

## **Kobanashi performed by learners -What we can learn from the activities of KKGH –**

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### 1. Introduction

This is a report on the formation and activities of a group called KKGH (Kokusai Kobanashi Godo Happyōkai), which was started by participants of an online training session "Kobanashi Workshop for Teachers: How to Teach Kobanashi Performances by Learners." The workshop was organized by the Japan Foundation London (JF London) in 2020. The main activity of KKGH is to have Japanese language learners learn kobanashi and present them in front of audience. For more information on the use of kobanashi in Japanese language education and its effects, please refer to "Minna no kobanashi project" (website) and other reports including Kubota & Hatasa 2009, Hatasa 2010, Arita 2016, Mori 2018, and Igarashi 2022.<sup>(1)</sup>

### 2. Beginning: 2020 Workshop for teachers organized by JF London

In June 2020, JF London hosted an online Rakugo event titled "Demonstration and Lecture on Rakugo for Japanese Language Education and Japanese Studies." The event was attended by over 120 participants, mostly Japanese studies scholars, Japanese language teachers, and Japanese language learners from European countries. The event featured lectures on rakugo and yose and a demonstration by a professional rakugo performer who participated live from Japan. The author was asked by Yuko Fujimitsu, then Japanese Language Education Advisor at JF London, to lead the event and serve as the lecturer. Although it was held during the COVID-19 pandemic, the evaluation questionnaire indicated that the event was highly satisfactory. (Hatasa, Yonemoto, Hamada 2020)

Following the successful event in June, JF London hosted an online workshop for Japanese language teachers, "Kobanashi Workshop for Teachers: How to Teach Kobanashi Performances by Learners" in October 2020. (Fujimitsu 2021) This workshop was the starting point of the series of development to follow.

While one-shot workshops tend to be transitory, after repeated discussions with JF advisors, we decided to emphasize the continuity of the workshop's effects. The following pre- and post-workshop assignments were incorporated to ensure the continuity of the activities. There was no charge for participation, and the workshop was about three hours.

1. Pre-workshop assignment: Record your own kobanashi performance and upload it to YouTube at least four days prior to the workshop.

2. Post-workshop assignment 1: Record your kobanashi performance again based on feedback from the instructor and peers at the workshop, and resubmit it. (A follow-up gathering was held after submission.)

3. Post-workshop assignment 2: Within the next six months, teach at least two students kobanashi.

Twenty-two Japanese language teachers from ten European countries accepted these conditions and applied. Their educational practices varied from hōsōgaku (weekend school in Japanese), continuing education, high schools, universities, and cultural associations.

Most of the participants were rakugo beginners

and had never performed kobanashi. All, but one participant, were native Japanese speakers. They did not have difficulty memorizing lines or pronouncing words. Few had ever uploaded videos to YouTube.

The pre-workshop assignment, due four days before the workshop, was to choose one of kobanashi from the list given in the handout, perform it, video record and upload it to YouTube.<sup>(2)</sup> There was no instruction on how to perform the story other than the basics provided in the handout. participants managed it well and almost all of them submitted their YouTube videos. No technical support was provided. Some of them may have gotten support from colleagues, friends, or family members. Once the videos were uploaded to YouTube, we asked them to post the links to Slack.<sup>(3)</sup> The instructor viewed and commented on the submitted videos through the Slack postings.

This activity was based on the idea that teachers themselves need to experience acting first in order to teach Japanese language learners. Experiencing the nervousness and shyness of performing in front of others, the effort to overcome it, and the difficulty of effectively acting even with only a few lines of dialogue, the teachers developed empathy for what they were trying to ask learners do. Comments and advice that the teachers receive can be used directly when they are in a position to teach.

The workshop was conducted over two days in two groups. The instructor commented on the basics of teaching kobanashi as the participants watched videos of the submitted assignments. The participants were then divided into smaller groups to comment on each other's performances and discuss how to improve them. The workshop concluded with a summary and a question-and-answer session.

Examples of kobanashi submitted by participants before and after the workshop

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jq89b4\\_g9IA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jq89b4_g9IA)



Post-workshop assignment 1 was due two weeks after the workshop, and sixteen participants resubmitted their kobanashi performances. At the follow-up meeting, all participants discussed the issues together. They were motivated to improve their performance, and some interactions among the participants took place.

### 3. Birth of KKGH



After completing post-workshop assignment 1, the participants began working on post-workshop assignment 2, which was to practice kobanashi instruction with at least two of their own students within six months. However, due to the pandemic, some participants could not easily find students. Some used family members since their children were learning Japanese as heritage learners. The kobanashi activity became a family activity for them. This was a development we had not anticipated.

From the winter of 2020 to the summer of 2021, a total of over twenty kobanashi activities were conducted in England, France, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Spain, Italy, Switzerland, Ireland, and Japan. (Oguma & Takagi, 2022) The types of schools included Hōsūkō, high schools, universities, language schools, and cultural education centers.

Ages of the learners ranged from early elementary school students to a seventy-year-old citizen. The number of learners in each activity

varied from a few to about twenty. Frequencies of instruction varied from once to several times, but the reports showed that the teachers made the most of their time and took the task seriously. One of the activities, which took place in Canton Vaud, Switzerland, in December 2020, developed into an online presentation of kobanashi by learners. (Ecole Club Migros Kobanashi Happyōkai 2020)

From June of 2021 to June of 2022, more than ten kobanashi workshops for teachers have been held at meetings of Japanese language teacher associations and regional study groups in various European countries. (Brand 2021, Nemoto-Brand 2022, Nakao 2022)

Through these activities, camaraderie among participants became stronger, information exchange among schools happened, and collaborative learning began. As an example, students from a heritage Japanese School in France were connected with students from Charles University in the Czech Republic to practice kobanashi online. (Kawashima 2021, Kawashima 2022)

During this process, workshop participants called on each other and a joint presentation was planned. This resulted in the first international kobanashi joint presentation held in June 2021. The seven members who played a central role went on to form the group KKGH.

The first KKGH presentation took the form of recordings of kobanashi performed by learners, which were submitted, edited by the organizer, and distributed via Zoom. There were eighty-eight participants from eight countries. JF London, which served as a cooperating organization, also provided original *sensu* (the fan for *rakugo*) and *tenui* (the hand towel for *rakugo*) all participants.



I was amazed at how active the KKGH core members were when heading to this event. The impossibility of a face-to-face meeting led to the decision to conduct an online international competition, which was larger in scale. The event was very success.

In July 2021, the second workshop for language instructors was held (hosted by JF London), resulting in fifteen new instructors who are interested in kobanashi. On September 25 and 26 of 2021, JF London hosted yet another online event "Rakugo and Kobanashi Demonstration, Lecture, and Presentation" featuring professional *rakugo* performers. KKGH provided pre-recorded kobanashi performances by learners and played them as warm-up act for the professionals.

#### 4. Further development of KKGH activities

The International Kobanashi Joint Presentation has become an annual event, with the second one held in April 2022 with sixty-four participants from nine countries, and the third one held in April 2023 with fifty participants from eight countries. Although the content of the presentation has gradually evolved, the basic philosophy of the event remains unchanged: Presentations are only to provide venues for performances, thus, no winners or rankings are announced. A new requirement was added in 2021 that teachers must participate as performers.

So far, all KKGH presentations have been conducted online, and the performance videos are subtitled in multiple languages so that viewers who do not understand Japanese can still enjoy them. The subtitling process is also part of language learning.

To expand and maintain its kobanashi activities,

KKGH has launched a new activity called "Kobanashi Dojo!" in 2021. KKGH members serve as hosts for this monthly online event, which provides a place to freely practice kobanashi. By holding these events on a regular basis, KKGH contributes to find new participants to expand kobanashi activities. All activities are conducted on a volunteer basis.

## 5. Findings from kobanashi activities

This section describes findings from KKGH activities.

- In the case of heritage Japanese learners, communication among family members became more active.
- Learners became interested in communicating with students from other schools because they were working toward the same goal, and KKGH provided a place for them to do so.
- Communication among learners of different ages was generated.
- The common goal of kobanashi presentation created communication among learners of different levels within the same school.
- The teacher's performance of kobanashi gives learners a positive experience. It created a sense of empathy between teachers and students.
- The online presentation allowed family members living abroad to participate as audience (grandparents living in Japan, grandparents living in Japan, etc.).
- They received several requests to translate local jokes in Japanese and make kobanashi.
- The work of translation and subtitling was incorporated into the learning process.

In addition to the above, an interesting phenomenon was reported. A husband (married to a Japanese) who was not good at Japanese became

interested in kobanashi and decided to perform. He participated in the presentation.

## 6. Conclusion

During a time when everyone was feeling depressed and stagnant due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the activities that KKGH started to do to do something cheerful have been rewarded with unexpected developments. The series of KKGH activities that began with the workshop broke down various "barriers". Barriers between schools, between levels of Japanese language study, between ages, between countries and regions, between learners and teachers, and even between families. (Kawashima 2023, Brand et al. 2023, Oguma 2023)

Looking from outside, the wonderful thing about KKGH is that all members enjoy the activities themselves. This kind of positive energy has the potential to expand further. It is also encouraging to see that the original participants of the first workshop, who three years ago did not know much about rakugo and kobanashi, are now in position to instruct newer members.

In the future, more in-person activities are likely to be held. Even on a small scale, I can see new challenges of conducting live kobanashi performances. It will be interesting to see how KKGH responds to this challenge, making good use of know-how they have developed through online activities.

We would also like to encourage non-native teachers to take on this challenge. A plan for new workshops is in making.

I have conducted many workshops large and small, but the experience from the 2020 workshop to today's KKGH has been overwhelming, and I am grateful to have had the opportunity to do so.

## Footnotes

- (1) A kobanashi is a short humorous story in the form of rakugo. It can be called a joke in the style of rakugo. Rakugo stories such as "Toki Soba" and "Jugemu" are main rakugo stories. They are not kobanashi. Professional rakugo storytellers often use kobanashi as a warm-up (called "makura") prior to the main story.
- (2) URL of handouts  
<https://one-taste.org/kobanashi/wp-content/themes/kobanashi/img/instruct/kobanashi-workshop-2022.docx>
- (3) Slack is a chat tool mainly for corporate use that makes it easy to share and comment on posted information. Participants had no particular technical problems with the use of Slack.

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### **Chronology of KKGH Activities**

- June 2020            Demonstration and introductory course on Rakugo for Japanese language education and Japanese studies (hosted by JF London)
- October 2020       Kobanashi workshop for teachers - how to teach kobanashi performance by learners (hosted by JF London) (pre-workshop assignment -> workshop -> post-workshop assignment 1)
- December 2020 ~ early 2021 (post-workshop assignment 2)  
At least ten workshops for teachers and reports on kobanashi teaching was held.
- June 2021:           The 1st International Kobanashi Joint Presentation (eighty-eight participants from eight countries)
- July 2021:           Second kobanashi workshop organized by JF London
- October 2021:       Rakugo and kobanashi performance, lecture, and presentation (hosted by JF London)
- October 2021:       Start of "KOBANASHI Dojo!"
- April 2022:           The 2nd International Joint Presentation of Rakugo and Kobanashi (sixty-four participants from nine countries)
- April 2023           The 3rd International Joint Presentation of Small Storytelling (fifty participants from eight countries)