



TC Spotlight

# Matthew Kocourek

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- **originally from Anchorage, Alaska USA**
- **Florida State University, Teachers College Columbia University**
- **currently teaching at Rikkyo University and the New York University School for Professional Studies**
- **president of Tokyo JALT**

**Tell us about yourself and your work recently.** My main interest has always been helping people reach their personal and professional goals and I try to do so by listening, asking questions, providing resources, and doing whatever else I can.

In New York, I did this in a special program we ran with Accenture and LaGuardia Community College which helped immigrants to the USA with a professional background practice business English skills, including job interview skills and communication skills, and learn basic bookkeeping skills and how to use Quickbooks--all before helping them apply for jobs or further studies.

Here in Tokyo, I previously worked at Kanda Institute of Foreign Languages and Temple University of Japan, teaching college prep courses and four-skills courses. Currently, I teach at Rikkyo in the English Discussion Center and I teach a variety of continuing education courses at the New York University School for Professional Studies.

Besides all of that, I also run a small online business teaching clients a variety of English and communication skills. Though I am too busy to do much of that these days, I still regularly Skype two Russian clients to talk about scientific and medical developments (their area of expertise) and work on their English communication.

Finally, in addition to my work, I volunteer with the Tokyo Chapter of the Japan Association for Language Teaching (JALT). I'm really proud of the work we do at JALT. We have nearly 700 members,



plan more than a dozen events per year, administer research grants, publish a research journal, and more. I am currently serving as President and it is a challenge, but also a great opportunity for me to meet more of the language community and to learn more about what they do and what we can do for them.

It all goes back to what I said in the beginning: I want to help people. JALT and my various jobs allow me to do that and I am grateful for it.

In the next five years, I hope to be working on an MBA and getting certified to do either coaching or counseling as well so that I can do even more of what I love. I hope to be working at a university while also working with private clients, helping students and professionals reach their goals.

If you are interested in getting involved with JALT, please email me at [tokyojaltpresident@gmail.com](mailto:tokyojaltpresident@gmail.com).

**What drew you to TC?** The community spirit is what drew me to TC instead of the other graduate programs I considered. I attended an introductory session with Bill Snyder and he demonstrated two techniques I had never considered, explained various theories behind them, and pushed the attendees to think about why they taught the way they did. And we did--together. I felt a sense of community then that continues still.

**What is your favorite thing about living in Tokyo?** Obviously food. Though I miss New York's incredible range of options, the cost performance ("cospa" in Japanese) is phenomenal.

**What did you learn at TC that ensured you would never be the same again?** It is so hard to synthesize one or two key points, but... I think one key points was to keep improving. I don't remember who it was that said it, but they suggested that we change one thing in our practice, see what happens, and then try something new. That is, we are teacher-researchers and we should be striving to improve ourselves, our lessons, and our learners. Change one thing, see what happens. Repeat. Love it.

**What is a favorite memory from TC?** I was teaching at a "second chance" school in Kanagawa and I was really struggling. There was little support, the students came from an incredibly diverse array of backgrounds, but all of them were suffering in one way or another. I was not prepared, but I was trying. That was where my observation with Dr. Hruska (apologies if my spelling is wrong) took place and it changed my life. Until that moment, observations had been to decide whether or not I was a good teacher, whether I got a raise and how much, etc. They either were followed up with a list of complaints or, more often, nothing. I dreaded that day, but after it was finished, the first thing she did was recognize how hard the situation was, listing all of the things the students and I were up against. She was there to help me be a better teacher, and to show me some emotional support. I will never forget her or that moment--even if the spelling of her name slips my mind right now. *(note from the editor: That is the correct spelling Matt!)*



**What is your advice for somebody who is trying to get into teaching?** Get special. Finding some area or specialty will help you immensely in the long run. Global expertise is necessary to get your foot in the door, but by focusing on something you like to do, and/or are good at, and building upon that, not only will it be easier to find other, better jobs, but they will come to you! If you are interested in something, do it and research it. Build up a repertoire of skills related to it. Be that person who everyone associates with your interest.

**What has been the biggest challenge in your career? How did you overcome it?** Fear of failure. I don't know if I will ever really overcome it, but I am working on it. We live in a world where failure can sometimes mean being homeless or at least having to make some very tough financial decisions and at many times in my career I have chosen the easier path, made as much money as I could doing as little as I had to survive. I am not advising people to take stupid risks, but... recognize that safety is sometimes worse in the long run. Does that make sense? In my career now, I am listening when people offer

me volunteer positions or jobs and trusting that if they believe I can do it, I probably can.

**What would you do if you could take a one-year sabbatical?** I would try something totally different. I think that we can also serve our students better by learning more about the world we all live in--and so much of what we learn in one field can carry over into others.

**What message would you like to share with the TC community?** Please reach out. I am garbage with names, but I greatly appreciate all of you and would love to collaborate more.

