

TC Alumni Spotlight – Michael Seko

From Minnesota to Botswana to Japan to Saudi Arabia!



The view from Dhahran,
Saudi Arabia

Michael (Rinne) Seko

TC Group Number: 21

Born: Northern Minnesota, USA.

Currently a full time lecturer at King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia

“Learning is so much more important than teaching. My best students will learn what they want to with or without my help and there are plenty of great students and fellow teachers to help me learn more.”



Tell us about yourself and your work? Life started for me in a small town in northern Minnesota. Teaching started in a village in Botswana with the Peace Corps. Effective teaching started some years later in Japan with Sony Language Laboratory, TLS English, Tokyo Metropolitan University and Tamagawa University. Since September of 2016, I have been a full-time lecturer at King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia.

Describe your path since graduating TC until now: After getting my TC degree in February of 2011, I was able to get more part-time work at universities in Japan, but learned that my own high estimation of my teaching abilities was not enough to get me a full-time position (note to other middle-aged teachers worldwide: there are a lot of talented, intelligent, young teachers with publications applying for the same positions as you). Teaching at my wife’s conversation school and part-time at two universities became too much for both of us, so I started looking towards the Middle East for opportunities (thanks, Dave’s ESL Cafe!) to teach and learn full-time while continuing to support my family in Japan.

Favorite thing about Japan? I lived longer at one address in Yokohama than I did in the house my parents built in Minnesota, and it remains my home of record and feeling. The school my wife and I started twenty years ago remains in operation under the ownership and direction of another dedicated teacher. I look forward to returning home for vacation next summer and retiring somewhere, someday in Japan.

What drew you to TC? The great John Fanselow was still at TC in New York in 1987. He was instrumental in expanding TC's Peace Corps Fellows Program from math and science teachers to ESL and when he called me to New York I gladly retired from substitute teaching by day and "beer-tending" by night to go to New York. Teaching full-time at a high school in The Bronx and studying evenings and weekends at TC was too much for me, so I quit to become a Peace Corps recruiter first in New York and a year later in San Francisco (where I had earned my BA at USF). After three years in San Francisco I taught for a year in Saudi, returned to San Francisco for another year, and settled in Japan from 1992 to 2016. In 2008, my wife and I together visited Dr. Terry Royce at the TC Tokyo campus in Suidobashi. I was saddened when Terry left TC before I graduated, but happy that Bill Snyder was there to guide my MA paper in Multiple Intelligences. So it was good people who drew me to TC, drew me back, and will draw me back again.

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What is a favorite memory from TC? So many, but one has to be TC Day in Tokyo this past July (2016). Like my father before me, I am known to tear up at a good TV commercial or touching rendition of the "Happy Birthday" song. I was called on that afternoon to introduce Dawn Jin Lucovich's excellent presentation and again that evening's dinner to speak. For once words flowed easier than tears for me. I was happy to be in the company of good, dedicated people who would welcome me back whenever I returned to Japan.

What class/teacher/classmate has had a lasting effect on you? Every single one, but in addition to John, Terry, and Bill let me add another name. I enjoyed learning how to teach the pronunciation of my mother tongue from Yasushi Sekiya and was happy to meet him again a few years later at Kanda University of International Studies. His path from Japan to New York and back to Japan with his intelligent and beautiful partner is as inspiring as his teaching.

What is your favorite thing (or hardest) thing about teaching (or your current job)? Tests and textbooks! My current assignment is to teach 29 young men for four hours a day, five days a week for eight weeks. That might be nothing but fun if we were not tasked with three textbooks to complete and high-stakes tests every two weeks. Yes, I have to be mindful to keep my lesson content culturally appropriate, but how appropriate is the future perfect continuous tense and TOEFL to aspiring minerals engineers? I am fortunate and wise enough to remain in communication with John Fanselow and challenge anyone to find (better yet, write) an ESL textbook that might meet with his approval.

What is your advice for somebody who is trying to get into your field? Do it. Friends at the University of San Francisco told me not to join the Peace Corps. They advised me that law school or Japan during "The Bubble Economy" were better options. I recall two successful lessons in two years of teaching in Botswana, but I visited Victoria Falls by overnight train three times and have two friends (one a former teacher and the other a former student who is now a teacher) with whom I am still in contact. I would rather live and work for two years or more almost anywhere in the world than visit it for ten days to two weeks. Teaching ESL has allowed me to live and work in Africa, the U.S., Japan, and for a second time in Saudi Arabia. To quote another former student, "Home is where the heart is and I have homes in at least four different places."

What is the secret to your success? No secret. My wife, three daughters, and father-in-law with a nod to my sister and two brothers. My late parents and grandparents and many dedicated (and surviving!) teachers along the way have helped, too.

Have you found TESOL theory and practice relevant to/useful in any other fields? How? Yes. Krashen's L+1 is consistent with the advice I got from an undergraduate friend who was working on his own intercollegiate basketball skills while trying to help me become a better intramural league player. If you want to improve your game, play with and against players who are better than you, not as good as you, and your equals. Watch, observe and learn from them, try to do what they can do, and make note of your own progress. Additionally, Fanselow's instruction to try alternatives both the things that work and things that don't has universal application. Small changes can have big results and do not preclude attempting bigger changes like moving from a happy home in Japan to a bachelor's existence in Saudi Arabia in midlife.

Can you share a recent classroom experience? A number of my current and first class of Saudi students have told me of their appreciation for Japanese culture and have asked me to tell them more about it. Last week one of their classmates raised his hand and said, "Mr. Seko you always tell us positive things about Japan. Why don't you ever tell us anything negative things?" Indeed. Why would I want to do that?

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What motivates you? Love. John Fanselow now talks about the five skills of communication: listening, speaking, reading, writing, and feeling. He contends that they cannot and should not be taught separately. I worked here for nearly two months before receiving my first salary. Not every lesson has been a joy for me or my students, but when understanding is gained and noted we each gain the motivation to continue. And I forgot to say that in addition to their four hours of English a day, my first-year students also have four hours of math (and a similar battery of testing).

What has been your biggest challenge in career? How did you overcome? The understanding and acceptance that I play a tiny yet vital part in the current puzzle of life. I, perhaps mistakenly, interpreted Krashen's divide between learning and acquisition to mean there is a similar division between teaching and learning. Realizing that learning is far more important than teaching and that learners are more responsible for their learning than I am helped free me to try doing things that might actually help them to learn. By making students take responsibility and reward for their own successes and failures, I started experiencing more of my own.

What is the secret to your success? No secret. My wife, three daughters, and father-in-law with a nod to my sister and two brothers. My late parents and grandparents and many dedicated (and surviving!) teachers along the way have helped, too.

What would you do if you could take a one-year sabbatical? This is it. I have long wanted to exchange three part-time teaching positions for one full-time job. I rarely sit down these days and rarely want to.

What advice do you have for others starting at TC now? Keep smiling.

What would you like to tell the TC community? Thank you. It feels wonderful to never be the smartest person in the room when I am in your company and to still feel completely accepted. Thank you.



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