

'Breakthrough Japanese' book sees light of day

By ANGELA JEFFS

It is rare to be interviewed twice for this column. But Hitomi Hitayama, president of the executive Japanese language school Japanese Lunch, deserves the space because she has kept faith with her book project for so long. Also, the result -- "Breakthrough Japanese: 20 Mini Lessons for Better Conversation" -- is a very good book.

"I began thinking about an English language book to teach Japanese in 1989," says Hitomi, dressed in signature black and with her bicycle parked outside Bunkamura in Tokyo's Shibuya Ward, where she lives and works. "People kept saying my lessons were so original I'd easily find a publisher."

She did. But not quite as initially envisaged. "The Daily Yomiuri agreed to publish a lesson biweekly." "Pera Pera Penguin's 5-minute Japanese class with Hitomi Hirayama" was launched in April 1999.

"Pera-pera" ("fluently") is one of the many onomatopoeic phrases that the Japanese language uses to describe sounds or actions. As for the penguin, Hitomi likes the image of a bird that knows no borders. "It should be the same between people."

In her first column, Hitomi introduced "like" and "dislike," beginning: "Most Japanese textbooks and dictionaries translate 'like' as 'suki.' But 'suki' is actually an emotional expression that implies 'love.' 'Ii desu ne' is the common way of saying 'nice' or 'good.' Be careful with 'suki' -- you could imply that you love someone in a romantic sense."

This lesson is No. 3 in "Breakthrough Japanese," preceded by advice on the use of "san" and "sama" and how to address people (lesson 1) and the confusions that can arise in the use of the word "anata" (lesson 2): "Anata is not a direct equivalent of 'you.' Used mainly toward equals or junior colleagues, it can cause offense if used in the wrong situation . . ."

Hitomi has been teaching her language to non-Japanese for 20 years. "I called my company Japanese Lunch because initially I set out to offer lessons to foreign businessmen during lunch hours." She now has four in-house staffers and about 50 part-time teachers. "Superlady Kaoru Ueda is in charge of Japanese Lunch. She works far harder than me."

Japanese Lunch staffers teach businesspeople (though not only during lunch), with an impressive list of major clients that includes the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Mitsubishi Fuso Truck & Bus Corp., Adidas Japan, DaimlerChrysler and any number of banks and stock market connections.

A steady stream of clients come via Pera Pera Penguin (PPP). And a fair number are in Japan on tourist visas, wanting to make the most of their time here.



Hitomi Hitayama, who began thinking about a book to teach Japanese in 1989, has at last collected her expertise in "Breakthrough Japanese: 20 Mini Lessons for Better Conversation."

Hitomi also has her fingers crossed for the passing of the Free Trade Agreement next year, which she hoped will allow Filipinos and others to enter Japan to work as nurses and helpers in nursing homes. "I'm on the board of Cosmos, a retirement home for the elderly in Koto Ward, planning a curriculum to teach incoming foreign staff when the FTA gets approval. With Japan's population aging so rapidly, this is new business, and I'm very excited."

She was also pretty excited when Kodansha International in Japan approached her regarding assembling her PPP columns into books. Taking three years to see the project through, she is especially grateful to Elizabeth Floyd in the States and her editor in Tokyo, Michael Stacey, for their support.

"Breakthrough Japanese" was published in Japan in August last year and in the States in December, with 3,000 copies sold to date. This first book (hopefully more will follow) explains how to introduce yourself and others, and when to use "shirimasen" and "wakarimasen" ("I don't know"). It offers handy "pocket" phrases, and idioms that relate to body parts and sumo wrestling. And throws in more than the occasional quiz to keep the learning light and breezy.

The chapter on the difference between the particles "wa" and "ga" -- always a sticking point -- is especially useful. Based on an exchange between two businessmen both trying to grab the bill and saying "Watashi ga! Watashi ga!" Hitomi explains that "ga" is used to emphasize a particular thing -- in this case, "watashi," meaning "It is I [who will pay the bill]." Quote: "Without anything being said overtly about paying the bill, the choice of words indicated who wanted to pay."

Lesson 18 looks at "water words" -- from "mizu" for regular drinking water to "mizu-shobai" for the liquid world of bars and nightclubs.

Another favorite lesson questions the meaning of "hai," the word most of the rest of the world believes means "yes." Quote: The English word "yes" is usually used as the direct opposite of "no," but "hai" is a much broader term and can have very different meanings in different situations -- it can even mean "no."

The West can continue to send its most aggressive executives to do business in Japan, but if they do not understand the subtleties of "hai" they will go home believing promises have been made where none exist. Moving easily between the two worlds of foreign and Japanese business, Hitomi knows what needs to be known for successful understanding.

She also knows what makes her happy. Making new clothes and accessories uniquely her own with added trimmings. Her Scottie dog, Ohayo. Her mother, who lives in Nasu. Work and friends. Jogging around Yoyogi Park -- she used to run marathons! And regular hot yoga classes.

"With such a full life, who needs a husband?" she adds, playfully, having let the idea of marriage slip long ago.

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