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**On the British Education System**  
**and**  
**The State Schools in Cambridge (Vol. XXX)**  
**—Hardships and Difficulties of Studying ‘A’ Level Subjects—**

Minoru SHIGETA\*

In the preceding essay (Vol. XXIX), we have seen first how my three children's admission to the state schools in Cambridge developed and then general outline of the Sixth Form in England and Wales, and in Impington Village College where my eldest daughter attended, and her hardships for going to school by bus.

In this essay, we will see how my eldest daughter got into difficulties in studying biology and mathematics, and then how much her friends in Impington Village College gave a helping hand to her.

As we have seen in the preceding essay (Vol. XXIX), most of the school children in the secondary schools in England and Wales find employment at the age of 15 when they finish their compulsory education, but some of them are moved up to the fifth form and they may transfer to college of further education or find a situation by passing O levels of GCE (General Certificate of Education) or some grades of CSE (Certificate of Secondary Education). But some of the fifth formers may stay school for two or three years more, and study there or four subjects, trying to pass A levels of GCE. This system is called the sixth form. Studies are highly specialized at the sixth form stage because the courses lead to the GCE "A" Level exam which qualifies students for all kinds of higher education. As for the Sixth Form in Impington Village College, each student, for administration and general guidance, belongs to a small tutor

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Group which meets daily. The responsibility for and coordination of the assessment of academic progress lies with the Head of Sixth Form, who regularly interviews all students. According to the Sixth Form Brochure in Impington Village College, students follow 'A' Level courses, but may, in addition, study some subjects to 'O' Level. For those who wish to enter for 'S' Level papers, teaching is arranged in all subjects. Students must normally choose three 'A' Level subjects, but for some students concentration on two subjects may be acceptable. The combination of 'A' Level subjects offered may be affected by the demands of the timetable, and so students are advised to consult the Sixth Form Brochure and / or the Head of Sixth Form before they make their final decision. Therefore, when my wife, eldest daughter and I met Mr. Hjort, Head of the Sixth Form, my daughter, according to his suggestion, agreed to take the two subjects, mathematics and biology for 'A' Level for two weeks.

Thus my daughter's learning in England began at Impington Village College. As I said in the preceding essay, my daughter had a great difficulty in going to school by bus. Almost every day, she seemed to be worried about the bus for the college being late. At school, they had assembly at the beginning of the lessons, but my daughter was often absent because her bus was frequently late. After the assembly, the sixth formers have their own courses. Some students study at the library, and some relax at the lounge when they are free. As for my daughter, she had only two subjects, and had a lot of free time. During the free time, some friends of my daughter's had the kindness to take her to the library, lounge, and music room. By permission of Mr. Hjort, head of Sixth Form, my daughter was able to play the piano, perhaps because I had told him that she could play the piano rather well. In this way, she seemed to enjoy her college life in her own way. But one day in December, I received a much puzzled letter from the head of Sixth Form. I will show you a copy of the letter in the following page, but to sum up, the point of his letter is as follows; about six weeks have passed since my daughter began to study at the Sixth Form, and she is studying very hard at Maths and Biology. But she is not able to benefit from their teaching because of her limited ability in English. So the lessons can be of little help to her either to progress in her understanding of Maths and Biology, or in her confidence in English. Therefore he thinks it is better to study English as a foreign language at one of the private language schools in Cambridge.

Reading Mr. Hjort's letter, I was much perplexed, and sought for my neighbour Mr.

CAMBRIDGESHIRE EDUCATION COMMITTEE



IMPINGTON VILLAGE COLLEGE

WARDEN: SYLVIA WEST, M.A.

IMPINGTON,  
CAMBRIDGE.  
CB4 4LX.

Telephone No:  
HISTON 2835  
(STD 022 023)

Our reference: DHJ/AJ

Your reference:

3rd. December 1986

Mr. Minoru Shigeta,  
40 Mulberry Close,  
Cambridge.  
CB4 2AS

Dear Mr. Shigeta,

re Chiharu Shigeta T11

Chiharu has been with us for six weeks now, and I am writing to express some concern about progress. She is working very hard at Maths and Biology, but is not able to benefit from our teaching or participate in discussions of the topics being taught, because of her limited ability in English. We had hoped that, as she became accustomed to hearing spoken English, she would be able to speak and understand more, but this has not happened and so the lessons can be of little help to her either to progress in her understanding of Maths and Biology, or in her confidence in English.

I feel it would be wise to consider whether Chiharu's time in England would not be of more benefit to her if she were to study English as a foreign language, at one of the private language schools in Cambridge. Please contact me if you would like to discuss this. Meanwhile, we will continue to give her what help we can, but this will, I regret, be limited.

Yours sincerely,

D. HJORT,  
Head of Sixth Form.

Michell's advice. He said I did not have to worry about it so much since such a thing happened so often, and I was much relieved. At the same time, thinking it important to contact Mr. Hjort, I wrote a letter saying that I thanked you so much for your kindness to my daughter, and would like her to study at Impington Village, and wanted her to stay in an Englishman's house if possible.

The next day my daughter went to school with my letter to Mr. Hjort, and came back, to my surprise, with a letter from her five friends instead of Mr. Hjort's. The letter said that my daughter had mentioned she had wanted to stay in a boarding house for two months in order to improve her English, and that they had discussed the matter with their parents, who all had agreed to let my daughter stay in their homes as part of the family for about two weeks, adding that she would be able to stay with an English family for a total of ten weeks, and that they were sure that would improve her English. Furthermore, they closed the letter, saying "We all enjoy Chiharu's company and we wish to make her stay in England most pleasurable." After reading the letter, I was very glad to receive such a warm letter, and tears came into my eyes, perhaps because I fully realized the tenderness, kindness and generosity of the five English girls. I lost no time in replying to a letter, saying that I thanked them too much for their kindness to my daughter, and that I would like them to wait for my answer because I had to contact Mr. Hjort and asked him if my daughter could stay at Impington Village College. In token of my gratitude to the five girls, I will write down their names here: Sandra Youd, Ruth Allchin, Alison Day, Christine Gibson and Samantha Davis-Chamblain. At the same time, I will show you a copy of the nice letter in the next page. In her diary, my daughter wrote, "Today I went to school with Father's letter to the five girls and the letter from Mr. Hjort to Father, and showed it to them. All of them read those letters one by one, and especially Alison seemed to get angry at Mr. Hjort's letter. I was very glad to see them thinking about my plight very seriously. At the third period, all of them as well as I had free lesson, and they went to see Mr. Hjort, saying that they would discuss the matter with him. Downstairs we met Mr. Hjort and they showed my homework in Mathematics marked A grade and Father's letter to them. In reply to such appeals of theirs, Mr. Hjort told me that he would hand in his letter next Monday, and told Sandra to ask for Mrs. Gray about my English lessons. Later when I asked Sandra what he had said to her, she said that I could go back to school after

Dear Sir,

Chiharu mentioned that she wanted to stay in a boarding house for two months, to improve her English.

We discussed this with our parents and they all offered to let her stay in their homes as part of the family for about two weeks. Since there have been five offers she will be able to stay with an English family for a total of ten weeks. We are sure this will improve her English.

We all enjoy Chiharu's company and we wish to make her stay in England most pleasurable.

yours

faithfully.

Sandra Youd,

Ruth Allchin,

Alison Day,

Christine Gibbons,

Samantha Davis-Chamblain.

having English lessons for a week or so. Furthermore, the five girls asked me which I liked better, biology or art, and I said I liked art. Perhaps I may have to take art instead of biology, though I am not quite sure. But I was very happy today.”

Soon I received a letter from Mr. Hjort. Here I will also show you its copy.



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WARDEN: SYLVIA WEST, M.A.

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HISTON 2835  
(STD 022 023)

Our reference: DH/ BJ

Your reference:

Mr. Minoru Shigeta,  
40, Mulberry Close,  
Cambridge,  
CB4 2AS.

8th December, 1986.

Dear Mr. Shigeta,

RE: CHIHARU SHIGETA T11

Thank you for your letter of 3rd December, 1986. I was not aware when I wrote to you about the difficulties Chiharu was having in improving her English, that some of her friends here had suggested that she should stay with them at their homes, for a week or two in turn. I now understand that they have written to you, with this suggestion, which they have already discussed with their parents. I am delighted that the girls should have taken this initiative.

I have been making some enquiries about English lessons for Japanese students, and I hope to have some information soon.

I hope these developments will help Chiharu improve her English. Her teachers have applauded her hard work and determination, but it is very difficult for her to benefit from the Biology lessons in particular, and I suggest we discuss this, and the other matters, on either Wednesday 10th December or Thursday 11th December, at 4 p.m. Please let me know which of these dates is more convenient for you and Chiharu, and I will then ask if some of her friends can also be present to discuss their proposal.

Yours sincerely,

D. Hjort

In reply to Mr. Hjort's letter, I said in my letter to him that I would like to meet him on Thursday 11th December, at 4. p.m., adding that I did not mind some friends of my daughter's sitting with us. Thus on the appointed day, my wife and I went to Impington Village College by car to meet Mr. Hjort. When we arrived there, my daughter had already waited for us with her friends, Sandra and Alison. When we went to the college office and said that we would like to meet Mr. Hjort, he appeared and took us to the library, and we discussed the matter. At the meeting, I told the two girls that I had no words to thank you enough for your suggestion, and agreed to the five girls' offer that my daughter could stay with their houses for the total of ten weeks. Then Mr. Hjort said that he would arrange for us to meet the five girls' parents as Lower Sixth Consultation Evening would be held in January next year. As for changing biology, all of us including my daughter decided to take art instead of biology according to Mr. Hjort's suggestion. In addition, Mr. Hjort advised that we should make a phone call to Mrs. Gray as he had asked her to have some English lessons to my daughter. After coming back home, I telephoned Mrs. Gray, with whom my wife and I had acquainted since she had been in charge of English Conversation Class held at the Society for Visiting Scholars, and I made an appointment to meet her at six p.m. the next day. On 12th December, my wife, my daughter and I went to Mrs. Gray's. My daughter, according to her diary, took a paper test in English with fifty questions. After that, Mrs. Gray pointed out that the pronunciation, vocabulary, reading and grammar of my daughter was not so good, and suggested that she should borrow some English books, listen to English cassette tapes and go to church to improve her English. And Mrs. Gray added that she would write a letter to inform Mr. Hjort of my daughter's English ability and that she would have English lessons after Christmas, though she was not sure she could.

Two days later, I received a school letter, saying that a Consultation Evening would be held between 7.00 and 9.30 p.m. on Wednesday, 14th January. So writing on the tear-off slip the names of staff I would like to meet, that is, Mr. Hjort and Mrs. Wood (Form Tutor), I returned to the form tutor. Soon it was sent back to me with appointment time added.

Thus on 14th January, my wife, my eldest daughter and I had dinner earlier than usual, and left home for Impington Village College at 6.30 p.m. As soon as we arrived there before seven o'clock, we went to meet Mr. Hjort, who had arranged a room for us. When all the five

girls and their parents came, we discussed the matter with them. It was arranged that my daughter was to stay first at Ruth's, and they asked my daughter when she would begin to stay, and she said any time would do. So it was arranged that she would begin to stay on Sunday, 1st February. On that occasion, I added that I would like them to let my daughter stay at their houses on Saturday and Sunday, since I was afraid that she would naturally speak Japanese at our house if she came back on each weekend. About the matter, they were willing to agree with me. Next I said I would like to pay some money as my daughter would trouble them so much, but they would not agree to my proposal though I said again and again that I would owe them too much if so. By the way, Mrs. Allchin, Ruth's mother, was a very cheerful and highly humorous lady, and let those present laugh, telling us that she would say "No," if I tried to pay them some money, and also would say "No" if my daughter asked her to give her one more meal, and that she would say, "You had better go to Japan" if my daughter made a phone call for a long time." After the meeting, we met Mr. Hjort and Mrs. Wood, and reported them about the matter and went home, thanking the five girls and their parents for their friendship, kindness and generosity, and thinking how I could be of service to them in return.

In the meanwhile, the parents of the five girls discussed the matter of the period of my daughter's stay with each English family. One day in January, the five girls wrote a thank-you letter to me after we had invited them to the party at our house, "Thank you for entertaining us for a Japanese meal. We all enjoyed ourselves and the food was lovely (although very different!). We also thank you for your extremely kind offer and as you know we intend going to York ( This is without an adult). [When we invited the five girls at the party, I proposed that I would like the five girls including my daughter to go somewhere for a short holiday as I was ready to offer the traveling expenses]. We will give you the full details later as arrangements still have to be finished....We hope Chiharu is enjoying her stay with us all." I found that it was Alison's writing because in the letter her address was written as a representative. Overleaf were the dates of my daughter's stay written: 1st February - 15th February (Ruth's), 15th February - 22nd February; 1st March - 8th March (Christine's), 8th March - 22nd March (Alison's), 22nd March - 5th April (Sandra's), and 5th April - 19th April (Samantha's). Thinking that my daughter would have a lot of troubles to them if she stayed

throughout the half term (23rd February - 28th February), I had asked them to have my daughter go home for the period.

In the meantime, the day came when my daughter left home for Ruth's (her first host family). At 11 o'clock on 1st February, Mr. And Mrs. Allchin was so kind as to come to our house to pick up my daughter. Thus began the total of ten weeks of her stay in English families. There she had a lot of experiences, I think. In her diary, she writes down a lot of differences of the way of living between England and Japan. For example, my daughter seems to have helped the landladies to clear the table after supper and is surprised to find that they put the dishes into a machine for washing them, and that with a cloth, they dry the dishes which are still foamy by detergent. And other times she finds that after dinner in the evening all the family always watch television in the dining room, but that once someone says, "Good night," he or she, after taking a bath or shower, goes to bed, and never comes back downstairs, and that it is very rude to go to other person's room at night whether it is done by the parents, or brothers and sisters. And my daughter thinks that it is rather strange from the Japanese point of view, but that such conduct is polite after all. Moreover, my daughter says in her diary: "When they serve a lot of food and the vegetables which I am unaccustomed to eating, and I cannot eat them up, they take it too seriously and ask me what kind of food I like, and are full of anxiety about me. So feeling sorry for them, I make up my mind to eat up the served food as much as I can, even though I do not like it."

Thus my daughter stayed with the five English families for the total of ten weeks, and her stay ended on 19th April. During the stay, my daughter improved her English, and had a many useful experiences, including the above-mentioned manners and customs of England, and learned how the English spent time to spare, holidays and the week end, I think. At the same time, her stay will become, I am sure, a sweet remembrance to her through her life from now on. I feel like telling you about the further details of her stay, but because of the limited space, I will tell you about them on another occasion. Finally, by expressing my appreciation to the five girls and their families once more, and showing you some photographs taken during my daughter's stay, I will finish this essay.



Alison's family and my daughter at the living room



my daughter's five intimate friends at Impington, Cambs.