This special issue of *Educational Perspectives* on teaching English in Japan was conceived during a four-week trip that I took as a visiting scholar to Bukkyo University, Kyoto in 2007. During my stay I was able to visit some schools and talk with a number of teachers and Bukkyo faculty regarding recent language teaching reforms mandated by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, and Sports (MEXT). These changes were controversial, as they required a departure from the usual practice of introducing English in the secondary schools. The new guidelines mandated forty-five minutes of English each week for students in the fifth and sixth grades. The aim of this reform was to get students used to conversing in English and to do it earlier in their schooling rather than later.

Several of the articles in this issue arose out of these discussions. The article by Ryoji Matsuoka clearly spells out the arguments on both sides of the debate regarding these reforms and raises concerns about access to foreign language instruction due to an opportunity gap between groups of students. Chie Ohtani’s article also discusses these reforms, especially in regard to the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) program. Her article was originally presented at the annual meeting of the Japan/United States Teacher Education Consortium (JUSTEC) held at the East-West Center, Honolulu in 2009. Ohtani’s study involved a number of in-depth interviews with and surveys of assistant language teachers (ALTs). Her article describes some of the problems inherent in the system and offers several valuable recommendations for its reform.

The aim of what is referred to as the “Rainbow Plan,” the effort to introduce English instruction to elementary schools is, perhaps, less controversial. In effect, it is part of a larger plan to achieve a greater degree of competence among Japanese students in speaking and communicating in English. Government efforts at reform have been directed to bringing about a change in the dominant approach in which English is taught as an examination subject requiring students to focus on written texts and the memorization of rules of grammar and vocabulary lists, much in the same way that Latin is often taught in the West—not as a living language, but as an object of study. The article by Minoru Shimizu provides an excellent historical account of the traditional approaches to language instruction in Japan and suggests how these deeply embedded traditions influence current practice. His narrative traces the story of language learning and teaching from its beginnings in the fifth century with the study of Chinese classics. He goes on to describe how these approaches were adapted to western languages and in general how language teaching has been...
shaped by the desire of the Japanese to learn from other cultures and to adapt what they have learned to Japanese culture and circumstances.

In addition to discussing these issues with faculty during my stay, I had the good fortune to visit several classrooms and witness at first hand a number of innovative approaches to English instruction that were being implemented, notably at Hirosawa Elementary School and at Murasakino High School.

My visit to Naoko Nishimura’s fifth grade classroom (pictured on cover) was especially enjoyable as I was able to see how the MEXT guidelines were being practiced at one school. I also had the memorable experience of meeting her students and holding short conversations in English with several of them. Ms Nishimura, ably assisted by an ALT from Australia (see cover photo), is an enthusiastic teacher of English, who worked in close collaboration with the ALT. Her students were eager to practice their language skills on me, and they all demonstrated that they had a much greater command of English than I have of Japanese.

During my visit to Murasakino High School, I was accompanied by Haruo Minagawa, the school’s Director of Development and Public Relations, who introduced me to students in Murasakino’s special English course. Murasakino High School aims to foster independence and individuality, and its English program is designed to provide enrichment opportunities in speaking English. The article by Minagawa in this issue provides a brief description of the school’s philosophy and an informative account of the schools distinctive English program.

The aim of *Educational Perspectives* is to explore a single issue from a variety of perspectives, so I am also grateful to several other authors for their contributions, which help to explore the theme of English language instruction as it impacts students, teachers, programs, and curriculum. Two of the articles in this issue were presented at the annual meeting of JUSTEC in Honolulu in 2007. Shien Sakai and his co-authors report on a large, two-phase study of student autonomy in English language learning. Natsue Nakayama, Akiko Takagi, and Hiromi Imamura’s article describes their work in conducting a survey of secondary school English teachers in Japan to determine their attitudes to a new certification system.

The article by George Weir and Toshiaki Ozasa takes a different perspective to the other articles in this issue by focusing on the textbooks that are used to teach English to Japanese students. Their approach employed the use of computer software to conduct a comparative analysis of three textbooks used in the teaching of English. One insight gained from their study is that a greater prominence is given to grammar than vocabulary in textbook design—a result consistent with the dominant approach to teaching that focuses on English as a subject of study rather than on language in use.

Finally, the article on the partnership between the College of Education at the University of Hawai‘i and Bukkyo University in Kyoto, Japan provides a short account of the ten-year connection between our two institutions and the real benefits that have been realized for faculty and students at both institutions.