

Postcards from New Zealand: Collaborative Teaching between Friends

Atsuko Kikuchi and Pauline Buchanan

ここで紹介するのは、関西大学外国語学部で英語を教えている菊地とニュージーランドのオークランド大学教育学部で教員養成をしているブキャナンの友情を通して生まれたプロジェクトである。二人は20年来の友達で、二人のつながりを利用して関西大学で英語を勉強している学生に生きた英語を使う機会を与えることができないかと話し合ったところ、ニュージーランドのブキャナン宛に絵葉書を書いて送らせようということになった。ブキャナンは受け取った絵葉書すべてに丁寧に返事を書いた。学生一人一人が書いた内容に合わせてブキャナンが書いた返事を読んで、学生は自分の英語が通じたことの喜びを知り、同時にニュージーランド人の優しさに触れることができた。

The Postcard Project

The postcard project outlined in this article came about as the result of a personal/professional collaboration between friends and colleagues, Atsuko Kikuchi, a professor of English at Kansai University, and Pauline Buchanan, a senior lecturer at the University of Auckland's Faculty of Education in New Zealand.

Atsuko and Pauline first met over 20 years ago when they were both on the University of Auckland staff. They each had a daughter attending the university childcare centre, and from that time on both the mothers and daughters developed close friendships that have been maintained ever since through frequent visits to Japan and New Zealand, phone calls, email, Skype, and now through this professional collaboration. This friendship between the two lecturers provided a linking device, so when Atsuko's students were asked to send postcards to Pauline, they already knew there was a genuine connection.

Both Atsuko and Pauline share a common philosophy about the value of sharing aspects of their lives with their students. Atsuko shared a collection of captioned photos showing the two women and their daughters socialising in Japan so her students could have a meaningful context for their summer holiday task of composing English language postcards to Pauline (see Figure 1). These postcards were not composed in class, nor were they checked by Atsuko

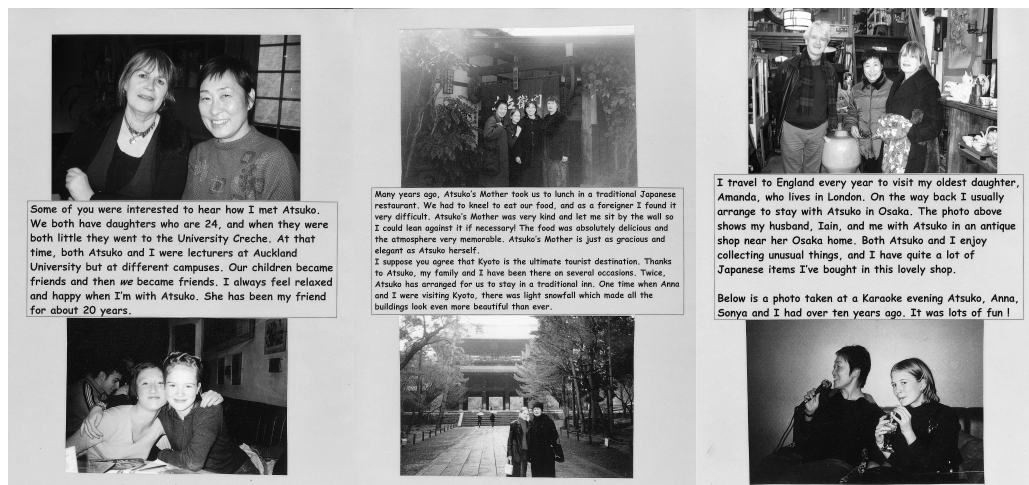


Figure 1

before they were sent. In class, Atsuko explained how to write Pauline's address and the sender's address on the postcard. It was suggested that Pauline might like to receive postcards that showed aspects of Japanese culture, but it was left up to the students to select the cards to send and to decide what to write on them. They were assured that they would all get a personalised reply back from Pauline.

The Students

The 30 students in Atsuko's class who participated in this project were first year non-English majors at Kansai University. They were in Atsuko's Advanced Foreign Language (English) class that met once a week for 90 minutes for 13 weeks during the first semester of 2010. These students were in the advanced stream not through any particular selection, but because they chose to be in this stream. The focus of this class was oral communication in English and in the first semester, the students learned how to participate successfully in conversations and small group discussions. The topics covered during the first semester were: interacting in class, maintaining a conversation, speaking to a group, and developing a presentation.

The Japanese Postcards

Over a fortnight, a steady stream of Japanese postcards appeared in Pauline's New Zealand letterbox. Many of the students had made the effort to select culturally significant cards: there

were five temple views, two Geisha images, Mt Fuji, Shirakawagou, maple leaves, sunflowers, goldfish, fireworks, and three postcards depicting shaved ice desserts.

Many of the students expressed their anxiety about undertaking the task. One student wrote: *"It's kinda weird sending a letter to a person I've never met."* However, the student went on to qualify this by adding: *"But it's exciting and awesome."*

For many of these students, this was the first time they had sent a postcard, let alone one written in English. It was a daunting task, especially as they knew the person to whom they were sending the cards was a native speaker of English and a specialist language teacher : Student A welcomed the challenge, explaining: *"I have studied mainly English in Kansai University. So I feel happiness now to write letter you in English."* Student B's response, however, was: *"Sending a letter in foreign language is first challenge in my life, so, I'm very tense up."*

Apart from worrying about using the 'foreign language', the students then had to consider just *what* they were going to write about. Usually postcards are sent by travellers back to their hometowns to share noteworthy and unusual scenes, but these were sent from a familiar place to, what was for most, an unfamiliar destination, so the students didn't have readymade subject matter.

Weather was by far the most commonly discussed topic, mentioned by 25 of the 30 students. Admittedly, at the time of writing, it was the summer season in Japan, and a particularly hot one. Student C wrote : *"It's very hot around here like I'm in desert,"* while Student D described it as *"abnormal heat!!"* Student E continued this theme: *"In Japan, the temperature rises too much recently. It often reaches over 35°C. I just can't believe it!!"* She then went on to contrast local conditions with New Zealand's climate. Atsuko had informed the students she would be spending her summer vacation in New Zealand: *"I'm very jelouse Atsuko. I think she finds a good place 'NZ' to escape from this heat and humidity in Japan."* Student F commented: *"NZ is very cold today isn't it? This difference is interesting isn't it?"*

Student G had prior knowledge of New Zealand as she had been there for two weeks, during which time she *"was impressed by beautiful nature and warm people. It is different from Japan. I have been Auckland, Mt Eden and Waitakere school."* Student H had visited Rotorua and Auckland. She recalled the view from Auckland's Sky Tower as being *"so beautiful."* Student I had spent a whole year in Tauranga, New Zealand. She also *"visited Auckland and Mt. Eden."* She *"really enjoyed NZ's culture and life"* and she claimed she would *"never forget the taste of Hokey Pokey."*

Nearly half of the students said they would like to visit New Zealand and perhaps meet up

with Pauline. Perhaps Student J had shared her experiences with Student I who wrote: *"I haven't been to New Zealand, so I want to go there someday. If I could go there, I want to try to eat Hokey Pokey and fish and chips."* Student W wrote: *"It's hard for me to imagine how the weather is or how people live there"* while Student K had *"a image that it is hot place and famous for kiwi."*

Several students, however, were more interested in encouraging Pauline to visit specific sights in Japan. Student L suggests: *"If you come to Japan, you should go to Mt Fuji!! I visited there last week, its landscape is very nice!!"* Student T's advice is *"In Osaka, there are lots of places you can enjoy, for example USJ, Kaiyukan, Osaka castle and so on. If you come to Japan you should go to Kaiyukan."* Student M recommends *"Miyajima in Hiroshima. Miyajima has Itsukushima temple of a world heritage and big fireworks are held in summer."* Student N, who lives in Kyoto, thinks *"Kyoto is one of the best place for visit in Japan. There are very old temples and shrines. If you have time to come Japan, I want you to visit Kyoto. I often see foreign visitors come Kyoto and enjoy their sight-seeing."* All of these students linked their writing to their particular postcards' images, in other words to the Japanese sights they were recommending.

As the postcards were written during the vacation, some of them directly described what was taking place during that time. *"Btw,"* wrote Student O, *"It's the summer vacation here! I have some plans for that happy lovely free time."* She went to see the movie 'The Sorcerer's Apprentice' and had *"plans to go canoeing."* Student P *"went to Universal Studio Japan with my friends and had a good time."* Student Q sent a postcard of a Shirakawagou and explained *"This is an old fashioned house in Japan. I travelled here with my family in August."* Student R *"staid in my country town Fukui for my summer vacation!! However there are many delicious foods... so I have gained weight recently."* Perhaps Student S experienced the same problem as she stayed with her family in her hometown, in Ishikawa prefecture, where she *"enjoyed talking, shopping and eating with them."*

Writing about one's hobbies is a common device for penpal letters, especially at the start of a long distance friendship. Some of the students described these interests for Pauline: Student T loves *"listening to music and studying English and other languages."* Student U's interests are: *"shopping, karaoke, going lunch with my friend, BBQ etc..."* Student V described his involvement with Rakugo and his aim to do *"English Rakugo."* He asked Pauline to *"please come to listen to Rakugo performance if you come to Japan. And teach me English pronunciation."*

Postcards from New Zealand (Kikuchi, Buchanan)

It is encouraging to note that a common theme of many of the postcards was how much the students enjoyed Atsuko's English class, and, as an extension of this, how much they appreciated Atsuko herself. She was described as an "elegant woman," who is "so smart and cute." Student M's appreciation of Atsuko seems to have positively affected her studies: "Atsuko is my English teacher. She is very nice. And now I enjoy studying English very much." Student N wrote: "Your friend, Atsuko Kikuchi, is my English teacher. She is a very good teacher. I like English. I want to be able to speak English more. So Atsuko's class is wonderful for me." Student I described how, "Atsuko's English class is very fun! So I love her English class."

The New Zealand Response

Pauline was very aware that the students had gone to a lot of trouble to select special cards to send to her. As mentioned above, this exercise was quite a "challenge" for these students. Pauline made an effort to personalise the replies by referring back to the postcard messages and/or images. She selected a different card for each student, and while researching what was available in New Zealand postcards, she discovered the norm is scenic photographs of picturesque tourist destinations. She wanted to make reference to the Kiwiana aspects mentioned by some of the students: Hokey Pokey ice cream, fish and chips, and, of course, the famous flightless kiwi. To cover this, she bought sets of Kiwiana stickers and stuck two on each postcard to provide further interest and topics for discussion (see Figure 2).

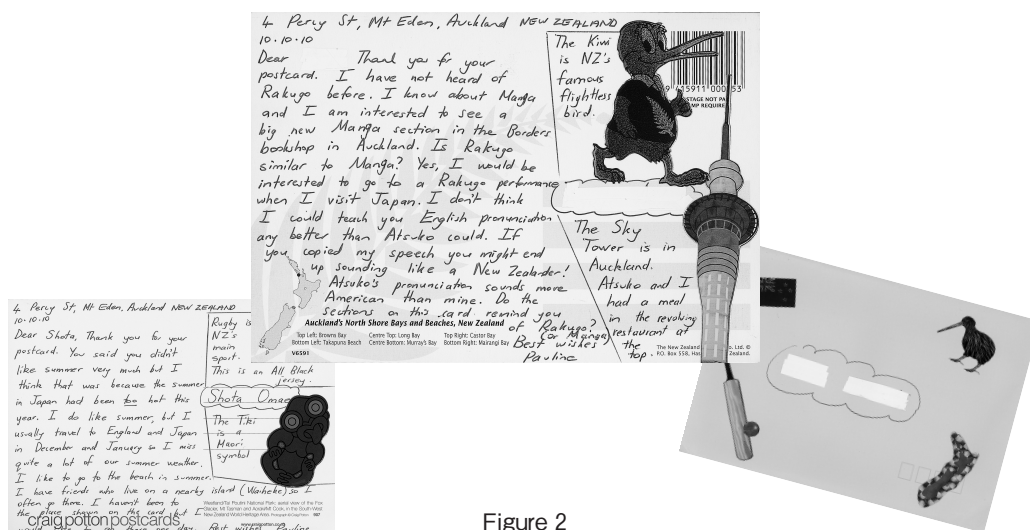


Figure 2

Student N sent a very elaborate card connected to a Japanese tradition, so Pauline paired this up with the New Zealand haka tradition: *Dear N, Thank you for the postcard. It was a very special card — thank you for explaining the connections to the Japanese classic tale. I thought the paper fan was very pretty. The postcard I selected for you has connections to a Maori tradition. Maoris were the first settlers in New Zealand. In olden times they used to dress like they are on this card, but nowadays this is only for musical concerts. These men are performing a war dance or 'haka'. You may have seen NZ's famous rugby team, the All Blacks, performing a haka before a rugby game. Best wishes, Pauline.* In addition, the message section was decorated with two stickers depicting a kiwi and a rugby ball, with a brief explanation of each.

In keeping with the Japanese tradition of gift-giving, Pauline bought all the students a small magnetic notepad with a New Zealand image (Figure 3).



Figure 3

Atsuko and Pauline thought it was most practical to send the replies en masse care of Atsuko at Kansai University. In this way, all the postcards would arrive together enabling Atsuko to build the material into her programme and to capitalise on the rich and meaningful English reading and discussion opportunities they provided.

Pauline wrote a generic cover letter to all the students: *Konnichiwa! Arigatou Gozaimasu! I feel very humbled writing to such clever bilingual (at least) people. I am not at all clever with any language other than English. One of you wrote that it was a very “big challenge” to write a postcard to me and they also spoke of being “very tense”. Atsuko told me that many of you had never written a postcard before this. Now we have emails and cell-phones, this form of communication is dying out, but it was very exciting for me to get 30 postcards over the space of two weeks! Thank you for taking such care with your postcard*

selection. It is a lovely set for me to keep. Please don't worry about the highlighted errors... some of them were very small things such as spelling Pauline with an 'o'. (I may have accidentally misspelt some of your names). If you have lots of highlighting maybe it was because you wrote a lot, or tried to be ambitious in what you wrote. I could easily understand all of your messages. I was most impressed with your use of possessive apostrophes. My students find them very difficult. You are very welcome to contact me if you ever visit New Zealand. Best wishes with your English studies. You have an excellent teacher!

The Highlighted Errors

It was important to indicate to the students, as described above, that in all cases their communication had both clarity and “voice”. Pauline photocopied the students’ postcard messages, and she returned these versions with all errors highlighted and accompanying notes outlining the correct construction (Figure 4).

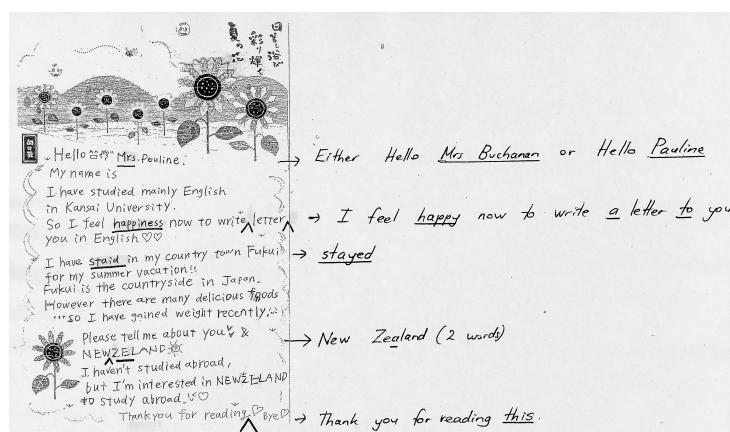


Figure 4

Although Atsuko had taught a lesson with the students about the potential content of their correspondence with Pauline, and how to address a postcard, she assigned the actual writing exercise as an out of class vacation activity. As the students’ postcards were not teacher checked for accuracy, the unedited content gives a genuine overview of some of the most common language difficulties experienced, as outlined in the table below:

Table 1: Student Errors

Omission of article (13)	I belong to music club. It's very famous building. It is hot place. This mail is first contact.
Omission of prepositions (13)	I stayed Tauranga. Going lunch with my friend Visitors come Kyoto I have been NZ. Introduced you by... I went Universal Studios Be careful your health I'm very jealous Atsuko
Inappropriate greetings (8)	Dear <i>Mrs</i> Pauline
Misspelt words (7)	sticked, heared, staid, your (you're), there (their), carefull, writtings
Incorrect tense (4)	If not having come Atsuko teach me... Events are taken place... I'm glad if you reply...
Incorrect prepositions (4)	I'm taught English <i>in</i> Kansai University. The best place <i>for</i> visit in Japan... You answer <i>to</i> me
Omitted pronouns (4)	Now is summer I really recommend. Thank you for reading...
Misspelt names (4)	Pouline Mt Edo (Mt Eden) ... a very Japanese variation!
Incorrect capitalisation (4)	Kansai university Recently, It has been... Btw, It's... By the way, Have you...
Using <i>a</i> instead of <i>an</i> before a vowel (3)	<i>a</i> elegant woman, <i>a</i> image, <i>a</i> illness (But: I'm <i>an</i> university student)
Incorrect agreement (1)	NZ have 4 seasons

The Students' Response

On the first day of class after summer vacation, Atsuko distributed the envelopes that Pauline had carefully prepared for each student. As each student received his/her envelope, Atsuko could see the surprised look on their faces. It was as if they had just received an unexpected Christmas present. They immediately opened the envelopes and shared the contents with their classmates. The focus was on the different designs on the notepads and the variety of stickers that decorated the postcards they received. As Atsuko walked around the classroom, every student turned to her and expressed their appreciation. “*She’s so nice!*” was the most common expression used, followed by “*I’m very happy!*” The students were, as expected, not paying

much attention to the English corrections that Pauline had given them. Perhaps after class, they had a chance to look at the corrections. Seeing the excitement on the students faces, however, made Atsuko think that in this case, it wasn't so important whether the students learned how to correct the mistakes they made on their postcards. The students felt that they had successfully communicated with Pauline in English. Pauline's reply, which was tailored for each student, was proof that Pauline had understood their message. This was a tremendous confidence booster for them. Every student was carefully reading what Pauline had written to them. Most of the students had never received such a personalised message from a native speaker of English.

Final Thoughts

The postcard project was a rewarding experience for all parties. The advantage of having Pauline as the sole correspondent from the New Zealand side was that she had the English language skills to tailor the replies expertly. The replies were of a uniform standard and a great deal of thought and effort went into them. Pauline's genuine friendship with Atsuko provided an authentic linking device, and her knowledge of, and interest in, Japanese culture were all positive aspects.

However, the project was extremely time consuming for Pauline. The students were undoubtedly challenged by the exercise as many of them pointed out, but Pauline was the most challenged of all as she carefully customised the 30 responses!

A possible variation to this project would be to match up the students with a Japanese language class in a university situated in an English speaking country. Students from each country could be asked to write *two* postcards each to their designated partner, one in English and one in Japanese. In this way, both sets of students would have the ease of writing in at least one of the languages. This could free them up to express themselves more freely in at least one postcard without the constraints of the foreign language.

Another advantage would be that the correspondents would be likely to be close in age and interests. They could possibly communicate twice during the term in this old style way, but also make use of the more familiar modern instant technology to send texts and emails, perhaps setting up a Facebook blog. Parallel to the students' communication, the two lecturers involved could model the process by also communicating using these methods.

It is unlikely that Pauline's highlighted corrections and answers will have had a major impact on Atsuko's students' written English usage, but the personal element inherent in the very old fashioned and rapidly dying art of postcard writing will probably be more lasting. Maybe in

many Japanese kitchens the New Zealand magnetic notebooks will still be displayed on fridge doors, and maybe some of the students will have carefully archived Pauline's postcards, just as she has done with her lovely and much admired, collection from Japan.