Why do English teachers have to be native speakers?

English-language schools in Japan are changing stereotypes by proving that good teaching is not about nationality

By MELINDA JOE
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In Japan, non-native English-language instructors from South Asian countries are challenging cultural stereotypes and putting a new face on the industry. And it hasn't been any easy task.

In Tokyo, North American-English and British-English have long been the standards taught in schools, and language testing is dominated by American exams such the TOEIC test, which attracts 1.5 million test-takers per year. This preference carries the assumption that only native speakers — specifically from Western countries such as the United States, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and Britain — can teach the language.

When Jeevarani Angelina (who goes by the name Sanku Rani for ease of pronunciation) opened the Little Angels English Academy in the western Tokyo suburb of Mitaka in 2004, the idea of hiring non-native English teachers was still a radical one.

Angelina and her husband had moved to Japan from India 20 years ago. When their children entered kindergarten, she noticed that all of the English classes were being taught in Japanese. Soon after she started helping some of her children's classmates with their English lessons, she decided to start her own school — staffed exclusively with Indian teachers.

From the beginning, Angelina had anticipated challenges. During her first year in Japan, she'd noticed that, regardless of language ability, friends and acquaintances from South Asian countries such as India and Sri Lanka had trouble landing positions as English teachers.

"They were not really accepted because they were not branded as native speakers," she says. "When I heard that from many people, I thought that's not fair and we have to change it. You shouldn't look at the teacher's color or where they're from and decide whether they're good or not. You give them a chance."

Angelina's experiment has proved successful. The Little Angels English Academy has grown to include a variety of classes for adults, and her enterprise has expanded beyond language lessons and her Little Angels International School offers classes from kindergarten up to grade five. She hopes to add grade six next year.

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All of the lessons are taught in English, and nearly all of the instructors are from South Asian countries — India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Indonesia. The school has become popular for its Montessori- style approach to an Indian curriculum and has even helped pave the way for other Indian international schools in Tokyo, such as the Global Indian International School in Edogawa.

Eighty percent of the school's students are Japanese, the rest are bicultural or from other countries.

"No one asks me if we have native teachers anymore," Angelina says with a smile.

While Indian teachers have gradually gained acceptance, instructors from the Philippines are now working toward the same goal. Like many Indians, the majority of Filipinos begin learning English at the age of 3, and most school subjects are taught in English.

At RareJob.com, a new online English tutoring service offering lessons via Skype, the Internet-phone and video-communication service, all of the teachers are Filipino students or graduates of the University of the Philippines in Manilla. Although RareJob's instructors are first screened and then required to complete a training program, CEO Tomohisa Kato admits that many students are skeptical at first.

"Japanese have a kind of prejudice against Filipinos, but once they started our service, they found that they are very good at English, welcoming and professional," Kato explains.

When RareJob staff member Mary Anne Tuazon first started teaching English, some students inquired about her status as a native speaker.

"Many were surprised that English is one the official languages in the Philippines. It's only happened with advanced students, but some would ask, 'Are you a Westerner?' " she says.

From a practical standpoint, such concerns have little validity. Mark Shrosbree, the former vice-chair of the Foreign Language Center at Tokai University in Kanagawa, points out that, in business, education and travel, Japanese people are far more likely to encounter non-Western, non-native speakers. In his 2004 book "The Language Revolution," British linguist David Crystal estimated that non-native speakers of English outnumber native speakers three to one.

"English has become the language of international communication, and as such has been influenced by all the people using it. The idea that there are prestige versions of English is not only obsolete but also offensive to the majority of English-speakers who have great competence in the language but do not sound 'native,' " Shrosbree says.

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Instructors like Tuazon believe that they are serving another important function by increasing cultural awareness.

"There are few cases, but I have heard reports of subtle or indirect discrimination. When one student made a statement about sex workers in the Philippines, the teacher firmly defended the dignity of the Filipino people," Tuazon explains. "I don't think there are many Filipinos in Japan, so these ideas are based on minimal interactions."

Kato hopes that his business will help break down stereotypes by creating opportunities for Japanese and Filipino cultures to interact in a meaningful way. A former consultant at the international management consulting firm Monitor Group, he founded RareJob in 2007. The company has since become the number-one provider of online English lessons in Japan and currently employs nearly 900 tutors from the Philippines.

"While at the Monitor Group, I found there are excellent people everywhere. If we provide an opportunity for them, they are eager to show their skills to the world. Our vision is to offer an 'equal chance to everyone, everywhere,'" he says.

In the end, language lessons are about communication. "The important thing is for the teacher to bridge the gap between culture and language," Tuazon notes.

For RareJob students such as Mayumi Yamazaki, the experience has been unequivocally positive. "My impression of the Philippines has definitely changed. I know that the tutors don't represent all Filipinos, but the most surprising thing is they have a sense of values similar to the Japanese. As I talk to them every night about my day, I feel that they are like friends," she says.

"And, of course, my English skills have improved so much."