

LIVING A CONTRIBUTIVE LIFE

Dr. Tomoko Takahashi, dean of the Graduate School at SUA, Calabasas, explains why a master's degree in teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) is like a 'passport to the world,' allowing graduates to help create a better world.

The World Tribune asked Dr. Tomoko Takahashi, dean of the Graduate School and professor of linguistics and education at Soka University of America, Calabasas (Calif.), to share her experience as an educator and comment on SUA's master's program in second and foreign language education with a concentration in teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL).

WT: How did you get involved with language education, particularly with English as a second language (ESL) instruction?

Tomoko Takahashi: My first encounter with ESL was in the summer of 1975 when I first came to the United States from Japan and studied ESL in preparation for college. While studying ESL, I became interested in and rather critical of ESL instruction and began thinking, from a learner's perspective, of what the most effective and ideal ESL instruction should be like.

After that summer, I enrolled in a college in New Haven, Conn., and majored in English. After graduation I entered Columbia University to pursue my graduate studies in applied linguistics — I studied linguistics in relation to language education. After completing my doctoral program in 1984, I continued my post-doctoral research at Columbia and began teaching applied linguistics and training graduate-level students to become ESL teachers.

In 1992 I joined Soka University at Los Angeles (SULA), which is now Soka University of America (SUA), Calabasas, and became director of a new Japanese language program there. Then in 1994 the graduate school opened and I became its first dean and have since been directing the master of arts program in second and foreign language education with a concentration in TESOL.

So, I was once an ESL student and am now involved with ESL instruction as a teacher trainer. Needless to say, my own experience as an ESL learner has helped me tremendously. Over the past 15 years I have gained extensive experience not only in teaching but in developing educational materials as well as research in language education.

I have published over 10 textbooks for English learners, four scholarly books and numerous papers and articles on linguistics and language education. I am also interested in the art of translation and have published the Japanese translations of three of Mrs. Rosa Parks' books. It's certainly a sheer joy to be able to share my expertise in language education and linguistics with future teachers.

WT: What is the objective of your master's program?

TT: It's to educate graduate-level students in the methodologies and intellectual founda-

tions of language education, and professionally train them to become ESL teachers or to become language educators such as textbook writers. In other words, the program provides future teachers with a theoretical foundation with the practical tools necessary to teach English to a non-native speaker. To achieve these goals we place emphases on linguistics, teaching and learning processes and cross-cultural awareness.

WT: What kind of teaching career can you pursue after receiving this type of training?

TT: A degree in TESOL is like a passport to the world. It opens up a path to international careers. It allows and enables you to teach English in other countries around the world as well as in the United States. Four classes of our graduates are now teaching in Japan, China and the United States — for instance, at Soka University and Soka Women's College in Tokyo, the Soka High Schools in Tokyo and Kansai, and Beijing Foreign Studies University in China.

Language education has a significant impact on society on a global scale. You can help people communicate with one another and facilitate their cross-cultural understanding, as well as help them open their eyes to new dimensions and possibilities and to their new potentials. I think this is a great way to contribute to society and to the world. I hope to see more graduates travel throughout the world and make such valuable contributions as educators.

WT: What are some of the highlights of your program?

TT: At our university the student is the center of attention. And our program emphasizes small class sizes and rigorous academic discipline.

Each class consists of about eight students. In a small class, students receive personal attention from the members of the faculty. Small classes also facilitate more interaction among students and between students and the faculty. This is an ideal environment for learning and growth. Our staff and faculty also constantly strive to create an environment that is caring, encouraging and conducive to students' success.

SUA, Calabasas, also offers ESL classes to Japanese students from Soka University and Soka Women's College in Tokyo and the Soka High Schools in Tokyo and Kansai. Our graduate students are placed in those ESL classes to do their practicum teaching as part of the graduate school curriculum. Outside the classroom, graduate students can also gain hands-on experience and knowledge in teaching ESL by interacting with ESL students on campus.

Other highlights include a well-balanced curriculum, a diverse student body, a quiet campus with beautiful natural surroundings, and campus programs such as the Human Rights Lecture Series, Botanical Center tours and lectures, bird watching and fitness walks.

WT: Where are your students from? Are they mostly recent college graduates? Or do they come with teaching or other work experience?

TT: We've so far had students from nine different countries — Brazil, Canada, China, Japan, Korea, France, Panama, the Philippines, and the United States. The international student body makes up on average about 40 percent of the entire student population. We

encourage an international student body because we see linguistic and cultural diversity as an enrichment and a true asset for learning.

Our students also come from many different disciplines — that is, different undergraduate majors. Many of our students majored in English, linguistics, foreign language, education or other related fields, but we've also had mathematics, history, political science, economics, psychology and business majors.

The diversity of the student population is further reflected in the student's ages, too; we've had recent college graduates as well as those who have worked for several years. The average age of the students we've had so far is 29. Some students (1 out of 4) come with teaching experience, but such experience is not required for admission. I would say what's required is passion for education and willingness to study in a highly rigorous program.

WT: Is it a rigorous program?

TT: Yes. First of all, we are striving to achieve academic excellence and make this program one of the best in the world. My personal dream is to make our academic program better than the TESOL program at my alma mater, Columbia University, which is considered to be one of the best programs in the world. When preparing to open the program, I researched a number of TESOL programs in the nation to come up with the best curriculum. Over the past five years, the program has constantly been improved in terms of its curriculum content.

Secondly, this is a three-semester program, and there is so much to learn within a year and a half. Education is a big responsibility. We want to make sure that our graduates are equipped with knowledge in the subject area, effective teaching skills, commitment to education, compassion for students and the greatest character.

Another aspect of the program is that students become closer to each other because they have to study hard and struggle together. The faculty members also assign many group projects. In the program, because of its rigor, our students learn to help and encourage one another and to learn from one another.

Plus, the faculty members are always there to help the students. We don't just watch them struggle. We struggle with them. We also strive to set them good examples as teachers. One of our goals is to train our students to become humanistic teachers, and we believe struggling with the students is one way of achieving this goal.

Our graduates all say that they have learned so much at the SUA Graduate School — not only about teaching ESL but about themselves, friendship, humanism and compassion. It's such a great program that I sometimes wish I were a student in the program!

WT: What do you think has been the greatest effect of Soka education on your students' lives?

TT: One of our graduates once said: "While at SUA, I learned the meaning of creating value in my life. I learned to do things wholeheartedly; to study 100 percent, struggle 100 percent, live 100 percent.... My direction for life is clearer now, and I know what I want to accomplish."

Another said: "I was able to awaken my desire to be part of Mr. Makiguchi's, Mr. Toda's and Mr. Ikeda's dreams. In other words, I could realize my mission in life: serving others

and contributing to the blossoming of each individual through education.”

I think these statements sum up the great effect of Soka education on the students’ lives. That is, they discover their true selves, expand their lives and realize their purpose in life. They become awakened to their full potential and a stronger sense of mission for peace and the happiness of others.

When the SUA Graduate School opened in 1994, the university’s founder, SGI President Ikeda said: “The mission of Soka University of America is to foster a steady stream of global citizens committed to living a contributive life. To study and learn, to take on difficult challenges, to continue to take action for the sake of the happiness of your fellow citizens — this is the key to a life that is ever youthful, value-filled, unhindered and expansive.”

In a nutshell, our students live this mission. It’s absolutely inspiring to see them take their strong sense of mission along with their love for their alma mater and profound respect for its founder, and sincerely strive to become capable global citizens for the sake of humanity’s happiness and peace — and to help others also become such global citizens. They really are gems of Soka education.

I’ve certainly learned a great deal in various ways from our students. In this sense I AM a student in the program, pursuing academic excellence with them, learning to be a better teacher for them and living the same mission as they do. I feel truly fortunate to have such great students as my teachers, colleagues and dear friends.

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