto

CHAPTER 2

Professor Noro, members of the organizing committee of this symposium, and ladies and gentlemen, I feel very honored to stand here today to talk about my experiences and my ideas on Japanese language education. My talk will be about something very basic but I hope that it will be of some use to you for your future Japanese language education. As you know, we celebrated the fortieth anniversary of Japanese Language Teachers' Association in BC (JALTA) this past spring, and since I was one of the charter members of the formation of JALTA, I will talk about the initial part of its history first (Part I) and then I will talk about my ideas on Japanese language teaching (Part II).

In February 1973, at the Hyatt Regency Hotel, a “Multi-Cultural Conference” was held for three days sponsored by the BC Government. At that time, the Canadian Government was trying hard to promote the multi-culturalism in this country. To this conference, ethnic language teachers from various schools, public and private including colleges and universities, were invited, and together with each ethnic language group discussions in separate rooms, there was a panel discussion for the plenary session. I remember that it was truly a lively successful conference. This conference really became the starting point of JALTA. To explain a little further, I must mention that one of the resolutions of the conference was to set up a communication mechanism between ethnic language teaching groups and the BC Government.

In accordance with this resolution, two UBC professors and several of the Japanese language school principals in the Vancouver area had meetings at the UBC Faculty Club to start a Japanese language teachers' organization. The members who attended the meetings were Rev. Yokoyama of Steveston Japanese Language School, Mrs. Kanazawa of Vancouver Japanese Language School, Mr. Matsushita of Vancouver Language Center, Mrs. Murakami of Gladstone Japanese Language School, Professor Takashima of UBC and myself. In these meetings, the proposed organization was named “BC Shuu Nihongo Kyooiku Shinkookai” (The Association for Promotion of Japanese Language Teaching in BC), and its purpose was to promote Japanese language education through teachers' cooperation in British Columbia. Rev. Yokoyama was asked to play the

role of the first president of the organization, and the others were also been given important roles such as secretary, treasurer, planning, etc.

Soon after the organization was formally started in 1974, the first things that the Association planned were “Recitation Contest” by children from various Japanese language schools, “Research Seminar” by teachers, and “survey” through questionnaires of the actual situations of Japanese language teaching in BC.

In the recitation contest, lower grade children were given selected Japanese sentences which they memorized and recited, and the higher grade children recited their sentences which they themselves wrote. The first seminar was held at the Vancouver Japanese Language School, and Mr. Tsutae Sato, the distinguished Japanese language teacher in Vancouver, spoke on Japanese language schools in the US and Canada, and Mrs. Yoshiko Kanazawa reported on the result of the survey of actual Japanese language teaching situations. The survey showed the number of Japanese Language Schools existed in the area, the number of students and teachers at each school, the kind of textbooks used and desired equipment at each school, etc. Along with Mr. Sato and Mrs. Kanazawa, I myself had the honor of speaking on some of the linguistic problems of teaching Japanese. The seminar was attended by 27 participants and among them were Professor Saint Jacques of UBC and Mrs. Warkentyne from Victoria. I must particularly mention that Mr. and Mrs. Sato, and Mr. Aoki who attended the conference had been teaching Japanese since before WW II.

In the following years, the seminars and the recitation contests were continued to be held, and then, joint school play sessions were added. Also, Japanese movie sessions were held in Vancouver Japanese Language School and Steveston Community Center although they were soon discontinued. As for the survey of Japanese language teaching in BC, it had to be discontinued later for some time because Mrs. Kanazawa who was the key member of survey and research passed away to our great, great sorrow.

In 1978, Mr. Kawamoto of the Japanese Consulate in Vancouver made a suggestion for members of the Association to produce Japanese language textbooks suitable for Canadian children. At that time, Japanese Language Schools around here were using textbooks approved by the Japanese Government for children in Japan, so they were not quite suitable for children in Canada. Certainly, new textbooks with Canadian contents suitable for the Canadian children were most desirable, but we all knew that writing new textbooks would take a lot of work, so no one wanted to take on the enormous task. Nevertheless, Mr. Kawamoto’s suggestion was taken very seriously by the members of the Association and became the starting point of the big project

of textbook writing. So, in response to his suggestion, a textbook committee was formed in this Association. The members were: Rev. Takeo Yokoyama and Mrs. Michiko Yokoyama of Richmond Japanese Language School, Mrs. Michiko Tateno of Coquitlam Japanese Language School, Mrs. Fumiko Maniwa of Fraser Japanese Language School, Mrs. Yasuko Morikochi of Killarney Japanese Language School, Mrs. Kazuko Trudel of UBC, Professor Ken-ichi Takashima of UBC, and myself also of UBC.

We made seven textbooks from the first grade to the seventh grade, and the corresponding teachers manuals had also to be developed. The work was financially supported by grants from the Japan Foundation and the Canadian Government to which we had to apply every fiscal year. We met almost every month under the excellent chairmanship of Rev. Yokoyama and we had to decide on various details such as the number of kanji for each grade and kind of contents relevant to the Canadian culture, etc. The work needed tremendous amount of effort and it took almost twenty years before completion in 1998. (I have to mention as a footnote that I had to drop out of the committee since I had to move to Japan in 1992.) Those textbooks were the very first textbooks made in Canada with Canadian contents suitable for Canadian children. I understand that a Canadian Government official, who read the English translation of a chapter “Kebekku o Tazunete (Visiting Quebec)” in the sixth grade textbook, was so impressed that he even said that he would put it on display at the Canadian Pavilion of the Paris World Expo of the year.

In 1987, Mr. Motoaki Egawa became the Association President, which meant that the activities of the Association were to be continued by younger people. At that time, there were eighty seven listed members in this Association. Under the new leadership of Mr. Egawa, an important new project was introduced-- to conduct the Japanese language proficiency test for the students in BC. I should mention that for the purpose that test, the examination and grading system were created for which Mr. Egawa worked hard together with members of the Association.

In 1988, we came to know that in the Toronto area, the Japanese Language Teachers' Association for Canada was organized and we subsequently became a part of that organization. Then, in 1989, we changed the name of our Association to “Japanese Language Teachers' Association in BC,” which was abbreviated to JALTA as we still call it today. I moved to Japan in 1992 and I am sure that you are all well aware of the JALTA activities since then.