

The right stuff: hiring trends for tenured university positions in Japan

Keywords

employment, Japanese universities, tenure, qualifications

Despite the demographic crisis facing Japanese universities it remains possible, though increasingly difficult, to obtain a permanent teaching position. This article analyses three years worth of job ads to determine the qualifications necessary to increase one's chances of securing a permanent, full-time position teaching English at a Japanese university.

終身雇用の教員職を得ることは、日本の大学が学生不足の危機に面している今ではますます難しくなっているが、まだ可能ではある。本論では3年分の求人広告を分析し、日本の大学で終身雇用の英語教員職を得るチャンスを増やすために必要な資格を分析する。

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The demographic crisis

The parlous demographic typhoon threatening Japanese education should give pause to anyone looking for stable, long-term employment at post-secondary institutions. In 1992, there were 2.05 million 18 year olds but by 2009 the number dropped to about 1.2 million (Terada, 2007; Anzai, 2003). One expert estimates that within the next decade between 15-40% of Japanese universities and colleges will close or merge with other schools due to a lack of students (Hollingsworth, 2008).

Finding a permanent job remains possible

For those absolutely determined to find a permanent, full-time university position, it does remain possible, though very difficult. Given the opacity associated with hiring processes at Japanese universities and the fact that each department in every school has their own hiring preferences, it is impossible to give job hunters a checklist of qualifications that would guarantee employment as a tenured English instructor. It is possible, however, to examine some of the broader hiring trends and identify important qualifications for those native and non-native English speakers seeking permanent university teaching positions.

The information for this essay comes from an analysis of 133 job ads for tenured English teaching positions at 99 different universities for the 2008-2010 academic years posted on the Japanese Association of College English Teachers (JACET) web page <www.jacet.org>. These 133 ads constituted all the postings for full-time, permanent teaching positions at four-year universities and two-year colleges, published on the JACET

website at the time of writing (11 February 2010). By permanent, I mean that the position had no stated limit on the number of contract renewals. Although, as documented elsewhere, instructors should be wary of contracts that must be renewed at the mutual consent of both parties because universities have summarily dismissed instructors with similar contracts in the past (Aldwinckle, 1999; Hall, 1998).

Japanese universities may not list every available English teaching position on the JACET page, the definitive website for university teaching jobs is the *Japan Research Career Information Network* (JREC-IN) <jrecin.jst.go.jp/seek/SeekTop>. However, using JREC-IN for research purposes is impractical. First, JREC-IN's classification of jobs by research field makes searching for jobs time consuming. In addition, an inability to search jobs after the application deadline has passed presents further difficulties. Interviews with six university instructors based in Kanto and Kansai who have had recent experience serving on a hiring committee to hire tenure track English instructors were also used in this study. Since universities have different policies regarding the types of information that can be disclosed by hiring committee members, the six instructors were not always willing or able to answer the same questions.

The necessary qualifications

Nationality

In terms of nationality, 56 ads were explicitly open to qualified applicants of any nationality. Seventeen postings called for someone with native speaker Japanese language ability, a requirement that obviously limits the number of non-Japanese able to apply. Universities called for native English speakers in 33 ads, a requirement that reduces the number of Japanese eligible to apply. The remaining job ads contained no information about nationality requirements.

Doctorate vs. master's

A large portion of universities now prefer or require doctorates for any new tenure hires. There are still jobs available for those with only a master's degree, but 65% of the advertised positions required or strongly preferred a doctor-

ate. Even for jobs that do not explicitly require a doctorate, master's degree holders may gradually find themselves losing the educational arms race to doctorate holders unless they possess, as will be discussed later, an even more valuable weapon in their qualification arsenal.

Furthermore, the more attractive the teaching situation, the more likely the school will hire someone with a doctorate. Famous schools required applicants to have *Dr.* written in front of their name more often than no name brand schools.

Are you experienced?

Universities often fail to list the number of years of teaching experience required in their job postings, but at least some university level teaching experience is usually required. An unspecified amount of university teaching experience was called for in 17% of ads, 12% of ads wanted at least two years of experience, 23% wanted three or more years experience, while 48% of job ads failed to mention any requirement for previous teaching experience. The stated minimum years of experience may not be sufficient to be hired. The hiring committee members I spoke with revealed that the average length of teaching experience for four tenured instructors hired in 2008 and 2009 was nine years, the majority at the post-secondary level.

While it depends on the school, three hiring committee members also expressed the opinion that it can be easier for full-time contract teachers to make the jump to tenure than it is for part-timers, partly because contract positions may involve some committee work, an important part of a university instructor's duties. It also helps if teachers have experience teaching at one of the more famous universities in Japan. Although, when applying to schools with less academically gifted students, such candidates will also need a convincing answer to the inevitable question: *So why do you want to work at our humble little college after teaching at Brand Name U?*

Have you published enough or will you perish?

When applying for a tenured job, the quantity and quality of your publications will have to ex-

ceed the three typically required for limited-term contract positions. One teacher hired last year for a tenured lecturer position at a medium-sized private university had a dozen publications, half in refereed journals. This successful candidate also had 15 conference presentations, several at international conferences.

Three other recently hired Assistant Professors in Kanto and Kansai had publication records nearly as long, though not always as impressive. One had a long list of a dozen publications, but all of them appeared in internally published university bulletins, indicating that quantity has a quality all its own, at least for the Japanese university in this teacher's case.

Japanese ability is a must

Simply put, Japanese ability is virtually essential. While diplomas, years in the classroom, and publications are important, they are still not enough to guarantee entry into the groves of academe. Just six out of the 133 tenured job postings examined for this study wanted applications from teachers with only limited Japanese proficiency, for example, having daily conversation ability or being able to communicate with office staff. The ability to participate in meetings and handle all the committee work in Japanese was explicitly called for in 60 ads, and the ability to teach in Japanese was called for in 25 ads. It is also not unheard of for university administrators to unexpectedly require newly hired native English speaking instructors to teach a class in Japanese.

Universities typically decide from the application materials and interview whether a candidate's Japanese ability is sufficient. Just eight job postings listed a Japanese Language Proficiency Test level: four schools required level one and four wanted at least level two. Other universities had language requirements that disqualified the vast majority of non-Japanese applicants. 13% of job ads wanted Japanese ability equivalent to native speaker fluency, including reading and writing.

Just applying for tenured jobs will test candidates' Japanese skills. Most (71%) of the JACET job ads examined were published only in Japanese. It is also typical for candidate resumes, publication lists, article abstracts, and a teaching

philosophy essays to be submitted in Japanese. Since the interview will also probably be conducted at least partly, and sometimes entirely, in Japanese, now is the time to start brushing up on your *keigo*.

The experience of a private university in Tokyo that appointed a lecturer to a permanent position in April 2009 helps show the importance of Japanese ability. According to a teacher serving on the hiring committee, the position attracted 57 applications, but only one of the eight candidates who reached the interview stage was a native English speaker. The hiring committee member explained that the most common reasons for eliminating candidates were insufficient Japanese ability and having less than the required three years teaching experience.

Some people argue that the powers-that-be in Japanese universities do not like foreign language teachers to get too good at Japanese, preferring it when their foreigner teachers are tongue-tied and ignorant of what goes on in the faculty meetings. This may or may not have been true in the past. Glick's (2002) discussion of university job-hunting in Japan claimed that too much Japanese ability could sometimes be a disadvantage but provided no evidence. According to Hall (1998), during the 1980's the majority of Tokyo University professors preferred their foreign professors to be "pure and unacclimated aliens" who could not converse fluently in Japanese (Hall, 1998, 105). Thankfully, today that way of thinking has mostly died out, and any places where it survives you would not want to teach at for very long anyway.

English ability

For Japanese applicants, the job ads usually failed to specify a required level of English or did so in terms so vague as to be meaningless. For example, job ads would call for *proficiency in English* or a *high level of English*. However, 25 ads stressed the need to be able to teach and lecture in English, and four more wanted teachers to have 900 TOEIC scores. Several schools also wanted Japanese candidates to have extensive overseas experience; 14 ads called for Japanese applicants to have studied or researched for a period of time in an English speaking country.

Is it what or who you know?

While crucial, even fluent Japanese and English ability will probably not get you crossing the tenure track finish line. Permanent English teaching positions at Japanese universities can attract over 60 application packages. Certainly not all will be from qualified individuals. The hiring committee members I interviewed remonstrated that a third or more of the resumes landing on their desks lack the minimum qualifications stated in the job ad. Nevertheless, competition remains fierce, so there will undoubtedly always be applications from teachers with very similar language ability, experience and publications to you. That makes setting yourself apart from the crowd vital. It is no longer enough to simply pay your JALT and JACET membership fees—you also have to get involved with meetings, conferences, editing journals and similar volunteer service.

Getting involved also helps one to make connections. Knowing someone never hurts in the current atmosphere of brutal competition. Yet what, and not just who, you know usually remains the key, at least for permanent jobs. All the hiring committee members I communicated with worked for universities that publicly advertised their positions. Two hiring committees reported recent experiences rejecting candidates with an inside connection after a different candidate excelled in the interview and teaching demonstration. This shows connections might be enough to land an interview, but they generally would not get someone automatically hired to a tenured teaching post.

However, a preference for the best candidate over those with an inside connection also depends on the university and department. As a hiring committee member elaborated, some universities, or sometimes departments within universities, have a reputation for restricting hiring to people with an inside connection. This is the kind of information that gets passed on from supervisor to graduate student and at conferences. It is another reason to become active in the field and meet as many people as possible.

Time to start praying?

Another consideration when putting together an application package for a tenured job is that

a number of universities in Japan are Christian institutions. The job ads from such schools typically call for applicants to show an understanding of the Christian faith. Being able to demonstrate this understanding is more important for tenured jobs than it is for part-time or contract positions at the same schools. Make your understanding of Christianity explicit in your cover letter or you will probably require divine intervention to get hired. This also illustrates the need for applicants to clearly show how they meet all the job requirements in their application packages. Never assume you can explain it at the interview because chances are you will not get invited unless your application clearly demonstrates how you fulfil *all* of the position's requirements.

The need for flexibility

Job hunters also improve their chances if they are mobile. If you have a Significant Other, start talking to them now about the need to move anywhere in Japan that an opportunity opens up. In 2008, at least two universities located in Japan's far flung colder regions experienced failed searches; no one who applied proved sufficiently qualified for the position, so the job ad had to be reposted. Willingness to move away from Kanto (and the larger cities in Kansai) reduces the struggle for tenure to merely dog eat dog. Around Tokyo, competition will always be dog eat dog, and eat cat too.

You also need to be flexible in terms of when you apply. If you are teaching on a limited-term contract, send out applications to tenured jobs every hiring season, not just the year your contract expires. Also, keep looking even in the off-season. A university in Kanto recently had trouble hiring a qualified tenured Assistant Professor outside of the usual application period, seemingly because lots of teachers had stopped job-hunting for the year. With the perfect demographic storm threatening Japanese universities, it is also best to be wary of tenured jobs opening up at small, unknown schools. It may be a great job, or you might just find yourself replacing someone who abandoned a sinking ship.

Conclusion

In the end, getting a tenured job is a bit like becoming fluent in a second language. Everyone who struggles wants to know the secret to success. There is no magic of course. It takes an incredible amount of hard work and perseverance over the long term. And unfortunately, also like language learning, not everyone who tries will succeed.

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James McCrostie came to Japan from Canada twelve years ago and sometimes thought his job hunt would never end. Daito Bunka University finally brought the search to a stop when they appointed him Assistant Professor in 2008. He also edits *The Language Teacher's* Job Information Center column.



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