

In America, speech and writing competitions are very rare. When it comes to foreign languages, they are practically nonexistent. I was surprised to hear that these types of contests are very popular in Japan, particularly in other languages like English. I think it's such a good idea! Since I've been in Japan, I have had the pleasure of sitting in on two big speech competitions, once as a judge for junior high school students and once to support the students from Tsu Nishi High School who participated in the high school competition just last week. I want to reflect on these experiences in my journal today.

I didn't know what to expect when I went to judge my first speech competition at the Mie Prefecture Cultural Center a few weeks ago. As I sat down to hear the first speech, I was surprised at the fact that I really had to read along with the text if I wanted to understand. I was nervous about listening to the rest of the speeches, but as time went on, I was very impressed with what I heard. The students all had very original and entertaining ideas, but sometimes I wondered if they were actually capable of writing such great speeches on their own. I would like to think that they did, but sometimes I thought that they must have spent a lot of time revising with their English teachers or ALTs. In the end, the judges agreed on the three best speeches in the contest and I was very happy with the winners because their speeches were very original and entertaining.

After judging the junior high school competition, I expected great things from the students at the senior high school competition in Matsusaka last Wednesday. I accompanied one first year student and a group of ESS members who competed in the speech and skit contests, respectively. Aside from a few outstanding speeches, I thought that a lot of the speeches were about the same quality of those I judged in the junior high school competition. I hate to be pessimistic, but I wonder if this is because the students got a lot of help from teachers and English-speaking friends both in junior high and in high school. As Taniguchi-sensei pointed out, it seems like the speeches in the junior high school competition were more interesting than those in high school. This could be because younger children are more creative, and as they get older, high school students want to conform, or do the same things that everyone else is doing.

The skit contest was particularly interesting, even though my students didn't do very well. It was the first time that students from Tsu Nishi entered a skit contest, and we didn't know what to expect. Unfortunately there were only four entries, and three prizes, so my students who came in fourth place were extremely disappointed. I know that it is important to students to win the prize, but I think that these English competitions really help the students improve themselves, even if they don't win. All

too often, students are shy and scared to practice English, even when they understand well and can make themselves understood. Just yesterday, I ran into a student from Tsu Nishi at the train station, and I talked to her on the platform and in the train for about 15 minutes. She was so nervous to talk to me, but she understood everything and did a good job of speaking English too. I wish I could just tell students that it really doesn't matter if they make mistakes in English. They want to speak perfectly, but they don't realize that they need to make innumerable mistakes before they will ever learn.

I think that learning a different language is one of the best ways for a us to improve ourselves because we are forced into uncomfortable situations. It is always awkward when you don't understand what someone is saying. Many people shy away from learning another language or trying to speak out loud for this reason. Learning to deal with uncomfortable situations like this gives people confidence to challenge themselves, not only in speaking other languages but in taking other risks in their life too. I am still afraid to make mistakes in Japanese, and I get embarrassed about it all the time, but I try not to let this stop me from practicing whenever I can and learning from my mistakes.

These speech contests are important for students to practice speaking English in a loud voice and to get used to expressing themselves out loud. At least in the students from Tsu Nishi, I saw a big change in their behavior as they became more confident with their performances. They are much more eager to speak in English now, and I'm sure they are more confident in other aspects of their lives too. It's too bad that there aren't more contests like this in the United States, because I think that it would help a lot of shy students to come out of their shells and become more confident individuals.