

**September 2010 – Volume 14, Number 2**

<b>Embrace Your Insignificance: Lessons Learned Teaching English in Japan</b>		
<b>Author:</b>	Bob Gaulke (2009)	
<b>Publisher:</b>	Portland, OR, USA: Future Tense Books	
<b>Pages</b>	<b>ISBN</b>	<b>Price</b>
124 pages	1892061341	\$11.00 U.S.

*Embrace Your Insignificance: Lessons Learned Teaching English in Japan* is more or less a collection of diary/journal/blog entries made by Bob Gaulke during his two-and-a-half year stint as an assistant English teacher in several public Japanese middle schools. There is really not too much to the book. It consists of one random entry after another about Gaulke's experience as a teacher in the JET (Japanese English Teacher) program, an officially sponsored Japanese government program designed to get authentic native English speakers into public schools. It is possible the entries are in chronological order, but they are not dated so you have to infer it from the descriptions of major events, such as his arrival and departure.

The book is a light read and can be finished in only a few hours. It is also very informally written, almost to the point of distraction. A few of the entries felt like inside jokes that I was not invited to enjoy and were a little frustrating to read.

The main concept that can be gleaned from *Embrace Your Insignificance* is an unusually unfiltered look into the Japanese education system. It is not the model of academic efficacy that it is often stereotyped for those of us in the West, but is in fact almost the opposite. Japanese students do spend an incredibly large portion of their day between school and cram school (a large private tutoring school that runs from early evening to almost midnight), but it is not as effective as it should be.

According to Gaulke, the cram schools spend their time reviewing and reinforcing what is being taught in the public school, so many of the students don't pay attention during regular

school because they know they are going to get the information they need drilled into them at cram school that night. This causes a lot of apathy on the part of the students for their work at public school, which in turn frustrates the teachers, which over a period of years wears them down and burns them out, thus perpetuating the cycle of apathy.

The upshot of all this is that it can be extremely frustrating working in a Japanese public school because of the apathy of both the students and the teachers. Of course, that is a general statement that can't be applied to everyone. There are good students and enthusiastic teachers, but the general trend is a downward one.

There are a few more insights into Japanese culture and education system to be gleaned from *Embrace Your Insignificance*, but they are not spelled out and you really have to be looking for them. It is vague enough that it can easily be interpreted many different ways.

I had a slight advantage reading this book because I have been a teacher of English in Japan. I was not part of the JET program and I taught mostly adults, but I had several friends that were in Gaulke's position. Unfortunately, my prior knowledge allowed me to fill in many of the holes left in Gaulke's narrative, so I am not exactly sure how someone who has never been to Japan would perceive this book. I am not sure he explained a few concepts well enough to allow someone who has not experienced them firsthand to understand their significance.

The bottom line is that I would not recommend this book for everyone. If you plan on joining the JET program, then I would definitely suggest reading this book so that you can get a feel for what you are getting into. If you are planning to teach in Japan at all, it might be worth your time to read, even if it is just to glean a few insights and reassure yourself that you made the right decision working for a private school and not directly for the Japanese public education system. Lastly, I might recommend this book to a teacher getting a newly arrived Japanese student in their class to help understand where they are coming from, but I would say this book holds little value for ESL teachers in general.

### **Reviewed by**

John Eckert  
Independent Scholar  
<john.eckert@hotmail.com>

© Copyright rests with authors. Please cite TESL-EJ appropriately.

Copyright © 1994 - 2010 TESL-EJ, ISSN 1072-4303  
Copyright rests with the authors.