

## *Quest for Perfection*

*Katy Prillaman*

*The other day, I received an e-mail from a Japanese woman who had volunteered to translate at an elementary school. The lesson was taught by me (an American), an Australian man and a Chinese woman (who spoke in English). The translator worked for almost two hours, translating on the spot three different styles of English. Her e-mail, sent two days after the lesson, said, "I know many people who has the same English level as mine but they don't try to do this job. They say 'After my English improving I will' but when is it?" Interesting question.*

*In my year and a half as an ALT in Japan, I've witnessed something that I call a "quest for perfection", but really it's more a fear of failure. During my first week at a junior high school, I went to a few 3rd year classes. No one said a word. I couldn't believe it. I asked my JTE if my English had been too difficult. He told me that they understood me but were too shy to respond. They were afraid they might make a mistake. I've learned now that this is common, not only in the upper grades, but with adults as well. Most elementary and first year j.h. students don't seem to have this same hesitation, and they are much more willing to use broken English, for example, "Me handsome boy!" The feeling among many students and adults is that if they can't say something perfectly, then they'd better not try at all. Even if students attempt something, make a mistake, and get corrected by a teacher or ALT, often they feel that they've failed and they never want to raise their hands again.*

*To be sure, this isn't something that only happens in Japan, but I'm amazed at how often I witness this here. Where does this perfectionism come from? For me, language mistakes aren't a big deal. Communication is simply conveying an idea and understanding someone else's idea. For me, a successful day of teaching is one in which many students try and make lots of mistakes versus the day when the same three seemingly perfect students do the entire lesson themselves, while the rest of the kids tune out because their English isn't good enough.*

*In my opinion, the best English teachers are the ones who spend some time every day encouraging students to try, regardless of the mistakes they make. They are the teachers who aren't afraid to use English themselves. When they make a mistake, they accept it, correct it, and move on. They point out students' mistakes without humiliating them. In my opinion, the teachers who nitpick are the most unlikely to stray from the textbook into creative territory (a territory filled with mistakes and grammatical uncertainties... a territory of potential failure). The irony is that the English textbooks are filled with innumerable errors, proving that nobody is perfect... not even the writers of textbooks.*

*As the Japanese translator wrote in her e-mail, "My job wasn't perfect, but I am satisfied with today's effect." Me too! Her "imperfection" is invaluable!*