

# Year in Tokyo

## March 2015 to March 2016

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## Introduction

As already mentioned by Tschumi, previous scholarship reports have already sufficiently discussed the administrative process which has to be undertaken in order to get a visa. Therefore, my mid-term report won't discuss these aspects, but will instead outline how life in the world's biggest city is being organised and must be coordinated from the perspective of the individual. The individual being a graduated foreigner with moderate financial means. Moreover, this final report seeks to sketch on one hand the everyday life in one of the world's biggest cities combined with an analysis of the specific Japanese job-world I was confronted to. Of course, I will also write about learning Japanese. Although I'm writing a report for my "Year in Japan", I chose to exchange "Japan" with "Tokyo" in its title, as my life exclusively took place in Greater Tokyo, a geographic area which is very different from the rest of Japan in terms of population, degree of urbanisation, job opportunities and prices of goods and real estate. Exceeding the scope of a mere report, special experiences in this Japan Year, such as winning the Shinjuku City Shabereon Speech Contest, climbing Mount-Fuji and an extra part about special events and the summer camp of my part-time employer Zippy Kids will be outlined further in the Annex of this report.

### ***Why participating in the one Year in Japan program?***

From April 2013 to February 2014 I was exchange student at Sophia University in Tokyo. During this year I acquired the basic knowledge of Japanese language and culture. However, my experience was strictly limited on student life. The epic figure of Japanese salaryman being married with his company remained a myth with which I was confronted only indirectly through academic readings or tired looking late-night train co-riders.

After returning to Geneva in March 2014 I felt that my Japan experience was incomplete: Not only did I feel having left Japan exactly at the moment I started being able to participate in and understand the social life but moreover, I did not have much interaction with Japanese people, especially regarding work. The SJCC Scholarship Program was the perfect match for my wish to complete my Japan experience. This time, I wanted to experience not only the student life in a very international University of almost exclusively people from upper middle classes or above, I finally wanted to dive into the so interesting life of the everyday-man, the salaryman, the hardworking Japanese who can content himself with little and gives his best every day for his company. Also, I wanted to improve my knowledge of Japanese: Without improving my basic Japanese skills, it wouldn't be imaginable to get a more profound experience of the people and culture.

### ***Planning my Year in Japan and changing my plans after***

Mr. Dudler (chairman of the SJCC scholarship fund until 2015) told me already at the interview, that the SJCC scholarship fund unfortunately lost its main sponsor just the year before I started my Year in Japan. This had as consequence, that my year's scholarship recipients would receive approximately 300'000 Yen per semester, which is a lot of money, however still somewhat less than the language school expenses for one semester. Accordingly, Mr. Dudler explained me meanwhile discussing the budget plan, that the Japan Year had to be funded to 2 thirds by the scholarship recipient himself. As I lacked finding a part-time Job in Switzerland during my last months as student, I decided to work-part time during the first 6 months of my year in Japan. I also decided that I would not work for free in an internship. I need the money for living and after all I'm a highly skilled labour force which according to economic theory should earn significantly more than nothing.

When leaving for Japan, I hoped to find an internship at a company where I could apply my intercultural skills and my academic qualification as a socio-economist who had done almost all his research projects at University about the social, cultural and economic aspects of Japanese society. After skimming through the job-market, exchanging myself with former scholarship recipients and after being refused for internships because of my academic origin, I realised that it would be very difficult to find an internship that would allow me to learn more about work in Japan. Arriving in Japan I was concerned ending up as an office worker in an international company without having real contact with the Japanese job world and moreover, without being able to also apply the knowledge I have acquired after graduating high school (i.e. I was concerned that my 5 years University were for nothing). In my civil service duty, I had already experienced how monotone and boring it is to work on the lowest level in an office despite of being a university graduate. I do not need to repeat this experience, it won't add anything positive to my curriculum.

Thus, I started my year in Japan with mixed feelings. In the first week after arriving, I met Fabien Clerc, director of Swiss Tourism, with whom I had been in contact for my Master Thesis. Fabien Clerc offered me to help me finding an internship and was positive that I would manage to find one. Although feeling the pressure for finding an internship somewhat reduced, I still lacked the necessary financial backup for living in Japan until at least October, the month I would end my Japanese language school. Hence, I started looking immediately for a part-time work. Fortunately I immediately found a part-time job as English teacher in at Zippy Kids, a so called 学童 « gakudou », an afternoon school (cf. infra). Being employed not only as teacher, but also as caregiver, I have deep insights into the Japanese education system. Besides, most of my co-workers are Japanese, as is the language spoken in the school. Having hence unexpectedly acceded to work in a typically Japanese Company, I asked Mr. Dudler whether one year as part-timer could be accounted as half a year internship. This would imply that I would also study Japanese during the autumn semester (and work part-time of course). I would benefit a lot of this situation because on one hand I would have a regular income during one year of around 100'000 Yen per month, which would mean that I could use the scholarship for financing the expenses for the Japanese school, travel and emergency savings. On the other hand, I would have very deep insights into the Japanese education system, not only would I be familiarised how learning English is organised in the school curriculum in Japan, but also would I see how Japanese learn Japanese (the characters), Maths and other subjects, because the children of the afternoon school do their homework at the school. Moreover, I would have a very deep insight into the Japanese education system as such. Besides, I would be able to participate into the company life of a small Japanese Company. These were my thoughts when I wrote to Mr. Dudler, who to my great delight warmly approved my request. My year in Japan was thus suddenly saved and planned...

## **Outline**

Before diving into my various experiences of life and work in Tokyo, let me outline here how this final report has been designed. I will start off by outlining the difficulties of organising life in Greater Tokyo, a very big city with long commuting times in "*Everyday life in Greater Tokyo*". Hence chapter one seeks giving a general introduction to life in greater Tokyo to the unfamiliar reader, taking myself as an example for illustrating the challenge to connect the three crucial points in the life of a student: residence, school and part-time work. If far from each other these points must be connected by means of commuting, a relatively unpleasant and time-consuming activity, at least in Greater Tokyo. Thus, the individual's objective must be to coordinate the three angular points in order to

minimise commuting. Besides working and commuting, “playing” (the undertaking of a free-time activity) is part of life in Tokyo and strikingly different to cities in Switzerland which is why I will consider it in one paragraph as well.

“*Studying Japanese*” sketches the challenge of learning a language which is not based on Latin and has a different writing system (respectively systems). It will also try to give an insight of different approaches for acquiring and evaluating skills in Japanese language. This chapter will also briefly reflect of the business model of a Japanese Language School, which is ready for everything to keep their students paying the school fee.

My experience regarding working in a Japanese company are summarised in “*English teacher at Zippy Kids*”. I think most readers are neither familiar with the organisation of a Japanese afternoon school, a booming business in Japan, nor with the Japanese education system regarding teaching English on elementary school level. Hence I will explain both, the business model “afternoon school” and the system or business (there is a lot of money made by this) “English for elementary school students”, which includes a set of tests and textbooks from different companies designed solely for Japanese children. Of course, I will also outline my own methods and discuss the efficiency of the Japanese education system without forgetting leading the reader through a typical day at my afternoon school.

Finally in “*Escaping the Urban by climbing mountains*” illustrates how I, a nature close Swiss, survive in a “natureless” never-ending urban complex such as Tokyo: I climb mountains, walk in the forest, go to a far place from the centre to get my piece of nature back in to my urban life. In this year I climbed up four different mountains: Taifukuyama, Fuji-San, Takao-San and Tsukuba-San. In the report I will content myself to describe the trail I walked and the mountain’s attractions. The interpersonal-experiences I made by climbing Mount-Fuji can be found in more detail in the annex.

## I Everyday life in Greater Tokyo

Greater Tokyo (see map on page 8) counts roughly 38 million inhabitants. This is not only almost five fold Switzerland's population, but moreover, it is also the world's largest urban economy. For a person originate from a relatively unpopulated place like me (I'm from Switzerland's biggest cities Zurich and Geneva), life in Tokyo is very stressful. The main reason for this are the variables distance and time which are combined in the function "commuting" but moreover are perpetually dictating the city user's schedule. Former must organise his life according to these distances and the time it takes to get there by train. The train takes the importance to a degree that one of the first questions a Japanese will ask you when getting known to you will be "what is your station?" or "Which line do you live on?".

### *Commuting*



**Rush hour;** Left: inside a lightly crowded sobu line; right: people waiting for the sobu line at Kinshicho station

A German say states "Das Leben in vollen Zügen genießen", which means to enjoy one's life by taking full breaths of it (.i.e fully enjoying one's life). However, "Züge" (breaths) not only means breaths it also means "trains", a word which rather corresponded to my situation, for the trains I rode where usually full and riding trains became during the first four months of my year in Tokyo one of the most ordinary experiences and, in terms of time, an important part of my life: On a usual weekday, I would ideally get up at around 6am, do my homework for around 45mins, eat breakfast and take a shower and then get on my bicycle around 7:10/15am. If the traffic was little, I might take the 7:32 train, in the other cases, the 7:36 or 7:40 train. By train I mean the sobu rapid line of course. Rapid, because local trains are usually not reliable, i.e. often run significantly behind schedule. As my commuting was relatively long my daily objective was to minimize the journey. In fact, it would be possible to go to my language school by changing trains once only. However, this would mean to ride the Sobu Local Line until Shinjuku which would make me lose, at least 20 minutes to my fastest way. The fastest way was to get on the rapid train until Kinshichou, there switch on the Local Sobu, but only until Ochanomizu, that is for 4 stops, and



then switch again on the rapid Chuo line (maybe another five or seven minutes of time won) to eventually reach Shinjuku five minutes ahead to the theoretically fastest way to Takadanobaba according to the internet. After having switched trains again in Shinjuku, this time to the Yamanote line, I would thus ideally arrive around 8:40 at Takadanobaba station, hence reach my classroom with somewhat more than 10min before the class would start.

It may sound ridiculous switching trains so many times just to be a couple of minutes faster, but riding train used by commuters is an experience that I wanted to keep as short as anyhow possible. On the top of the fact that commuting was time consuming, the morning trains were also an easy way to get sick: Not only was I exposed to the bacteria of an entire train (and hence being almost assured catching the seasonal flu viruses) also were these trains cooled down to a ridiculous temperature. If in Tokyo outside temperatures often reach an average of 40°C in summer, the trains would be cooled down to something close to 20°C, that is, almost 20°C lower than the temperature to which I was exposed on the bicycle. Of course, if you come from an extremely hot place going into a fridge makes you feel comfortable. However, if you are put into a fridge for one hour, you, or at least me, get bloody cold! Now, in a perfect world, the train rider could of course just put on clothes when feeling cold, however in Tokyo's everyday commuter reality being able to change clothes (i.e. putting on a jumper) after entering a train is, due to the extremely limited space relative the number of train riders, as likely as winning the national lottery. On the top, the temperatures are different depending on the train line one uses... The table below tries to summarise all the discomforts to which I was exposed to during the four months as a morning commuter. It bases itself on a train system running on schedule, which luckily often was the case during the morning for trains from the East going to the Centre. However, if one commutes outside of the commuting hours the connections between the different trains are not always given and the delays often more important.

**Table 1: Morning commuting time schedule**

Time	Train/Station	Degree of crowdedness	Temperature
<b>7:15</b>	Leaving my house by bicycle		
<b>7:36</b>	Inage Station Sobu Rapid Line	Impossible to sit, Stand by being slightly touched by the next person. Usually impossible to change clothes after entering the train.	Pullover necessary in summer
<b>8:10</b>	Kinshichou Station Sobu Local Line	Impossible to sit, usually being pushed against the next person or the door of the train. Impossible changing clothes after entering. Usually impossible reaching my own pockets.	Colder than the rapid line
<b>8:25</b>	Ochanomizu-Station Chuo-Rapid line	Sometimes possible to sit. Usually not very crowded	Pullover not necessary.
<b>8:35</b>	Shinjuku station Yamanote line	Not possible to sit but usually the second least crowded train	Usually the most air-conditioned (i.e. coldest) train
<b>8:40</b>	Arrival at Takadanobaba station		

### ***The Magic Triangle or Coordinating life***



**Map 1: The four Prefectures of Greater Tokyo:**

千葉県 Chiba-Ken, 埼玉県 Saitama-Ken, 東京都 Tokyo-To and 神奈川県 Kanagawa-Ken

Living in Tokyo implies to think very well about the **distance between residence, school and work**, the three pillars for the spatial organisation of a person's life. I will call this trilogy the **magic triangle** by the following. Choosing the right school for studying, finding employment at a reliable company and acceding to housing for an affordable price already is a challenge itself. However coordinating the three places is the key for living in Tokyo and constitutes the actual challenge for a resident of the world's biggest urban agglomeration complex. The next paragraphs will outline in more detail how I designed and reorganised my magic triangle during the first five months of my year in Japan.

### **The choice of Human Academy**

The first choice to make was the one of the language school, for it would be this very language school applying for my (student) visa. The choice of my language school was not related to spatial reflections but instead based on my previous experience as student of that school, for one month during the summer break meanwhile my university exchange (i.e. in September 2013). I knew that the speed of learning would allow working part-time, an experience I wanted to make, because I think every Japanese student works on one point of his life part-time (and besides I needed money for living). However, the main reasons why I chose this language school were the teachers, which have a very human relationship with students, and moreover the fact that the school is rather chosen by

<sup>1</sup> [http://lin-es.com/eria\\_map.gif](http://lin-es.com/eria_map.gif) 29/08/15



Asian than Western people. With my classmates at Sophia University I spoke English during the breaks but what is the point of speaking English when learning Japanese? With many Koreans and Chinese in my class I would have to use Japanese to correspond, we would all benefit of the fact to not speak any common language other than Japanese.

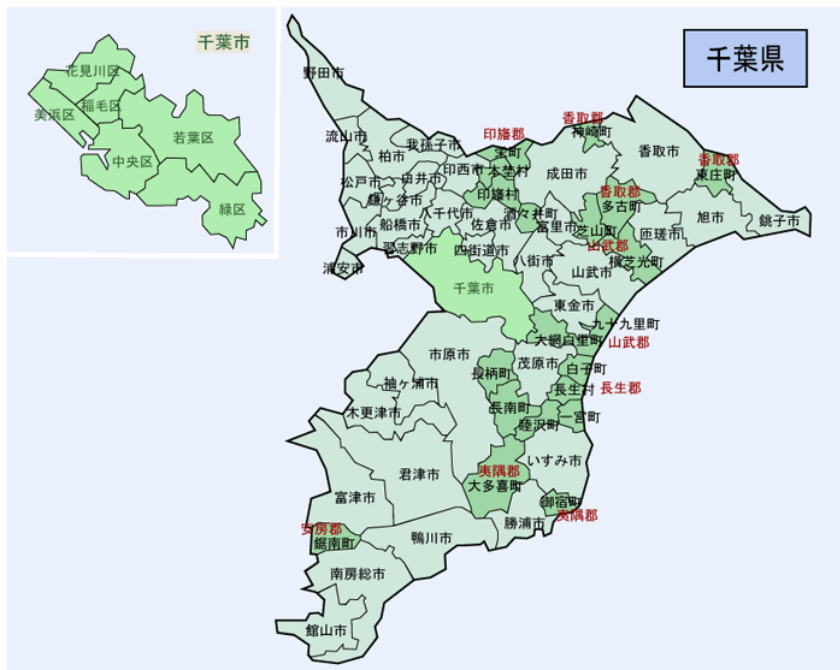
Human Academy Tokyo Campus is Located in **Takadanobaba, Shinjuku City**.

## Finding a part time Job

As Westerner, the easiest way to find a job in Japan is to be an English teacher. There are countless job opportunities in the business “English Teacher”. However, the quality of employment available is very divergent and it is not always easy to distinguish between serious job offers and gaijin traps. The web-site with the most part-time jobs (serious but also unserious) for English speaking people is no doubt “craigslist”. Through craigslist I applied for 3 teaching Jobs and I got 3 offers. The most serious and fastest of the offers, Zippy Kids, was the one I chose as my part-time job. Zippy Kids is a so called 学童保育園 Gakudouhoikuen, i.e. an afternoon-child care club for elementary school pupils, that provides support for homework, snacks and some extras such as regular educational events (i.e. dancing, cf. infra for more) and, in the case of my Gakudou, English classes. I will describe in more detail the work in chapter three.

Zippy Kids, Ueno School is located in **Iriya, Taito-City**, not far from the famous Ueno park. The distance to the Japanese language school is about 9km, which corresponds to an approximately 20 minutes train ride from Takadanobaba to the closest station **Uguisudani**. Hence, school and work are located relatively close one of another.

## Living in Chiba...



Map 2 : Chiba-Prefecture (千葉県) and Chiba-City (千葉市)<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.geonavi.net/georisknavi/html/chiba\\_map.gif](http://www.geonavi.net/georisknavi/html/chiba_map.gif)

During my previous university exchange, I lived in a “share house host family”, that is, in a household shared together with a Nepalese couple and the Japanese landlady. We shared the kitchen, bathroom, everybody had his own room. Since we came along very well, I asked for living in the same household again. My host family in Japan lives in **Chiba-City**, in the **Hanamigawa Ward**. Being part of Tokyo’s suburbs, Chiba has the advantage of disposing of many green spots, being located next to the sea which is largely accessible to citizens and being in proximity to nature and not as overcrowded as the Centre of Tokyo. I often went to the sea by bicycle to watch the sun setting behind Tokyo. Also within the suburban housing the setting sun is enchanting the scenery and making one forget to be part of one of the world’s biggest urban aggregation.

However, my new old home was located very far from the other two angle points in the magic triangle. To reach the language school from Inage station, the closest station from home with rapid train access, the train ride alone took, if there weren’t any delays roughly 60 minutes. From Uguisudani, the station closest to my part-time job, it takes about 45 to 50 minutes by train to Inage. On working days, I would, if including the 15-20minutes bicycle ride to Inage station, in average spend **more than 2 hours on commuting**.

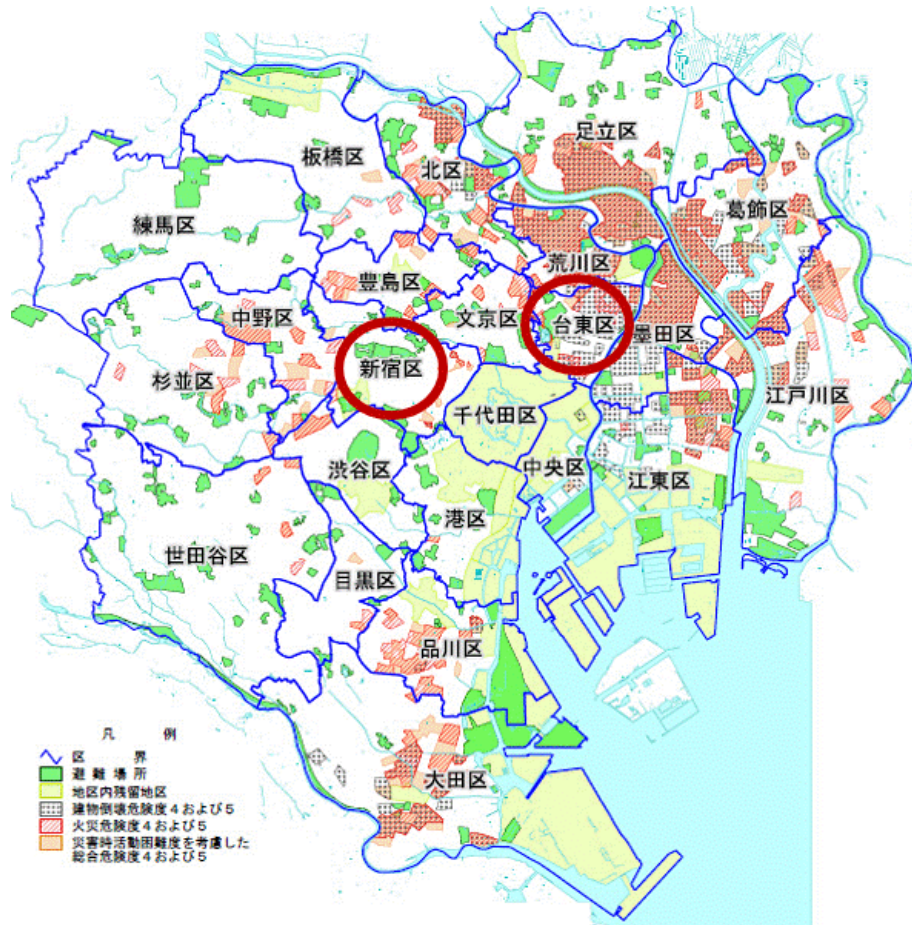


Besides the unfavourable location of the residence within the magic triangle, during my absence a new flatmate had arrived at my home. The one year old Yuina was already born just before I left last time, however, this time, Yuina’s voice was significantly louder and her willingness to sleep significantly reduced compared to last time. Logically all the family life was coordinated on Yuina and so I would dine alone, if arriving after 9

o'clock in the evening. In sum, besides the lack of sleep I had by being kept awake on some days by my new little friend, I also spent significantly less time with my old friends, who were the main reason for choosing this residence. Moreover, I spent more than 2 hours a day on trains. In short, my triangle lost its magic and was rather a cursed than magic triangle.

### ... And moving to Central Tokyo

Therefore I started looking for a new flat. Fortunately, my Korean friend Soungil, a former police officer in Korea who decided to change his life and so came to Japan, also wanted to move and found an extremely cheap flat which we could share together. The place my friend found, a room rented by the the “Soeul House” restaurant’s landlady, usually rented exclusively to Koreans, is located just 10 minutes by walk of the Japanese language school... Eventually my magic triangle became a super-magic line!



Map 3: Central Tokyo with circles on Shinjuku City (West) and Taito City (East)<sup>3</sup>

My current home is hence located in **Shinjuku City, Takadanobaba**, 10 minutes' walk from HAJLS and an approximately 20 minutes train ride from Uguisudani (9km). But enough now with issues of coordination, let's dive into the perspective of experience for life in Tokyo and its suburbs.

<sup>3</sup> Map base from: [http://www.toshiseibi.metro.tokyo.jp/bosai/chousa\\_6/parts/kenen\\_map.jpg](http://www.toshiseibi.metro.tokyo.jp/bosai/chousa_6/parts/kenen_map.jpg)



## “Playing” in Tokyo



**Left:** Drinking together with my friend Songil, **Right:** a nice cappuccino for chatting

There are three verbs which summarise the life of a Japanese person: 働く *hataraku* “to work”, 休む *yasumu* “to rest” and 遊ぶ *asobu*, a term usually misleadingly translated by “play”. However, the meaning of “asobu” englobes any activity being somehow related to free-time, fun and moreover, anything which is neither work nor resting. In Tokyo, there are many opportunities to “play”, however almost all include the consumption of a good or a service and hence implies spending money. Although there is a large scope of activities which are generally considered as “play” in Tokyo, I will only describe two activities of urban play: going to Nomikais and meeting with friends for coffee<sup>4</sup>.

**Nomikai:** The by far easiest way for meeting up with friends is to go drinking together at a so called 居酒屋 *Izakaya*, an intermediate between bar and restaurant designed for getting people drunk at a comparatively low price. Most of the time people are incited to drink by attractive 飲み放題 “*Nomihoudai*”, that is, all-you-can-drink courses, for a limited time, usually 2 hours or 1h30. There is also the possibility to get a 食べ放題 “*tabehouddai*”, all-you-can eat course or a 食べ飲み放題 “*tabenomihoudai*” all-you-can-eat-and-drink course. However, even if only ordering a “nomihoudai” costumers usually have to pay for the so called 漬物 *tsukemono*, a small snack that will be served and must be paid for, whether you order and eat it or not, and often costumers are obliged to order one or two dishes per person. In not few cases, Japanese people and foreigners living in Japan go to a so called 二次会 “*nijikai*”, second round, after the actual nomikai, usually in a smaller group. There are even offers at several izakayas targeting exactly these people going on a « second round » and attracting them with special “all-you-can drink-second-round” courses. The challenge about the second round is to not drink too much and moreover to not miss one’s last train. Then if so, a third round has to be arranged, Japanese often go to sing Karaoke on this occasion, that is, rent a Karaoke-room and sing Karaoke until 5 o’clock of the following day and then go home by the first train.

**Drinking Coffee:** A healthier and more relaxed form of play is to go drinking coffee and chat with friends. I usually do this activity with people I haven’t seen for a long time. Compared to eating out, drinking coffee is extremely expensive. A coffee often costs about 500 yen, which is almost equivalent to a full lunch or half a dinner.

<sup>4</sup> If you are interested in the topic “play” I can forward you a research paper I did with a friend at Sophia University

There are of course different types of coffee shops. One of the most interesting I have been to is the “猫 café mocha” a so called Neko-café, cat coffee. Cat coffees offer proximity to pets, cats, a proximity that most residents of Tokyo will never be able to have because of the very strict housing rules regarding pets. In 猫 café mocha cats hang around all over the two floors of the facility, mostly sleeping and rather uninterested in the humans trying to interact with them. Although in my opinion everything but ideal, for people liking pets this is one of very few ways to have proximity with a pet. Of course the cat coffee has its price, its 200 yen per 10minutes. Going to a cat coffee is no doubt one of the peace-fullest and healthiest ways to “play” in Tokyo and yet it is a perfect caricature of Tokyo’s incapacity to provide with services or goods other than anthropic.

## II Studying Japanese

It may seem self-evident that studying Japanese is at a Japanese language school. However, the process of learning goes far beyond the school and often learning out of school is much more useful than what can be practiced at the school itself. Hence, after outlining the specificities of learning Japanese I will distinguish between learning at a language school and individual learning.

### ***About Japanese language***

Learning Japanese is typically structured into four parts: (1) kanji, (2) grammar and expressions, (3) conversation and listening (4) reading and vocabulary. At the language school I have been enrolled for one year, a lesson usually starts with the Kanji 漢字, that is, the Chinese characters. Every week approximately ten new characters are introduced in the class and put into linguistic context by means of example sentences. Every student usually has to explain at least one character (together with one or two other students) per week. Explaining a character contains explaining the order of writing the strokes and explaining the different ways this character can be read (usually two or three different pronunciations are possible for each character) and of course the different words in which this character is most often used.

For example, I had to explain the character 流. Explaining the writing is too difficult here, so let's move straightaway to the ways of reading and usage in vocabulary: 流 can be read in three different ways: 1) naga 2) ryu 3) ru/lu. Adding the characters れ re and る ru, this kanji becomes the verb 流れる nagareru and means to flow. If ever you go to a modern toilet in Japan, you will certainly be confronted with this character (push a button with that meaning for flushing!). If combined with the word character 行'ko', meaning to go, then the kanji is read 'ryu', together with ko hence 流行, ryuko, which means fashion, trend, vogue, but can also be used for saying that a flu is spreading epidemically, “この風邪が流行がある” means, “this flu is epidemic” (i.e. Spreading like fashion throughout society). 流 can however also be used for names, where it is then usually read “Ru” or “Lu”. If adding the character 歌 « ka », « song », 流歌 it can be read Luca.

Japanese grammar is not very difficult and it is pointless to try explaining it here in one paragraph. The main challenge is, as in other languages, to use the learnt expressions in an appropriate context. Different to the European languages I'm familiar with (DE,FR,EN,IT) in Japanese it doesn't matter very much, WHEN something has been done, but rather WHO did it and with WHOM or for WHOM and whether the one who did it is now reporting what he did or is going to do to a superior or inferior. There are only three tenses in Japanese: Present tense, present continuous and past tense. The verb is mostly changed/flexed by the not by the tense, but on the hierarchy. For example: there are four ways to say “Go to the station” in present tense only. If I or somebody else at the same hierarchic level or lower goes to the station I will say: “駅に行く”(eki ni iku). If the other is a stranger or at the same level but in a formal context I will say “駅に行きます”(eki ni ikimass). If the other is superior to me and its him or her going to the station I will say “駅にいらっしゃいます”(eki ni irasshaimass). Same situation but if I'm reporting to the superior that I go to the station I say “駅に参ります”(eki ni mairimass). The hierarchy and exact relation with the person one is talking to is also reflected by the way men use four different words for saying “I”. With family members or friends I use the term “俺” Ore. Speaking with people don't know



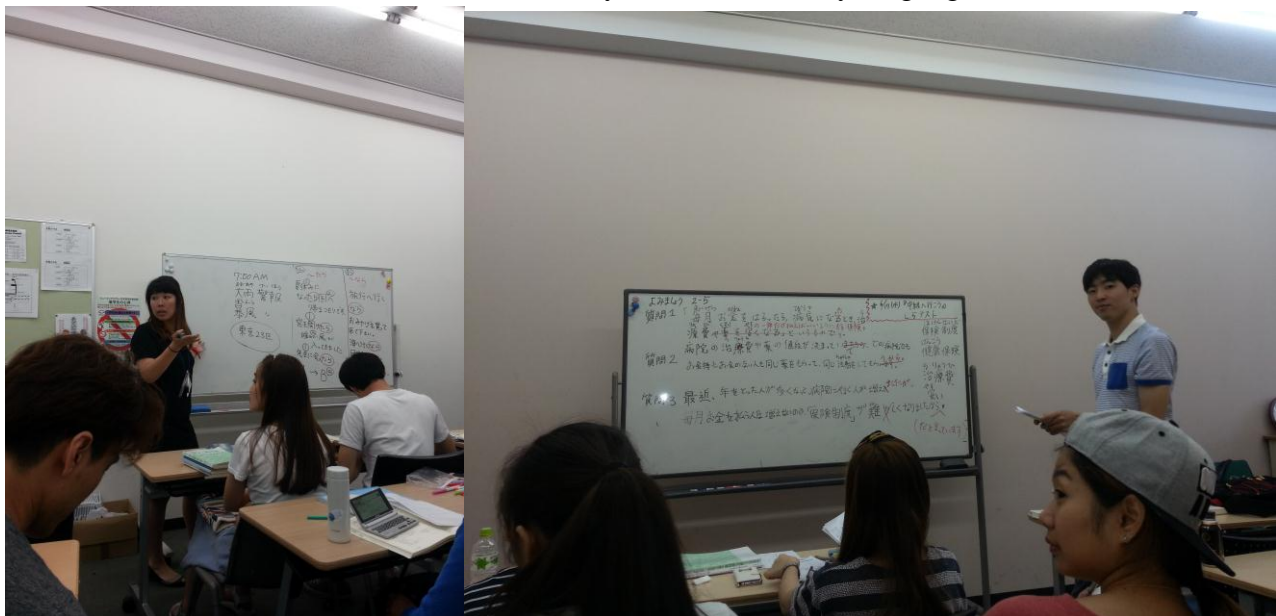
very well but speaking within a casual context, I will use “僕” Boku. Speaking to a teacher, a superior at work or in any formal situation, I will use “私” watashi. Last, if I want to emphasise my inferiority to a superior person, i.e. speaking on the phone to costumers or with the president of my company, I will use “私” watakushi. Note that watashi and watakushi use the same character but are read differently depending the situation. The prefix for addressing oneself to people is also different regarding the situation: in business world, in emails or to talk to higher business partners, the prefix 様 sama is used. For talking to people in the normal polite way, the prefix さん san is used, meaning as much as Mr. or Ms/Mrs. When talking to inferior at work or when talking to younger man than oneself or small boys the word 君 is used. When talking to small girls the word ちゃん chan is used. Chan can however also be used for addressing oneself to close friends, regardless their age.

Conversation is very hard to practice in the classroom. In Japanese class we usually practice model conversations about either work, school or travel, in other words, conversations we anyway have outside the language school but standardised to a degree that makes the conversation unrealistic and uninteresting... In the spring semester our teacher allowed us to improvise and make the conversation more real-life like, in the autumn semester the new teacher wasn't as flexible and we didn't improve at all. Conversation should moreover be practiced with Japanese, in real situations, not in the classroom in model conversations which are so distant from reality that a Japanese person would not recognize them as proper Japanese.

In the spring semester we practiced a lot of reading. We had to read a text in a short time reply to answers and then explain to others why the answer one chose would be the right one. Also we had to learn by heart paragraphs of a short text and so present the text in group. This sounds stupid, but it really helps for remembering the grammar and the new vocabulary used in the text. In the autumn semester we read both new texts and vocabs once and put them beside and so I did not improve at all my reading skills during the last 6 months unfortunately.

### ***About Human Academy Japanese Language School***

I will here clearly distinguish two periods at Human Academy. The spring semester, where I improved a lot my Japanese and the autumn semester, where I didn't really learn much in my language school.



In the spring semester, the class I was placed in and the 先生 Sensei (teacher) which was designated as our head were both above my expectations. Most of my classmates didn't speak English, so we communicated exclusively in Japanese. With Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, Thai, Malaysian, Nepalese, Cambodian, American and me, the Swiss, we were a very international class and bring together cultures of almost around the world. Thanks to the Asian internationality of Human Academy, I could thus get familiarised with different cultures, but moreover, different life trajectories of different countries, getting to know the reasons for emigration of Asian people to Japan and hence also to the stories of their own countries.

As mentioned above, the autumn semester at Human Academy has been a great disappointment. For advanced level of Japanese, the school splits people up into classes according to whether they want to enter a university or whether they want to work. In fact, the actual method in splitting up consists in "university goers" and "other" the "other" are supposed to be looking for a job, however, tourists, just coming to Japan for fun or people having planned from the beginning to stay only one year anyway are also put in these classes. Lacking of members there are only two "shushoku" classes. One extremely advanced, and the other one. I was put into the other one and hence I am in class with people not understanding the basic rules of Japanese, not coming to class regularly (because being here as tourist)... As good the spring semester was and as much as I learned during this time, as bad was the autumn semester and as little did I learn.

### ***About moneygrubbing Japanese Language Schools***

Besides not helping me to improve my Japanese skills, the school also was not honest with me regarding the Visa conditions for spring 2016. Originally signed up for a language course of 1 year and 3 months, Human Academy pretended that everyone would have to study for 2 years if wishing to "graduate" the school. If one leaves the school without "graduating" one has, if not managed to change his or her visa status to something other than "student", to leave the country within 2 weeks. In other words, on the top of changing the rules agreed to previously, the school threatened me that my visa would be cancelled and I would be sent back to Switzerland, if I didn't pay the tuition fee for six months, from April to September 2016. This may be true but is wrong if you found employment and apply for changing your visa status before your school ends. Therefore, I want to **strongly advise anyone going abroad to Japan to not study at Human Academy**. The school is only financially oriented. The teachers are very nice and trying to help, some support you with all the possible consideration one could ask for. However, the core of the school itself is an ice cold business giving you zero support for cases where you stop going to school and even providing you (more or less deliberately) with wrong information regarding your Visa status, just to get your money. **Don't go to Human Academy, and if you go to another Japanese language school be sure that you have written and signed documents which are very clear about the terms of your enrolment.**

### ***About Individual learning***

At an intermediate level of Japanese, the language school is good for practicing, for perfecting one's Japanese. However, most of the learning process is done by oneself. By the individual. My biggest progress, my conversation and listening skills, are without considerable influence of any teacher, it is the fact of working with Japanese children who talk and talk and talk in Japanese no matter whether or not the foreign teacher understands

and who are also happy to explain words, since they are also still learning new words in Japanese. Hence the reason why I am fluent in everyday conversation in Japanese is because I am teaching Japanese children. Besides this permanent opportunity to practice Japanese, three events outside of my Japanese language school helped me improving my Japanese skills.

In June 2015, I won the Japanese Speech Contest of Shinjuku-City. Being in a very chaotic way selected by my language school for representing them at the speech contest, I spent more than one month the draft, redraft, perfect a speech of 5 minutes in Japanese. Writing and rewriting a speech in Japanese considerably improved my skills. I first wrote a speech with the words I knew, then gave it to correct to the teacher assigned to me for preparing me for the speech contest. Both me and the teacher used some new vocabulary for me, which logically I had to learn then. Then I presented my speech to the elite of the school, who found the speech alright however wanted to change everything (that's how it felt at least). I have more than 50 drafts of this speech. By every draft I improved my Japanese.

Besides improving my Japanese, I also won back the self-confidence that I lost during my first stay in Japan. Whatever happens the first European to ever win Shinjuku City's Japanese Speech Contest, usually won by Asians, is me. In Switzerland, it is very hard to try integrating Japanese into a university curriculum other than "Japanese" in the linguistics unit. It's hard to be related to a distant country with a completely different linguistic system. Nevertheless doing so will confront one to many problems and only few people are able to help, and its hard knowing whether one is doing the right or the wrong things since not many people have the knowledge needed to judge. Winning this speech contest compensated me in some ways for the hard way I chose to go and showed me that I did many things right during the last 5 years (see Annex for more information).

Also I took the Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT), level 2, currently called N2. On one weekday, my language school provides specific preparation classes for this Test. However, most of the N2 study must be done by oneself, as it is in the end a matter of comprehension of vocabulary and expressions in written and spoken form. The N2 has a very wide range of expressions and and vocabulary, sometimes for daily conversation, sometimes for casual conversation. I would not say that everything one needs to know for the JLPT is useful, nevertheless I have often learned words which I could use immediately after or which I heard in conversations shortly after learning the words. Although failing the JLPT due to my still insufficient comprehension of the Kanji (the Chinese characters in the Japanese writing system), I think I improved considerably my Japanese thanks to this exam.

A fourth way of progressing in Japanese were the many Job interviews I had in the recent past. I improved a lot my formal Japanese and the way how to write emails. Although in Japanese language school some ways of polite Japanese, the 敬語 "keigo" are practiced, we are not taught the actual formal Japanese used in the business world (for what reason ever). As for daily conversation Japanese, the rule for learning business Japanese best is: learning by doing.

### **III English Teacher at Zippy Kids**

Since April 2015 I am also known as ルカ先生 (“Luca Sensei”), Luca teacher, an English teacher at the afternoon school “Zippy Kids”. My activity as English teacher gives me not only wide insights into the Japanese education system on primary school level, it also makes me familiar with the interesting business “afternoon school” in Japan and introduces me to the Japanese company life. In the following paragraphs I will first explain the “system Zippy Kids” and the services provided by my company, secondly I will emphasise my tasks, my role in this system and the challenges and contradictions I am confronted with daily in this from outside perfect looking system.

#### ***My start at Zippy Kids***

Before describing Zippy Kids as such, I think it will be interesting to describe my start, which will already introduce the reader with the way Zippy is organised and coordinated. As mentioned previously, I found my job as part-time teacher at Zippy Kids through the webpage craigslist, an online platform for part-time and full-time jobs, selling and buying things, finding partners, etc. A friend and current English teacher in Japan told me about this webpage, mentioning however that the range of seriousness of the posts would be very divergent. In other words, one doesn't really know what one has applied for until the job interview or the first day at work. This was not different in my case. I saw a job-post on craigslist with a relatively attractive salary of 1'700yen per hour and three hours every day from Monday to Friday (=25'000Yen a week) and transportation compensation (i.e. the expenses for commuting to work are fully paid by the employer). The post only said that the job would be at a kindergarten facility and that the place of work would be in Irya (the name of an area in Northern Ueno). Ueno is only about 20 minutes from my school in Takadanobaba and was only 40 minutes from my initial residence in Chiba, therefore the location was good for me and the fact to be assured approximately 100'000 Yen per month (approx.. 1'000CHF) by working at only one place was also interesting. And so I applied.

I was contacted already the day after for a job interview. When being contacted I was also informed about the name of the company, Zippy Kids. At the interview then I was told that the children at Zippy Kids Ueno would have had a very bad English teacher previously and consequently now hate English. “How are you going to make the kids participate into your lesson?” I was asked. “Well, I will try to make games and teach them English playfully.” “I also have a guitar and I can sing in English with the Kids.” The Job interview was carried out at the Bunkyo school of Zippy Kids. Although this wasn't the place where I was supposed to teach I already knew that the company was (at least more or less) serious and I could see a bit the setting of the afternoon school. With a bit of luck (in fact the other candidate interviewed refused to work since there was no visa-sponsorship available) I was the one chosen to take up the difficult task at Zippy Kids Ueno and teach English to children hating this very subject. As usual in a Japanese company a new worker is provided with training in the beginning. The training was to be held at Bunkyo school, the same place as the interview. For one week, I assisted to lessons in Bunkyo and was also allowed to teach some of the lessons. I was impressed how the children participated in the lessons, which I thought I would have felt bored about if I was a child.

Although I was not sure whether the staff at Bunkyo was 100% convinced about me, they decided to accept me as new member and send me to the next level, teaching at the chaotic Ueno. I was welcomed very warmly at

Ueno by the staff and also by the children who were invited to ask me questions during snack time: One child asked me: “What is your favourite shape?” (好きな形は何ですか), a small little girl mentioned “Sensei, you are very good looking” (先生はかっこいいです). With this very warm welcome I started my first day with very positive feelings. However, the welcome messages were not yet complete. At the first evening after work, me and the other English teacher Clyde were both given a letter by Nishimura-Sensei, the oldest co-worker, called “Jichan” (じっちゃん= granpa) by the Children. The letter said the following:

Welcome to the Ueno Store! Welcome to you. Because it is the first meeting of the staff and the children and I think that it is tiring by tension, but okay? Although probably very first time of work, tells what important to the fun work with everyone.

You job has become English teacher and child care in general. So you must know that the hourly rate is higher than the only staff other childcare.<sup>5</sup>

For business of childcare in general I do the same thing as Ito teacher.<sup>6</sup>

Must they teach you a good look at her work.

I troubled to remain do not know about the business of child care in general.

Please become possible to be sure.

I do not know that the learn by any number of times in question appointed teacher and Ito teacher.

It would be very most to learn, but children do not me to wait.

Technology also must not have lost the confidence not accompanied.

You might passion and sincerity and power. Please whether believe it.

Love the children parents have a lonely think at work, to protect, it is precious to work to grow.

Please lend please contact you're the hot passion and sincerity and power.

Your voice is the only means of conveying to children your hot passion and sincerity and power.

Please do its best in pure and healthy whole lot smile voice to the big healthy so that it is not lost to the children.

Please believe in yourself to have a hot passion.

Please believe in yourself that hidden a lot of potential.

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<sup>5</sup> This probably meant, that we should be aware of the fact that our wage was significantly higher than the one of the other care givers, i.e. the Japanese staff, at the afternoon school.

<sup>6</sup> Ito teacher = a female Japanese co-worker (hence one who earned less than me)

I believe such a you.

From Jitty<sup>7</sup> (Grandpa)

... And that was only my first day at Zippy Kids. From that day I knew that every day would be interesting with lots of unexpected experiences and I could also experience the Japanese company life with the Senpai Nishimura, who I now knew had a very special status inside my company. By the way, besides this ambivalent welcome at Ueno, another interesting element of my start at Zippy Kids is that I received my working contract only two weeks after starting to teach at Zippy Kids, Ueno.

### ***The system Zippy Kids***



Zippy Kids is a company providing day-care, education and free-times activities to its client's children. It is a so called 学童保育園 "Gakudouhoikuen", afternoon-school for (elementary school pupils), which, at present has three branches, one in Arakawa, one in Bunkyo and one in Ueno (Taito). Although being a very small company all three facilities of Zippy Kids provide with the usual afternoon care for primary school children for such an institution in Japan, that is, Japanese care staff supports the children in their homework, play with them (inside or at the park), the children are provided with an afternoon snack and, if desired, dinner. It is also free to the client to choose whether picking up their children by themselves at the school or asking the school to drop the children by their homes.

For this purpose, a car sharing system has been established and part-time working drivers (in my school all retired men) are hired to bring the children home safely. Home-drop service is available for 6, 7 and 8pm, whereas the time indicated refers to the time when the children enter the car, the exact time when children are actually dropped at home varies according to the number of children in the car, the traffic and whether the parent of the child to be dropped is already at home (if not, the parent will be waited and all other children's drop-off time gets delayed). If desired and if a parent is willing to pick up her/his child, then children can stay until later, theoretically until forever and practically until around 9 o'clock. Besides bringing and picking up the children home from Zippy Kids, the drivers also bring our pupils to their so called 習い事 (Narai-goto), literally translated "learn things" and having the meaning of "extracurricular activities".

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<sup>7</sup> Misspelling of Jichan.



Children at my afternoon school attend many different 習い事, such as swimming, ballet, karate/kung fu, music, painting. On the top of the actual “extracurricular activities” Children are also leaving our afternoon school for other forms of afternoon schools, the so called 塾, “Juku”. Conversely to a Gakudouhoikuen, a Juku is a place designed for the sole purpose of studying. Children are either supervised in doing their homework or taught classes, such as English, Maths. Originally the idea of “Juku” became popular as a place to prepare for the University entrance exams, hence designed for high school students. Recently however, the number of Juku teaching middle school and moreover primary school students has increased and so children are pushed and academically squeezed like lemons already with the young age of 8 or 9 years.

Zippy Kids may be different to other afternoon schools by the supply of English lessons. To show that teaching English is taken very serious, Zippy Kids prepare their pupils for nationally recognised English exams: The 児童英検 “Jidoueiken” exam set and the 英検 “Eiken” exam set. Jidoueiken, literally means “Children English Exam” and thus the Jidoueiken exams are meant to be designed for young learners (but in fact are just very irrational exams with paintings...). The Eiken are exams which are designed for (young) adults, however, my pupils already take these exams successively to the passing of the last exam of the Jidoueiken exam set. On the top of these exams, which are each carried out 3 times a year, another, different testing system, called JAPEC (and carried out only once a year) is also part of the curriculum of Zippy Kids.

Although not knowing much of other afternoon schools, I think I’m not wrong by saying that my afternoon school sends, as others do as well a so called “メールマガ” “mail-maga” derived from “mail-magazine” to the parents of the children. The mail-maga summarises the day that we spent at Zippy kids and illustrates the written part with pictures, that me and my team took throughout the day. The mail-maga also reports what types of snacks have been served and informs about the upcoming events at Zippy Kids. The introduction part of the mail-maga is a general philosophic reflection about all and sundry and is shared by all three afternoon schools. The rest of the mail-maga is separate for each school as we have relatively different programs.

Given these various task to be taken up at Zippy kids, the care-givers at my Gakudou are assigned different roles and different types of people are needed. In my school, we are two English teachers, hence two foreigners, two care-givers (of which one can also be used as a driver) and one co-ordinator, all Japanese. The language used for daily conversation is not English but Japanese.

## **My tasks at Zippy Kids, 保育士 and 英語教師**

I am an English teacher (英語教師 “Eigo-kyoushi”) at Zippy Ueno, moreover, however, I am a care giver (保育士 “Hoikushi”) and trying to support our team and moreover the children as much as I can. The tasks I am assigned to besides teaching English are officially to organise the snack time and to write the “mail-maga” the daily “magazine” we send to the parents of the children every day. Besides I have to support the team in whatever we are doing that day, so for example if the event is to make a puzzle, I help the children making a puzzle, if there is sportsday and a child “injures” itself, I will give a cool pack or put a plaster around the wound. Until autumn 2015 I was often asked to bring the kids to the nearest playground, located only a five minutes’ walk (for children 5 minutes) from the afternoon school. After leading them safely to the playground, I play with the children and make sure everyone is fine. Another task I’m helping is the check-in and check-out system of the school. Most of the pupils have a card which serves to confirm virtually whether they arrived or left Zippy Kids afternoon school.

If the card is touched on the sensor, the parents of the child who touched its card are sent an email informing them that their child has arrived at or left from our school. Although this seems to be a relatively simple way to make sure that all the children are safe, it is not easy to supervise that really everyone who arrived touches his/her card. For example, there is one little first grader, who always forgets touching her card at the sensor, so if one day I or another Sensei doesn't remind her to do so, she will arrive and leave without touching and her parents will be very worried...

In the mail-maga, I summarize my English lessons, in Japanese language of course. The positive aspect of writing the mail-maga is that I get free Japanese writing practice and even get corrected by the coordinator in case my writing is not understandable. The backside of the mail-maga is that I automatically do overtime work. I barely have time to start writing before six o'clock (=the time my duty ends) and often my colleague needs to write first, because he has to go to his second part-time job. "write first" means, that only one person can write the mail-maga at once, since there is only one computer where this mail-maga can be written.

Hence I usually can start writing only around 20 past or even half past six. In this time I play with the children. Together with the children I invented a set of games. Sometimes we do "sumo wrestle", what the children don't know is that I'm doing a mix between sumo and the traditional Swiss sport "schwingen/lutte". I also do different versions of catch-me if you can games and help the children flying to the moon, etc. I noticed that my relationship with different pupils improved a lot by playing with them after the English lesson. Now most of them already participate in English because they like me. And they like me because they appreciate playing with me. Recently I was asked by first-graders whether they could answer questions to Kimipyon. So sometimes I teach indirectly English to my colleague's students.

There are also a set of additional tasks which are put up on us English teachers. One of this tasks was to write new year cards for all members of our afternoon school: a task shared by all teachers, and, and this task was only for me and my colleague, we also had to write all the new Year cards for the "next Zippy", that is, the families of the children entering our afternoon school from April 2016.

## **A typical day at Zippy Kids**

I usually arrive at Zippy Kids 20 minutes before my duty starts (i.e. I usually arrive at 2:40pm). After I arrived I start preparing my white board according to the length of my lesson and the participants at that day. I only know who is attending my lesson after I arrived, because according to at what time the lesson has been set, some students have not arrived yet or have left our place already to go to a juku or narai-goto. Parents are also free to spontaneously withdraw their children for one day, one week or some months. I am usually informed about that after the child left. Therefore, it is hard to prepare a lesson in detail, because I literally don't have any clue what will happen on the next day.

If I am lucky, the children arrive a bit after 3 o'clock, so I will have enough time to prepare my lesson. If the children arrive early, me and my colleague Mack (name changed) have to manage the Snack time, that means, we have to distribute the snacks, the children can always choose out of a couple of snacks, and we have to decide of the day's leaders (ninshoku), who give the command to start the meal with a loud "let's eat". We usually start English straightaway after the children have finished their snack. If there is a small "event" only we might have 45 minutes of English, if there is a big "event" we will only have 30 minutes per lesson or no English at all. Sometimes I get 1 hour per lesson. However, this doesn't mean that I actually do a complete 1 hour lesson because usually children have to leave the lesson early because they go to a juku or a naraigoto OR they have been at a

juku or naraigoto and come back to Zippies and hence arrive late for my lesson. I teach two English lessons. Each consisting out of between 2 to 8 students depending the day and time the English has been set. During the same time, Mack also teaches two classes, however, as I have been attributed the third and fourth graders, Mack has all the first-graders and as we split the second graders, Mack's classes are much bigger, due to the high number of first-graders in our afternoon school.

Most of the time, there is a so called "Event" at Zippy Kids. At events, we do something that we usually don't do at Zippy Kids: children can play puzzle, make candles, write cards, make by themselves some accessories, play with carton, play dodge ball, cook, "barbecue" sweet potatoes in the park, etc. Besides these ordinary events, there are also seasonal events, such as make "new year mochi", celebrate Halloween, celebrate Christmas, water battle, color painting, snow wars. There is also a dance-teacher coming to Ueno, once in a month and the children get dance lessons. There usually is at least one event per week, and Wednesday is traditionally the event day. During this event time, we also bring the children to museums sometime. So far we went to the Children Library in Ueno, the baseball museum in Suidobashi, the Museum of Natural history in Ueno park, a honey shop in Ueno, the fire station in the neighbourhood and the police museum of Tokyo Prefecture.

If there is no event, and if it doesn't rain, then the children are usually brought to the close by playground, misleadingly translated by the word "park" for about 45 minutes. Sometimes children who are not in English (there are four classes and only two can be taught at once) go to the park, in order to create a more study-friendly environment for those having English. However, this is only possible, if those who don't have English, have already finished their homework, which, unfortunately, is only rarely the case outside the holiday period.

Ideally, the last English lesson ends at 5:30pm and after that a so called "帰りの会" Kairi-no-kai "Going home assembly" is held. At the Kairi-no-kai, which is moderated by the ninshoku, the two leaders, which have been decided at snack time (hence those arriving later will never moderate a kairi-no-kai), children are asked to tell in front of everyone what they have liked today and what they didn't like that day. This kairi-no-kai is in my eyes very important for us teachers and care-givers since children evaluate indirectly our work. Sometimes my English lessons are found as the thing most liked of the day by children. Sometimes children complain that they couldn't go to the park or that there wasn't an event. Moreover, I like the kairi-no-kai because it is a sort of coming together and discussing the day in group, children can express their opinion in front of others and have to listen to what others say from first graders to fourth graders.

## ***The Product "English for Children" in Japan***

The Japanese education system makes a big deal of teaching English early. For this purpose, the education system has designed English exams for elementary school pupils, literally called 児童英検 'jdoeiken' "Children English Exams". Three Jidoueiken exams are usually thought to be passed by elementary school pupils: Bronze, Silver and Gold. An exam consists of 50 questions and is passed if the child reaches a score of 80% or above. As I haven't taught the Silver and Bronze exams, I am most familiar with the Jidoueiken Gold exam. The exam is composed of different parts and the vocabulary used is completely random.

The next step in learning English in Japanese education are the so called 英検 Eiken "English Exams" starting from level 5 (5 級) up to level 1 (1 級). By the way, the Eiken tests are English language exams designed by Japanese for Japanese. Only few institutions outside Japan, and only in the United States of America, officially

recognise the Eiken as certificate of English language ability. Considering these facts, one gets the feeling that this exam is rather designed for reassuring Japan as a country from its self-feared lacking of internationalism than for actual educational purposes. Eiken are designed for young adults and adults, however, my eight and nine year old children at Zippy kids who have passed the gold level, keep straight-away going in the English exam road and take the Eiken exams.

The challenge for an English teacher in this exam-oriented education system is to teach English. Yes, you are reading correctly, it is very hard to teach English as English teacher because of the importance and the frequency of exams, which, in my opinion, are not systematic tests of English proficiency. Most of the English-time in my afternoon school gets “burned” for preparing for exams which don’t actually test English knowledge but confront you randomly with new vocabulary. One is hence forced to teach a lot of use- and contextless vocabulary in a very short time to the poor little first graders... Logically there is no time to teach anything else than what is tested by the exams. When I arrived at Zippy kids, although knowing the alphabet only few of my students were able to actually read and nobody was able to write more than his or her own name without making 2’000 mistakes per word. The reason for this is that the jidou-eikens are mainly listening tests. Whether one can write and read, or not, doesn’t matter. Hence the previous teacher, no doubt lacking of time and being pushed to make the students pass the exams, focused on the vocabulary and the listening and did not teach at all reading. However, for passing any of the eiken exams, reading is mandatory. Most Japanese are no doubt not aware of the over-paced learning system and so expect their children to pass every exam taken. But by doing so, their children are again only taught how to read, speak and listen for the exams. In comparison to the jidou-eiken, the eiken is in my opinion much better and consists in an actual level check of English, however still constitutes, due to the pace one is expected to pass these exams, an ample hindrance for learning English to Japanese children and eventually to the Japanese society which will never reach a good level in English if continuing on the exam-path. Children learn English best, if they are interested in it and if they are incited to use English also outside the classroom. Teaching children how to read a letter written from an adult to an adult is not interesting for children and will surely be forgotten very quickly. Teaching children reading with a book of the adventures of a mysterious animal, which is behaving human but still sufficiently different to adults for allowing children to identify with, is much more effective. In the next paragraph I will provide with more information about teaching methods for an English teacher in the framework of a Japanese afternoon school

### ***Teaching Setting and Methods at Zippy Kids***

The children at my school are between 6 and 10 years old, from 1<sup>st</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> graders. The children I teach are mainly third and fourth graders but also some second graders. All first and most of the second graders are taught by my dear colleague Mack. As an important part of the children at Zippy kids are first graders, Mack’s classes are much bigger than mine. Accordingly, Mack has been given a teaching space which is used uniquely for teaching English. I can teach in the other teaching space, which is also used by other children for doing homework. At present I usually have one table only for all my students and hence the lesson style takes inevitably different shapes to Mack’s classes, whose lessons are organised as an actual class, whereas mine is naturally organised like a seminar. As I explained previously, an English lesson takes usually about 45 minutes. However, there are also many days, where a special event takes place at the afternoon school and so the time for English is shortened or sometimes even cancelled. According to the time when English is set the number of students or the students attending my

lesson change. As the time-tables are decided day by day, this means that I have to improvise a lot and come up with many original methods in order to make tired children participate to the lesson. Teaching to children at an afternoon school, where if not being taught English children were free to play is not always easy and I can understand children who would prefer to play than study. Therefore I must be armed with humour, games and tricks to make my students forget how hard they are actually studying. Besides my natural talent as entertainer, my most powerful teaching weapons or methods are my guitar and a doll called “Kimipyon”.

### **Kimipyon my friend and helper**

Kimipyon is a doll of approximately the size of my hand. I bought Kimipyon when going walking in Chiba Prefecture in Kimitsu-City (therefore Kimi-pyon). Lacking of elements to tame my wild Zippy Kids, I introduced Kimipyon to my two classes. Swiss German readers of this report might know “Klibi und Caroline”. Klibi is a comedian whose show consists in conversations with his doll Caroline. Caroline is like a little girl, a bit naïve, always saying what she thinks (and maybe some members of the audience also think but wouldn’t dare to say) and therefore funny. As a child I loved to listen to Klibi and Carolines adventures and hence I decided that Kimipyon would be sort of my Japanese Caroline. Contrary to Caroline, Kimipyon is a guy, or his gender is not really well known. He is fascinated for English, however, he forgets very quickly what he learned and hence his replies to my questions are usually wrong. Like Caroline he has a very high-pitched thrilling voice and also makes some stupid remarks. On the top, he is more impatient than my most impatient students. In other words, Kimipyon is the most imperfect of my students, however, extremely motivated. From the very first day, Kimipyon was loved by my students and also from the very first moment, immediately corrected by my students whenever making mistakes. In other words, without needing explaining the rules of the new game, my pupils spontaneously took part. I often ask Kimipyon to participate in the lesson when conjugating verbs in English, when reading and more generally for repeating previous lessons.

Another “application” of my dear friend Kimipyon is when I do single lessons (with only one student). In two of three cases the children interpret extra lessons as punishment or as “you are stupid” tag on their head. One student went to cry in the toilet when hearing that on that day she would be put aside for English, another one became violent but eventually settled down however by keeping crying very loud... So, for mastering this situation, I just started the lesson with Kimipyon, who, regardless whether the child cried or not, tried very hard but with very little success to solve my English problems. Moreover, Kimipyon’s mistakes were so evident that the student would think that herself or himself was largely superior to him and would not make such a stupid mistake... after maybe five minutes the student will more or less naturally join the lesson and help me correcting Kimipyon and eventually I would be able to ask the student directly to solve the problem without using Kimipyon at all but by having a good and entertaining man to man or man to woman lesson.

I also use Kimipyon for asking questions in English to my students or for making students asking questions to Kimipyon in English. Recently I even the vocabulary about “family” by means of kimipyon: I drew equally looking Kimipyon’s on the white board (see picture previous page) and then told the children that in a dolls family they would all look alike but that Kimipyon would know very well who is who, they just needed to ask him. My students asked impatiently and enthusiastically and immediately learned and remembered not only which doll was who, but also their designation in English (father, mother, brother, sister, cousin, grandfather, grandmother, uncle, aunt).

The power of dolls is often underestimated I think. They can really be useful in education!

## Learning by Singing

Besides Kimipyon another tool for taming my Zippies is my guitar and my voice. My lessons always start with a song, because I realised during my training time that all the children of the entire school suddenly became quiet when a song was sung. Therefore I searched online for suitable songs for my two classes. After a very short night with lots of research about nursery rhymes which on one hand are easy to sing but on another interesting and not too easy I decided to sing a song called “the rainbow song”<sup>8</sup> and another one “gummy bear”<sup>9</sup>. The second song is not actually a song with an educational purpose, but in fact it is a funny song of a gummy bear with electronically changed voice. The song was, I think, a very successful buzz on youtube. It wasn’t actually the song I wanted, but I thought, it suited somehow to the class with the most advanced level: they were all very energetic and wanted to jump around and make, just like the little funny gummy bear in the song. With that song they could leave some of their wildness out and start to focus their energy on English... At least that was my theory

When I explained to my pupils my plan to sing a song every time before English, the reactions were ambivalent. Whereas the younger class seemed to accept what their teacher told them to do, the older pupils seemed to be bored or at least not at all interested in the song: They hated English and I was the current medium of English. Not only the song, but also the lesson in general did not to be appreciated at all by my students. In this difficult situation, my Japanese co-worker, who at the time also ran the whole school at Ueno helped me very much by keeping telling me that actually she could see that the students liked me very much and were enjoying the lesson (but yet without showing it). So I kept going on. However, I thought, that the song might not be suitable for that class and that it might be better to not sing a song at all. Yet, the day after I thought my song project had failed my pupils suddenly asked me “but sensei, don’t we start the lesson with a song?” “Well, you didn’t seem to like it very much the other day” was I intended to say, however kept quiet and played the song. The following days I kept thinking of playful English lessons for that “gummy bear” class and we practiced the song and the children seemed to take part the more and more enthusiastically into my lesson. The fascination of the children for the song and the rest of the lesson was so strong that in my second week in Ueno all of my students stood up at the kairi-no-kai and said that the most fun of the day would have been to sing the gummy bear song with me. Of course it was not only the gummy bear song that made the children accepting me as their leader, however I think that it was an important cornerstone for building a relationship with my students and for changing their attitude towards English, which after a couple of weeks only, had reversed.

Singing is not only useful for getting the attention and appreciation of one’s pupils’, it can also be a very powerful means for teaching vocabulary. For passing the Jidoueiken Gold, for which I had to prepare my younger students, it is crucial to know the words “when, who, where, which, what, how, how many, how tall, how many people, why, how much”. First I tried to teach them these words, however, they were not able to remember for a long time. One day during the lesson, I had the idea that we could sing the words in order to remember them. And so I played some simple and bright cords which can be repeated for as long as a song has to be and sang the words first in English then in Japanese. The children immediately liked the song and now all remember these words. Better even, as the children not participating in that class are making homework just on the desks next to my

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eI46AbAWzLw>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=astISOttCQ0>



lesson, they also remembered the song and now almost everybody knows these words already.

### **Finding the right books for reading**

As I have mentioned previously, one won't get far by teaching children below 10 years how to read with learning materials designed for students of 14 years old or above. Moreover, the challenge is to find reading materials designed for children who learn English as a foreign language. English speaking children know all the tenses already and hence can read more difficult books, grammatically speaking. My students don't master all the tenses yet, they are supposed to know present, present continuous, simple past and future tense. A book written in passive, present perfect, past perfect and with many very common but not basic English expressions is NOT useful for my pupils. Even if my students had the same level of reading as American or British children, they wouldn't understand the grammar and vocabulary of a book written for American or British children. With these thoughts I asked the people enabled to decide for English of my company for extra reading materials. My request got refused. I should use the material for preparing the children to the exam in order to make them pass the exam. Besides, if I really wanted then they would send me English books for (American) children.

In a first term I tried to teach reading without a book, just by games with words and integrate some problems of the exam into the English lesson. However, my students forgot very quickly the words they learned and forgot how to read letters as soon as we would stop practice every day, which happened when I started to prepare my students more specifically for the eiken exam. Initially against the actual will of my company, I went to Tokyo's second biggest bookshop, "Kinokuniya". The 8<sup>th</sup> floor (out of 10) is specialised in language learning. In this big bookstore, a tiny little shelf is specialised for children's English and in this shelf one small sector has a few books which are designed for (Japanese) children learning reading in English as a foreign language. Luckily I found two book series, that suited the level of my English classes. On one hand there is the series of "Guruguru and Gorogoro - The kitten brothers" for young children not yet mastering very well the tenses (mainly written in present tense), in easy English, short sentences and with many illustrations. A book written by a Japanese author. This book is perfect for children learning for the jidoueiken gold exam or the eiken 5kyu exam. On the other hand there is the book series "Cheburashka", a book about an animal named Cheburashka and his friend Gena. The story is originally written by the Russian Edward Upetsky but has been translated to English for learning English. The story is written in past-tense and uses a somewhat advanced vocabulary, however without using an extremely common and for the exam meaningless and too specific English. It is a perfect book for reading practice with children studying for the eiken 4kyu. Moreover, both book series are designed for children and within the scope of the imagination of a child. All of my students have improved considerably their reading skills by reading in English, not only for having read but by getting interested into the adventures of Cheburashka and Gena, by being amused of Guruguru and Gorogoro's daily challenges. Sometimes children even ask me to continue reading Cheburashka instead of playing a game during English time. Children should learn to read English through stories and situations that capture their attention, that make them interested in learning more, that don't make them feel to have to learn but being able to learn English.

### ***The myth of the Japanese company – Differences to previous job experiences***

The place I have worked longest in my life is Zippy Kids, Ueno. My previous job experiences in Switzerland are limited to the Civil Service Program of the Swiss Confederation (6 months at Greifensee-Stiftung, a small NGO in Zurich, 1 month at an old people's residence and 6 months at the international office of University of Geneva). It

is thus hard for me to actually compare Swiss company life with Japanese company life. Further a reader might argue, being an English teacher doesn't go beyond the expat experience in Japan and hence is not actually an experience in the Japanese jobworld. Although my part-time job company is not what people usually imagine of an internship in Japan, I would argue that it is closer to typical Japanese company life than a very international company in Japan, where other scholarship recipients may have worked. First, the language spoken with my colleagues (besides Mack of course) is Japanese. Although the rules of the company regarding dress code, overtime-work and attending the *nomikais* are extremely easygoing, the identification with one's workplace and the time spent with one's colleagues of work is very strong. *Nomikais* are organised (i.e. sponsored drinking) every two months by our president and in March 2016 we will all go on a business travel to Taiwan (sponsored by Zippy kids). Things that the Swiss companies I have worked at previously would never do.

What is often thought and said of the Japanese work-world is the so called "life-time employment", the fact of receiving a working contract without end, not planning to ever leave the company to which one is practically married. Fact is however, that in Japan, flexible work has become very common, in 2014 flexible workers represent 35% of the Japanese working force, most of them part-timers paid per hour (see von Felten 2015). In my company, only three employees have full-time employment without ending date. At Ueno, only one member has full-time employment, however, on a one-year contract. All the others (4 out of 5 members) work part-time. Although I have to relativize the case of Zippy Kids, a very particular and small company, not representative for the average Japanese company, I know through friends that companies in trading, translating also have fixed-term contract workers, who can be hired or fired relative the economic circumstances of the company. In sum, there certainly is this phenomenon of "life-time employment", people working all their lives for the same company, but there are also other systems of working fixed term or part-time which is just as common as life-time employment.

As the reader familiar with Japan might know, it is common in Japan to call each other by the family name. Hence, even if your co-workers are in some way also your best friends, you will keep calling them Tanaka and Yamashita instead of Kentaro and Miho. However, what many Western reports forget to mention is that the prefix to the name changes regarding your relation with the other. If you are really good friends with your co-workers, you will call them Tana-chan or Yama-chan, in other words, use a short form of the last name, a nickname, and with the prefix "chan" which originally is used for girls, however, is also used for addressing really good friends regardless their gender. Hence, although being formal at the workplace and calling one's colleagues Mr. DuPont and Ms. Meier, this formality is forgotten at the *nomikais* where everybody becomes a "chan". Eventually, I think that the difference between Japan and Switzerland is not that big regarding working colleagues. In Switzerland one might call everybody, even the CEO by the first name, however would people go altogether drinking with each other and start using Nicknames for addressing each other?

A striking, however relatively unimportant difference to Switzerland is the way of being paid the salary: at the last day of the month where we work, our manager gives us a small paper envelope with the exact amount of the salary in cash. In Switzerland I used to get paid delayed and of course by bank transaction. However, I think that bigger Japanese companies also have the bank transaction system. No doubt, this depends on the company.

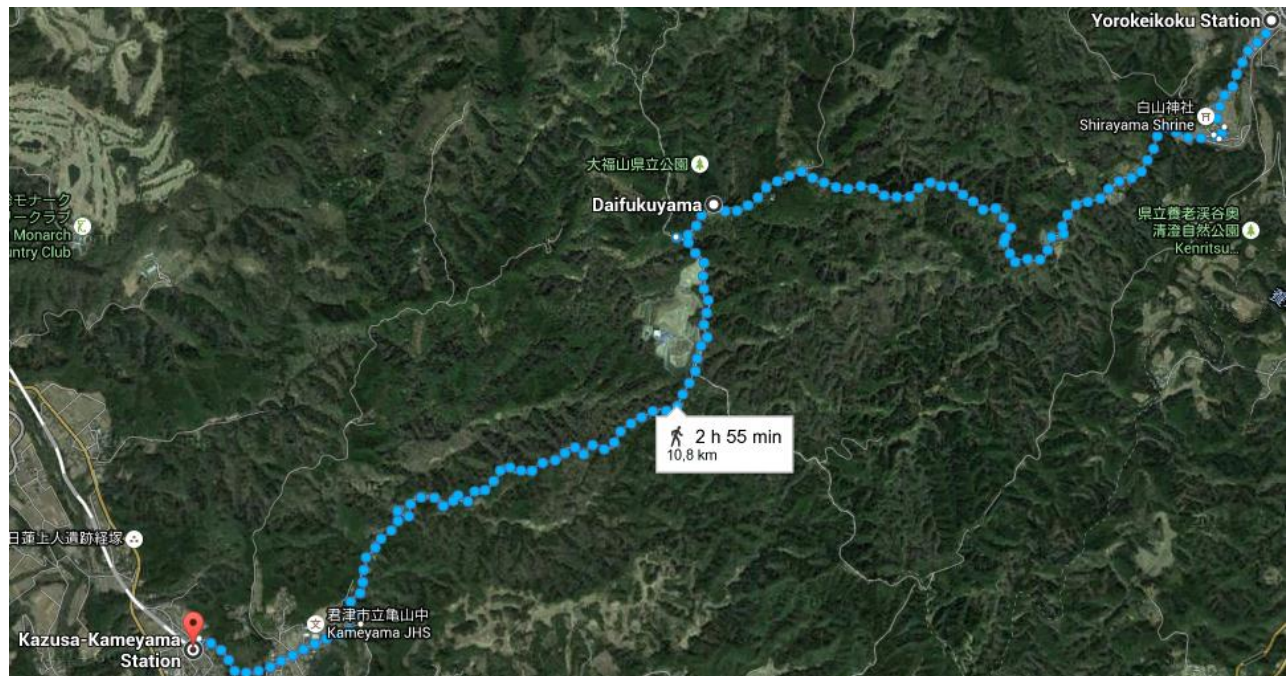
So, what are the differences between a small Japanese company and a small Swiss company? The only really small Swiss company I have worked for was Greifensee-Stiftung, a small NGO-like company managing the environmental protection issues of a lake in Zurich Prefecture called "Greifensee". Besides calling each other by one's first name and receiving the salary paid by bank transaction, I can't think of any striking differences. In the

end, a small company always fights for surviving and for doing so, all its employees need to work with all their heart for the company and hence be convinced to do something good and identify themselves with the company.

## IV Escaping the urban by Climbing Mountains

In my Year in Japan travelled three times outside of Tokyo for vacation. However, what gave me most the feeling of holidays was climbing (walking) up mountains in Tokyos surroundings, Taifukuyama, Takaosan and Tsukubasan and of course climbing up Mount Fuji (Fuji-San). I will sketch my experiences and provide with climbing tips for these mountains in the following.

### 05/15 大福山 *Daifukuyama, Chiba*



My first walking experience in Japan was the so-called Big-Luck-Mountain “Daifuku-yama”, with 292m one of the highest hills in Japan’s flattest Prefecture, Chiba. Together with 3 friends, I walked from Yoroikeikoku Station to Katsusa-Kameyama-Station, a walk of somewhat more than 10km but moreover with a lot of green and few people, which was exactly the experience me and my friends were looking for. When going for this walk, I was still living in Chiba (which is located a 1h30min train ride the two stations), just as one other of my friends and the other two absolutely wanted to walk in Chiba. In this context I would say, the excursion we did was perfect.



**Daifukuyama:** Beautiful Landscape in a forest-surrounded environment

Most of the walk was on small (carless) streets surrounded by forest, hence anybody who can walk 10km is able to do the trail we did. On the way up there are also several places with benches and tables where groups can eat their pick-nick, as people in Japan do just as we do in Switzerland. Best is to go on this walk with sufficient food and water for the walk as there are no selling points on the mountain itself. No doubt, Daifukuyama is perfect for the spring and fall season.

### **08/15 富士山 *Fuji-San, Gotemba (Subashiri)***







**Above the clouds:** The view from Fuji-San and the way there up to

The only actual mountain I climbed in Japan was Fujisan. Climbing Fujisan will be an unforgettable experience. Maybe as Swiss it is somewhat less extraordinary than for other nationalities... Fujisan is a mountain after all, less high in altitude than the Matterhorn but yet considerably higher than the mountains I have been to previously (I haven't been to Switzerland's highest mountains yet). To anyone wanting to climb Fujisan I can only recommend to well plan the entire trip and to stay one night either in one of the accommodations on the mountain or in its surroundings. I climbed Fujisan together with four friends and because of running behind schedule from the very beginning we eventually had to spend a night in an accommodation on mid-way. The most impressive part of climbing Fugu-san was watching the sunset from the very top of the mountain and then the sunrise from the 7<sup>th</sup> station. The interested reader will find a more detailed report of my Fujisan adventure in the annex.

### **9/10/12 高尾山 *Takao-San Tokyo's Uetliberg***



**Beautiful:** The view from Takao-San



I climbed the closest mountain to Tokyo's centre three times. In September, October and December. As Daifukuyama, the small hill in Tokyo's West is gently called "mountain" by Tokyo's citizens despite its rather moderate height of 599m. People familiar with Zurich city may compare Takao-San with the Uetliberg, also not an actual mountain but entitled as such. Moreover, both mountains are visited frequently on the weekends as recreation area and counter-region to the over-urbanised Tokyo (with the slight difference that Japanese "climbers" dress up as if they were about to climb at least a Fujisan).

Anyways, climbing Takao-San is a pleasant one-day activity which, to a certain extent, relieves you of the feeling of being constantly imprisoned in what some academics (e.g. worral) call the urban. Also, the landscape is changing in function of the seasons and the landscape as well as the view from the top of the "mountain" is beautiful. For people disliking sports or not being able to climb there are cable cabins from the bottom to almost the top of the mountain (just like the "Felsenegg-Bahn" at the Uetliberg). There are also 6 different trails/routes for going up the mountain, different in difficulty and length. I suggest trail number 6 for climbing up and 4 for going down, the landscape view is very nice on these trails.

## 02/12 筑波山 Tsukuba-San



Tsukuba-San, 870m OSL, is no doubt the highest mountain that can easily be reached from Tokyo Centre and that I would recommend for a one day trip. Although being in Ibaraki Prefecture, that is, not a neighbouring Prefecture of Tokyo, the mountain can be accessed easily and in comparatively little time: There is the Tsukuba-Express from Akihabara, a direct train to Tsukuba-City, from where a direct bus to Tsukuba-san, a so called shuttle bus (for 510 yen, a bit expensive), runs twice in an hour. For climbing up the mountain one can choose out of three trails (see map below). Me and my friend, we took the blue trail for climbing up and the orange for going down. For readers who don't want or are not able to climb nevertheless want to have an outstanding view all over Ibaraki, there is a cog railway (along the blue trail) and cable cabins (starting point of the skyblue trail).



**A wonderful view:** Ibaraki-Ken from the top of Tsukuba-San

For two sportive Swiss men in their late twenties climbing up from the bus stop takes roughly 80 minutes. Although never being far from the cog railway and using a men-built path, the path is challenging (the slope in particular) and leads through nature-landscape, hence really gives the feeling of having left the world's biggest Metropole. As we climbed in February, there were few passages with some snow. However, every Swiss has been confronted to more snowy trails, and hence doesn't need the Himalaya equipment that Japanese are using for climbing up. Throughout the year one can climb Tsukuba-San with good walking shoes. On the top of the mountain there is a picnic area, with a wonderful view of the scenery. For going down, we chose the purple and orange trail. It took somewhat longer than going up, perhaps approximately 2 hours (we didn't time for walking down). The scenery on these trails is nicer and with more variations than on the blue trail. The spot with the best view and ルカのおすすめナンバーワンスポット definitely is the view from the top of Jotaisan-Sancho 女体山 (the picture above with the best view), a must if you decide to climb Tsukuba-San. Important also for a one day-trip is to be aware of the early schedule of the shuttle bus: The last bus leaves from Tsukuba-San on 20 to 5 on weekends and public holidays. Best would no doubt be to stay at an onsen close by the mountain for the night and return to Tokyo on the previous day, or rent a car for one day to be less bus-bound in the schedule planning. But even if going by public transport and for one day only Tsukuba-San is a wonderful mountain to climb for any temporary or permanent resident who appreciates to escape the life in the 30million urban agglomeration, and take a deep breath of clean air before continuing the urban adventure again ;-)

## Afterword – Three Years in Kumamoto



**Future:** Where will I go next?

Writing these last words, I am also fully engaged in the so-called 就活”Shukatsu” activities. 就職”Shushoku” means work, employment, 活動”katsudou” means activity. 就職活動”Shushokukatsudou” employment-activity is usually translated with “job-hunting” and describes the fact to be actively searching employment. Hence to be searching for a job 就活”shukatsu” is the short and commonly used form of the term. Searching for a job in Japan is much easier for foreigner than for Japanese, yet also foreigners can’t get around the rigid framework of the Japanese recruiting system:

In Japan, most positions for new jobs within the frame of stable (full-time) employment start on April, 1<sup>st</sup>. Thus in order to find employment in April, year X, a foreign person has to start searching from November, December in year X-1, if one hasn’t found employment by the end of February, year X, then it’s likely that one won’t find employment for the entire year X and hence has to prepare his profile for the year X+1. There are also some companies recruiting for autumn, however their number and hence the probability of finding employment is significantly less important than for April. From October to December, I focussed all my forces on the JLPT exam, because having a proof of Japanese language proficiency is an extremely important and almost necessary asset for finding a job in Japan. I started hence a bit late, maybe too late?...

However, in the second half of December I saw a job offer, with very little description for an English teacher in Kumamoto Prefecture. At the time I was very tired of the life in Tokyo and wanted nothing more than living elsewhere, in Japan’s countryside. And so I sent my CV. The day after a man called Mori called me. The Job would be part-time only he said. I explained that I was living in Tokyo and hence I needed a full time job and as well a Visa-Sponsorship. “Wait a minute please” said Mr. Mori and a bit after “we have also got another job with Visa-Sponsorship.” I will transfer your CV to the recruiting company. Shortly after Ms Kinoshita, from a company called “Outsourcing” called me and invited me for an interview. At that interview, carried out on January the 5<sup>th</sup>, I was informed more about the actual job: if employed, I would be half of the time an English Teacher for office

workers of a semiconductor producing company, and half of the time, I would be corresponding emails as overseas representant and translate documents. The name of the company was, however, kept secret for this first interview. Fortunately I could impress the two interviewers and hence invited for a second interview, where I would meet with the actual representatives of the company who would, possibly, be interested in employing me. The interview was set on February 5<sup>th</sup> (one month after the first interview). On that day, to my big surprise the General Manager of Outsourcing presented me nobody less but the General Manager of Sony Kumamoto! Besides, the GM, two other Sony representatives, to whom I was not introduced, also assisted the interview. The GM, Mister Kariya, asked me a few questions and presented me Sony Kumamoto with a short video. Basically the company where I would work cleans parts of the semiconductors, a very complex process. During the interview, I was also asked whether I would like drinking and whether I had already drunken some 焼酎 shochuu (strong Japanese alcohol), how often I would drink alcohol. In a Japanese company it is important to participate in the nomikais and hence this kind of question seems to be part of job-interview, at least if the one to be employed is a foreigner.

Being still not assured of this job opportunity at Sony, I continued to job-hunt almost every day, at various companies which are in need of linguistic talents with academic intellect. Conversely to the Swiss job-market it is completely unimportant what the person to be employed has graduated in since one need to be trained and adapted anyway to a new job. In my case, it is no doubt easier to find employment here in Japan than in Switzerland. Holding a master's degree of one of the world's top 100 universities is not taken for granted here in Japan and being linguistically versatile (5 languages) is also treasured. When I was searching for jobs in Switzerland I felt that the most important thing was, which subject one had graduated in and the job experience. It would be unimaginable to work in the technology, trade or education sector in Switzerland, in Japan I had an interview with Sony and recruiting companies contacted me because their clients, companies involved in finance, car manufacturing and infrastructure, were interested in me. Besides, I'm currently having life-time part-time employment at an educational institution, a sector for which I needed another University degree in Switzerland. Aren't Swiss companies too rigid on the theoretical capacities of a person and forget that it won't be one's graduation papers, degrees and licenses that will work but the *person* him- or herself. Swiss companies, please treasure more the human value of your employees, otherwise you should rather employ robots.

These impressions of the Swiss- and Japanese recruiting system is eventually also the very reason why I thought that my future would rather continue in Japan, where I am a highly qualified worker with many special skills, than in my home country, Switzerland, where I am one of many university graduates in a weird domain (what is socio-economics? I doubt that employers have heard the word before) who speak some weird exotic languages (Japanese and any other than Swiss-German or French) not really of use for business.

Today, on March 5<sup>th</sup> 2016 I add these last words to my Year in Japan report, which I will send tonight to Mr. Stricker, as future employee of Sony Semiconductor in Kumamoto. My terms of employment are not yet clear in detail, however, next week I will see my working contract and be able to apply for a working Visa in Japan. In three weeks' time, I will move to Kumamoto and start a complete new life in Japan's countryside.

Today, I don't know whether I will really work the 3 years agreed to in my contract, how hard or easy work will be and whether I will have a long-term future in Japan. But I know that my year in Japan was a wonderful experience, which gave me self-confidence for the future. Even if in Switzerland my abilities might not be valued, I know now that they have a high value. Moreover, I could have the actual insight in Japanese culture that I missed

last time. I could teach in a Japanese childcare institution and have deep insights into the education system and have wonderful experiences with Japanese children and I could hopefully help them to make their busy and overscheduled life somewhat more enjoyable and playful. Before closing this report I want to express my warmest thanks towards Mr. Dudler, I am very lucky and grateful for receiving the SJCC Scholarship because without it I wouldn't have been able to do all these fantastic experiences which are of great value for my life and my personality. Thank you!

Thanks for reading and I would look forward to be read again when I will publish the next chapter of my Japan-Book "Three years in Kumamoto" ;-)