

BELOW LEFT: Anne (left) and Year 11 student Harriett Russell make a foodstop at a soba restaurant during a school trip to Nagano, Japan  
 TOP RIGHT: Anne and her students having given a talk at Loughborough University for people wanting to do business in Japan  
 BELOW RIGHT: On a visit to the Institute for Solid State Physics, University of Tokyo



# Day in the life Anne Rajakumar

Words & interview Diana Smith

Anne Rajakumar's lifelong passion for language teaching has led her to leave her native Australia to take up a post teaching English schoolchildren Japanese in the Nottinghamshire countryside...

Anne Rajakumar teaches Japanese at South Wolds Community School in Keyworth, Nottinghamshire, which offers GCSE, AS, A2 and IB Language B Japanese. She is on the Japanese Language Committee of ALL, which stages the Nihongo Cup speech competition, and has developed a number of resources to teach GCSE Japanese. Currently taking up much of her time is the Musubi Project, a collaborative undertaking led by Japanese language students at South Wolds school in partnership with Loughborough University, The East Midlands Development Agency and Yo Sushi (see panel below).

An Australian who began teaching Japanese in Melbourne in 1986, Anne admits that she didn't want to teach at all initially but, after completing a degree studying history, German and Japanese, she spent two years in Japan teaching English and discovered that it was "marvellous fun". A short stint working as a broadcaster for Radio Australia's Japanese Language department followed, during which time Anne also studied part-time for a Diploma in Education (the Australian equivalent of the PGCE) in order to pursue her new-found passion for language teaching.

"My job at Radio Australia was to produce a weekly music programme called *Top Hit* in Japanese," says Anne. "It presented the Australian

top 10 singles chart for a Japanese audience. I also had to host the two-hour daily live programme on a rota basis. This involved introducing pre-recorded programmes by other presenters, and reading out and commenting on listeners' letters. The day after my broadcasts, I would find a little note on my desk listing the various mistakes I'd made on air, and this was the period when my Japanese improved most!"

Now Anne spends her days in front of what she calls a 'real' (as opposed to 'imaginary') audience. "I am the only teacher but I almost always have a native language assistant with me and often take PGCE students," she says. "I like having student teachers because they give my students a break from me and expose them to other styles of teaching and different personalities. Also, I enjoy mentoring younger teachers and sharing my ideas and resources with them. In turn, I am able to benefit from their fresh ideas and perspectives."

In Australia, Anne returned to work after having children in 1994, at the time when foreign languages were being introduced into primary schools. "As I had primary-aged children myself, I swapped from teaching secondary Japanese to teaching it at primary level," she says. "This was quite a change, and it took me some time to adjust to the different teaching environment but, after a few years, I grew to love teaching at that level and I also completed

## AT WORK

**Q. What is your favourite part of the job?**

A. It's hard to choose but it's certainly the parts to do with the children – the lessons, the projects with the keenest students, the school trips and the competitions. The least enjoyable part is the relentless paperwork and staff meetings.

**Q. What first attracted you to language teaching?**

A. After completing a degree studying History, German and Japanese, I taught English in Japan for two years. I discovered that teaching languages is marvellous fun.

**Q. How did you come to be doing the job you do now?**

A. Although I trained to teach Japanese, German and History, I was only ever asked to teach Japanese. After a number of years teaching at secondary level, I moved into the primary sector and wrote the primary workbooks, *Yonde Kaite*.

**Q. Are languages on the rise?**

A. I feel that motivated students value languages and the chances they bring very highly.

**Q. Is there anything of which you are particularly proud?**

A. I am very proud of the Japanese programme at South Wolds, which started from nothing and is now a popular and thriving subject that goes all the way to A-level/IB.

my series of six primary level Japanese workbooks – the *Yonde Kaite* series.

"In the UK, I was thrilled to be able to work across both the primary and secondary sectors, as the rewards at each level are quite different but equally exciting. In the end, my timetable at South Wolds didn't allow me to continue teaching at the lower level, which was a great disappointment – though I was relieved not to have to rush to and from the primary school."

According to Anne, Australia and Britain's educational systems are remarkably similar and students' behaviour and attitudes are almost identical. "In both countries, we are lucky to have very articulate, active and involved students who engage enthusiastically in their lessons when they find them interesting," she comments. "The downside of this is that students can be quite picky about which subjects they are prepared to work in, and very vocal in any dissatisfaction they may feel – you cannot take their co-operation as a given."

**"We have the benefit of teaching something exotic, which gives it a very high status – students feel quite special when they learn it"**

This begs the question – what is it about learning Japanese that appeals to students? After all, the extra time and effort that needs to be spent on teaching the writing system leaves students who are learning Japanese behind those studying other languages.

"We have the benefit of teaching something exotic," answers Anne. "It's a subject which the students make a formal application to learn. This gives it a very high status and students feel quite special when they learn it. Additionally, being such a long way from Japan, students in the UK seem to feel really lucky to be able to learn the language."

"Because of Japan's economic and cultural influence, Japanese must be one of the major languages of the world today. For the UK to make the most of our new globalised environment, it is imperative that we produce many speakers of the

most important languages in the world. I believe that diversity is the key to being able to make the most of the opportunities which will arise.

"Learning Japanese gives the students the opportunity to go to Japan and explore it using the country's native language. Japan is an extraordinary place and spending time there always affects our students profoundly. No matter what field they end up studying, having had the opportunity to learn Japanese will always give our students another focus in their lives, and a skill which will forever more set them apart from their peers when applying for competitive positions."

### The daily grind

Anne's day typically begins at 7am. Upon leaving the house at 8am, she enjoys a pleasant drive through the countryside north of Leicester to Keyworth, just south of Nottingham. "On the way to work, I listen to a CD of either Chinese or Japanese, but on the way home I listen to music," she reveals. "I usually teach three to five hours per day and, during lunch time, I answer emails and mark work. Fortunately, I don't spend a lot of time on preparation as I use the workbooks I have developed over the years.

"At 3:30pm I attend school meetings, continue working on organising activities such as school trips or upgrade my current workbook. I go home between 5.30pm and 6pm and, once there, I try not to do any more school work. I cook a meal, do whatever small chores need doing and relax with my husband in the evening – watching TV, reading a newspaper or curling up with a book.

"Now that my children are at university, I have a lot more time and I use a considerable amount of that time to work on things for school, which is a luxury I thoroughly enjoy. At night, when I find myself awake, I plan lessons and think of new and exciting projects.

"This job does seem to take over your life but, after many years of teaching, I still find every day as fresh and exciting as ever, and I credit my students with keeping me young at heart." ●



The Musubi Team with UK Olympic Badminton player, Anthony Clark

## Tying the Musubi

For South Wolds School, Musubi (a type of knot in Japanese) represents an exciting project to develop relations with Japan and the Japanese Olympic Team in the run up to the 2012 Olympic Games in London and educate local children in the language and culture.

"It's using the presence of the Japanese Olympic athletes at nearby Loughborough University," says Anne. "The project is being run by the students

and they have shown tremendous independence and resourcefulness in putting it together in conjunction with both the staff at Loughborough University and Gaynor Nash of the East Midlands Development Agency.

"They are developing the skills they will need to run major initiatives of this kind in the future."

Details of the project can be found at [www.japanese-at-southwolds.org.uk](http://www.japanese-at-southwolds.org.uk)