



Ms. Mikami

Ms. Tatsumi

What's your name?

This marks the first in a series of articles in which we describe our daily activities as members of the SHIEN-ATR Foreign Staff Support Group. Through the articles, we hope to present some of our thought and experiences as we work side by side with people who suddenly find themselves immersed in a different culture.

According to the 2000 ranking of the *World Competitiveness Year Book* published by the International Institute for Management Development, a Swiss think tank, Japan sits at the very bottom of the list of 47 countries for the item, 'Ease of employing foreign workers'. This is unfortunate, but it probably means that foreign workers in Japan are somewhat special among most Japanese. If so, foreign residents may have many difficulties in this country.

On the other hand, ATR employs more than 60 foreign researchers each year. They represent about one-third of all employees hired in a year, which is an uncommonly high rate for a Japanese company. SHIEN is specialized group that supports the foreign researchers and their families. Our goals are twofold: to help people coming from overseas to settle into their new working environment more smoothly, and to help the Japanese people at ATR to associate with them more naturally. The support begins by taking care of their visa procedures and continues until they leave ATR and Japan. During their stay, we provide much advice on a wide range of day-to-day issues. In this article, we give an example of how we help newcomers facing a custom peculiar to Japan.

In Japan, there's a custom of attaching *furigana* over people's names when filling in a form. (*Furigana* is the phonetic alphabet written beside the kanji characters to indicate how they are pronounced.) This is a convenient custom for Japanese, because the kanji characters used for people's names have so many different pronunciations, some of which are quite unusual. Although this custom probably does not exist in other countries, foreign residents of Japan are needed to attach *furigana* over their names as well as Japanese. Bank forms, city office forms, and many other forms require it. As part of their company orientation, newcomers to ATR have the first experience of it. "Is it like 'ray', is it more like 'rayee'?" "Does it sound like 'chin' or 'tsuin'?" Since these differences are strictly reflected to *furigana* expressions, we ask such questions to newcomers for filling in *furigana*. "How was that?" We sometimes even have them listen to the very Japanese pronunciation of their own names. It's quite difficult to write non-Japanese names in Japanese, but we must try more to find the closest one, because many procedures will depend on it. Attaching *furigana* is not simply a matter of paperwork; it is part of the process of showing differences about life in Japan and offering suggestions about how to get along with such differences. Hoping to reduce the confusion, we sometimes tell newcomers that a Japanese person may not catch their names immediately if they pronounce their names in their native tongues. At such time, we even suggest them that they give their names more Japanese pronunciation. It will be very helpful for the Japanese people to call them. We make this suggestion because we believe calling a person makes a smoother communication, even though pronunciation might be off slightly.

"Hello, XX-san! (Hello, Mr./Ms. XX!)" Our orientation cannot be started without a cheerful introduction.

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