

# English Education and Team Teaching in Japan

Reflections on a decade as an English teacher in the Japanese classroom

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## Introduction

Every situation is different. Each country in the world where English is taught, and that includes the vast majority of nations, has its own conditions and its own special educational background for the teaching of languages. This special educational environment is sometimes at odds with the pedagogical principles that underlie the international industry that English language teaching has become. Thus there are often issues to be dealt with when English is taught in each nation. Japan has its own fair share of these issues for a variety of reasons. While I in part use the works of others in this paper I intend to look at the Japanese situation surrounding the field of English education based on my own personal experiences and observations as an Irish teacher of English in Japan. Since my coming to Japan originally in the year 2000 I have been involved in English education in various capacities. These include in no particular order; a university lecturer, a private language tutor, a medical English tutor, an English conversational school tutor, a company business English course instructor, a part-time lecturer at a technical college, a part-time junior college lecturer, a part-time university lecturer and an Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) at a public junior high school. By focusing greatly on the latter post I would like to broadly outline the background and some of the issues surrounding the teaching of English in Japanese classrooms and finally offer my personal views regarding the same.

## Japan's Historical Relationship with English

The earliest record of the initial contact between the Japanese and a native English speaker is said to have taken place around 1600 when it is believed that Tokugawa Ieyasu, founder of the Tokugawa Feudal Government, met with Englishman William Adams. Although it is reported that the sole interpreter between the two men was only well-versed in Portuguese language, it did not stop Tokugawa Ieyasu from having a very positive relationship with William Adams who remained in Japan for the remainder of his life.

The first translation of any English grammar book into Japanese was accomplished by Shibukawa Rokuzo, a high-ranking official of the Tokugawa Shogunate who had studied Dutch, in 1841 when he translated Murray's *English Grammar* from Dutch into Japanese. Then in 1848, American Ranald MacDonald came to Japan, after pretending to be shipwrecked, and taught English to fourteen official Japanese interpreters of Dutch in Nagasaki under Shogunate orders. It would be one of MacDonald's students named Moriyama who would act as interpreter between the United States and Japan in order to establish trade relations.

After being rescued from a shipwreck and studying in the United States for ten years, Nakahama Manjiro wrote an English textbook called *Ei-Bei Taiwa Shokei* (A Shortcut to Anglo-American Conversation), which used Japanese kana for pronunciation and the *kanbun* (Chinese classic characters) word-order system. This text would later become influential in shaping the methods of teaching and learning English in Japan.

Yokohama Academy, one of the first English Schools, was founded in Japan by the Shogunate in 1865 and American missionaries such as James Curtis Hepburn taught there. By the year 1874, there were 91 foreign language schools in Japan, out of which 82 taught English. And in 1923, Englishman Harold E. Palmer was invited to Japan by the Ministry of Education, where he would later found the Institute for Research in English Teaching in Tokyo and introduce the aural-oral approach to teaching English.

In modern Japan, there seem to be conflicting views over how the Japanese people view the English language. On one hand, it appears that there is much interest in acquiring a working knowledge of the English language, which can be demonstrated by the annual rise in The EIKEN Test in Practical English Proficiency applicants and the number of Japanese media outlets that have begun to incorporate English-language programs into their repertoire. While at the same time, Japan remains to be one of the most independent nations on Earth due to its isolated geographic location and amazing translation industry, thus requiring hardly any use of English in daily life.

In Japan, English-language education starts the first year of junior high school and continues at least until the third year of high school. Surprisingly students are still unable to speak or to comprehend English properly after this time. One of the reasons is instruction which focuses on the skill of reading and writing. In the past, Japan was a nation composed of a single ethnic group and had a very small number of foreign visitors, and there were few opportunities to converse in foreign languages. Learning English became popular after World War II, but English was taught by teachers who were trained under the method that emphasized reading. There were no qualified teachers to teach hearing and speaking ability. Another reason for the relatively poor speaking ability of Japanese high school graduates compared to those of other countries lies in the Ministry of Education's guidelines. The guideline limits the English vocabulary that is to be learned during the three years junior high school to about 1,000 words. Textbooks must be screened first by the Ministry of Education and result for the most part in standardized textbooks that make English language learning too confining.

However, in recent years the necessity to communicate in English has increased. The students and adults who study English conversation have increased rapidly and private English conversation schools have become prominent. I would say that one of the primary obstacles to gaining greater conversational ability in the English language lies in the absence of conversational skills being

evaluated in final exams, be it junior high school, high school entrance exams or in most university entrance exams. In order to enter high school or university, students need to be proficient in reading, writing and to a lesser extent listening to English, but proficiency in speaking is not required.

### The Grammar Translation Method

The method and goal of the grammar translation method are apparent just from the name. The main objective is to translate from the native language to the target language. This is done through the intensive study of vocabulary and grammar rules in a deductive way. That is, the teacher presents and explains a grammar rule which is then practised through translation. Because grammar is taught outside of communicative goals or discourse, the focus is on the sentence-level. The relationship between sentences is not necessarily relevant. Generally this explanation is given in the native language. Thus, though students might develop some competence in the target language, they will continue to use their first language as a referent. Oral practice, with the exception of the recitation of texts, is completely absent.

As a means of teaching language for communicative purposes, the shortcomings of the grammar translation method are obvious. However, that was never the goal of the method's German proponents. Rather, the grammar translation method was the application of traditional methods of studying classical languages such as Greek and Latin to modern languages. Language was considered not to be that much different from teaching mathematic or scientific rules. The point was not communicative competence, but intellectual rigour. The study of language was not an end unto itself but a means of acquiring mental discipline.

The attractions of grammar translation for a country hitherto isolated from foreign influence are manifold. Teachers did not have to be communicatively competent in the language they were teaching. Students' main contact with the language was usually through books which the grammar translation could render comprehensible. The country was able to gain access to international developments in science and industry even though there was limited contact with foreigners. Finally, the philosophical underpinnings provided by the grammar translation method allowed success in the tasks dictated by the method (i.e. the memorisation of vocabulary and grammar rules) to be equated with general intellectual capability. Thus English ability as defined by the grammar translation method came to be a part of the examination system. The examination system is one of the main causes for the continuing use of grammar translation in Japanese schools. It continues to be an efficient and effective means of cramming the huge amount of English trivia necessary for examination success into the heads of aspiring university students. Although this is changing and some universities are making their exams more communicative in nature, school teachers and students still feel great pressure to study isolated points of grammar and lexical terms in preparation for the entrance exams. Aside from the continuing predominance of the examination system, many of

the reasons for the slow decline of the grammar translation method in Japan are practical. Many language teachers have not had the chance or the time (given their numerous other duties) to practice their language skills because of limited opportunities to travel abroad or interact with foreigners. They may feel more comfortable teaching grammar and vocabulary as they can continue to rely on Japanese as a medium of instruction. Also, language classes in Japan are very large. Grammar translation, because it treats language as a body of knowledge that can be passed from teacher to student using traditional methods such as lecturing, allows the teacher to maintain control of the classroom easily.

### Effects of Grammar Translation on Classes

- Many teachers continue to rely on Japanese for foreign language instruction.
- Classes are teacher-centred. The teacher lectures about a given point of grammar. There is little interaction on the part of the students.
- When oral skills are taught, they may be formulaic (i.e. A: "How are you?" B: "I am fine, thank you"). In other words, conversation is taught in terms of unbreakable rules rather than as a form of strategy for communicating.
- Students rely on Japanese-English or English-Japanese dictionaries, and so will often use words in an incorrect way because they are unfamiliar with the language usage.
- Students may be able to give explanations of grammar points in Japanese, but are unable to use the language in communicative situations.
- Since accuracy is stressed, students may be corrected when they make a mistake, even if what they were saying or writing is understandable to the listener or reader.
- In a grammar-based syllabus, language elements may be presented and practiced outside of meaningful contexts.

### Application to the JET Programme

The Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme began modestly in 1987 and has grown consistently. It is a Japanese government initiative that brings college (university) graduates—mostly native speakers of English, to Japan as Assistant Language (ALTs) and Sports Education Advisors (SEAs) in Japanese kindergartens, elementary, junior high and high schools, or as Coordinators for International Relations (CIRs) in local governments and boards of education. JET Programme participants are collectively called JETs.

Today it is one of the largest exchange programmes in the world. The vast majority of participants are native English speakers working in public schools as ALTs. CIR participants work for local governments as coordinators of international relations, for example organizing internationally themed festivals or homestays abroad. Most JET Programme ALTs are hired directly in their home countries and are recent university graduates with no teacher training and little knowledge about the

education system in Japan or the Japanese language. It can be said that this is due to the size of the programme and the difficulty in recruiting such a large number of qualified instructors.

I still remember vividly the day which in many respects changed my life path. I was a final year undergraduate student at University College Cork which is located in the city of Cork in the south of the Republic of Ireland. If my memory serves me correctly it was the autumn of 1999 and we final year students, due to complete our studies and graduate in June 2000, were naturally anxious about our plans post-graduation. The Careers Office of the university organized many job hunting-related presentations periodically throughout the year and we were notified one day of a presentation that was to be given by the staff of the Japanese Embassy who were doing a tour of all the major Universities in the country. Having spent one summer working in New York and my third year of university studying in Spain at the University of Deusto in the city of Bilbao, I had a profound interest in travel and exploring foreign countries and their cultures. Although my first reason for applying for the position was for employment purposes, I had studied a little of Japanese history and was interested in experiencing life in a country which had been so deeply involved in World War II. During the presentation we heard some former JET programme participants speak of their experiences working in Japan and also watched some videos which gave us an idea of what working at a junior high school or senior high school would be like. Ever since first coming to the enchanting country that is Japan in the summer of the year 2000 it has gained a special part in my life, so much so that I still find myself residing here to this day. I still consider it essential as an Irish person living abroad to enlighten the local population about my home country's geography, language, culture and traditions.

### Duties of the Assistant Language Teacher: Team Teaching

ALTs participate in team-teaching. The goal of team-teaching is to create a foreign language classroom in which the students, the Japanese Teacher of English (JTE) and the native speaker (ALT) engage in communicative activities. Team-teaching provides opportunities for active interaction in a foreign language in the classroom, enhances the students' motivation towards learning a foreign language and deepens the students' understanding of foreign cultures. ALTs are involved with the planning of lessons in cooperation with Japanese foreign language teachers, interacting jointly with the Japanese teacher in the classroom and evaluating the effectiveness of the lessons.

Despite being given the title assistant, many ALTs are given a great deal of responsibility regarding the curricula and syllabi. JTEs sometimes wonder about the effectiveness of having an ALT. Often the ALT does not speak Japanese, has had no formal training in teaching, not to mention teaching English as a Foreign Language, and most importantly, probably has little or no understanding or experience regarding the educational system in Japan. Additionally, whether due to language or

other challenges, some JTEs find it difficult to work with ALTs. However, ALTs are uniquely equipped to engage in communicative education. An ALT can make foreign language learning more immediate and real for the students. S/he can speak from personal experience about a foreign culture, and breathe new life into a text by building upon it with these experiences. S/he can also help to improve the JTEs' language ability, confidence and teaching skills. Many JTEs complain that they never have the opportunity to speak with native speakers; with an ALT, however, there is ample opportunity to do so. An ALT usually has the opportunity to meet the JTE many times, either during or after school hours. It is through team-teaching with the JTE that the influence of the ALT can reach the greatest number of students, not just this year, but for as long as the JTE teaches. Some Japanese teachers may suggest that their students do not like the foreign language and cannot speak it very well. These problems may be a result of language instruction aimed primarily at fostering reading, not speaking skills. The JTE may have been trained in this method and see it as the only desirable way to teach. The ALT, having been exposed to a different educational system, may have been exposed to alternative ways of instruction, which s/he can use alongside the more traditional teaching methods. The close contact that is possible between the ALT and the JTE allows for a worthwhile exchange of ideas between the two. Working together, they can combine their knowledge and experience to produce more productive teaching techniques than they could otherwise create alone. It is difficult to generalise about the ALT position. ALTs may work closely with Japanese colleagues in developing the curriculum and be given the responsibility to develop their own materials, or their Japanese colleagues may have already decided an overall plan. Good cooperation between the ALT and the JTE has a major influence on the atmosphere of the classroom and on the students' attitudes towards team-teaching lessons and communicating in a foreign language. The value of team-teaching, however, extends beyond the specific lesson that is team-taught. In a larger sense, team-teaching is a medium through which the ALT can demonstrate many broader educational principles that the JTE can employ everyday (without the ALT) to increase the effectiveness of his/her teaching. Based on the experiences of past ALTs all over Japan, the following are some principles that are widely applicable and very helpful. This list is not exhaustive, nor is it arranged in any special order of importance.

### Instruct the Four Skills

Language is composed of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. To achieve communicative competence, one must practice all four. If only reading and writing are taught, the students' progress is actually impeded. Placing greater stress on the listening and speaking components of language will facilitate the students' mastery of the material, improve their test scores, and make class more interesting.

### **Encourage the Students to Think for Themselves**

Find ways to challenge the students without embarrassing them. By immediately showing the Japanese meanings of words, or by translating everything into Japanese, you run the risk of the students becoming intellectually passive. In some cases the students may prefer to wait for an answer or the JTE's translation instead of actively trying to understand something by themselves. However, in most cases the students probably are thinking, but may find it difficult to express exactly what they mean in the foreign language. Be patient, and try to encourage them as much as possible.

### **Review what is already learnt before Progressing**

If the students do not really understand earlier lessons their linguistic foundation will not be sound, and they will not be able to master subsequent information. The teacher should therefore check for comprehension rather than assuming his/her explanation was sufficient. Moreover, past material is less likely to be forgotten if it is incorporated into later lessons. It is also important that the teacher show the relation of the new material to the old; without the understanding of this relationship, the students are overwhelmed by the sheer quantity of seemingly unrelated bits of information.

### **Create a Suitable Learning Environment**

Learning a foreign language is a frustrating and humbling experience, so it is quite natural that some students dislike it. As well as fear of failure some students are afraid of classmates' opinions. Combat these feelings through non-traditional teaching methods that relax the class, such as language games, TPR (Total Physical Response) activities and an overt display of enthusiasm. A fun class sparks the students' interest and makes them more receptive to learning.

### **Use Topics and Subjects Familiar to the Students**

The most powerful lesson is about something that the students both know and like. Demonstrate grammar points using real things, not just the examples in the textbook. This serves not only to make the lesson more interesting and memorable, but it also shows how to generalise from the textbook's limited examples to create real communicative and meaningful language. A few suggestions would be cartoon characters, movie stars, singers, sports, name brands, or whatever is popular in society.

### **Speak in Your Native Language as Much as Possible**

The simplicity of this principle belies its importance. It is perhaps the most significant way to improve effectiveness because its benefits are so numerous. It is a convincing demonstration that a foreign language is a real language that can be used for communication. It helps to consolidate old material and preview upcoming material. It gives the students daily listening comprehension practice.

It shows how to generalise from the text and how to create original sentences that express new ideas. Finally, on the most basic level, speaking in your native language maximises the students' exposure to it and therefore maximises the probability that they will learn something.

In the course of the three years spent performing duties as an ALT teaching at a junior high school with over 500 students, I had the opportunity to teach with a number of teachers who had different teaching styles and personalities. It was my belief that the development of good working relationships between the ALT and the JTE was at the beginning one of the biggest challenges but at the same time one of the most rewarding aspects of my time spent as a JET participant. Indeed, good cooperation between the ALT and the Japanese foreign language teacher has a major influence on the atmosphere of the classroom and on the students' attitudes towards team-teaching lessons and communicating in a foreign language. In my case I was fortunate to be able to build solid working relationships with the Japanese Teachers of English who I had the privilege to work with. Many of those teachers were always eager to introduce me to different aspects of Japanese culture and lifestyle. Looking back on my time as an ALT I am appreciative of all my co-workers who were so supportive towards me during my first few years in Japan.

### Student Relations with the ALT

As in any country, you will meet various types of students in the classroom. In addition to the enthusiastic ones who enjoy speaking with you in a foreign language, you may find classes with noisy, unmotivated and disruptive students. Part of the challenge as an ALT is to motivate such students to communicate in class and to stimulate their interest in foreign language learning.

Furthermore, the ALT may notice some differences in the learning styles and behavior of Japanese students from those in their home country. For example, I often found students initially reluctant to do pair work and group work, especially when they have to cooperate with a member of the opposite sex. To tell you the truth, I was such a shy student that I was always reluctant to take part in any such activity when I was a secondary school student in Ireland. In order for students to get used to working in such formations, you may have to move slowly, giving them sufficient explanation of what is expected of them or giving ample demonstrations with the Japanese language teacher. You may start with easier activities, increasing the level of difficulty in subsequent lessons as they become more used to pair work and group work. Similarly, you may find students reluctant to answer questions in front of their classmates. In such cases, you may choose to introduce strategies such as allowing them to consult with each other before the teacher selects a student, or when asking the students to voice an opinion, allowing them to write down a response before giving it orally.

Even in difficult situations, and I did encounter some stressful, awkward or embarrassing times as an ALT, it is necessary to try to be patient and supportive towards the students. In the secondary school classroom, some students may be reluctant participants. I tried to think back to my adolescent



years when I had to study my first foreign language, French. It certainly was daunting to put it mildly and by thinking back to my own experience I wanted to empathize with my students. It is important for students who are going through the difficult stage of adolescence to understand that it is alright to make mistakes. When I first came to Japan I couldn't speak the Japanese language so what I said to my students was:

"We can have a mutual benefit relationship; you help me with my Japanese ability and I will help you with your English studies. Let's help each other!"

Interacting with students outside the classroom is a good way to get to know them and their interests. At school, ALTs have the opportunity to participate in school events and extracurricular activities, such as sports clubs and culture clubs. I found that taking part in the school cleaning, which takes place almost every day for about 20 minutes following the conclusion of classes, was a valuable opportunity to frankly chat to the students about their interests, likes and dislikes. Participating in extra-curricular activities gives the ALT and the students a chance to see each other in a relaxed non-academic atmosphere. Clubs are a good opportunity to interact informally with students. The ALT may choose to attach himself to one club or visit many as a guest. Some extracurricular activities may be geared toward foreign languages. I was asked by my school to run an English Conversation Club and while participation numbers were few, we could enjoy using and getting used to English in a relaxed setting. It is important for the ALT to help his or her colleagues and contribute to a warm learning environment in whatever way possible. Whatever the ALT decides to do, such activities are not only enjoyable but the relationship s/he builds with students will prove to be a helpful asset in the classroom.

### Cultural Issues for the ALT

As a broad generalisation, Japanese social order is characterized by group conformity and hierarchy based on age or rank. In addition, there are many rules which cover all aspects of group functions and define the exact behavior of the individual members. This order allows for things to go unspoken, creating an almost silent means of communication within the group. One result is strong group peer pressure making it very difficult for the individual to differ from the norm. Another is that there are fewer opportunities for individual members to think independently. This does not mean that individual members always agree with each other, but that in order to minimize conflict and deviation within the group, individual opinion is withheld. For example, it is said in Japan that "the nail that sticks up gets hammered down". In other words, there is little room for deviation from the norm. Exceptions are sometimes made for foreigners in this area as it is understood that you may not instinctively act in accordance with these group dynamics.

Decision-making in Japan is also carried out on a group basis. There is hardly ever one person who

is responsible for the decision. The process begins at the bottom and gradually works its way to the top decision-makers. As a result, almost all persons become involved in one way or another. This may seem very tedious and a waste of time. But, it is important for one to not become angry or frustrated. Rather, try to understand and respect that this is the way things are done in Japan. If you make a request, your supervisors must ask their bosses who in turn must talk to their superiors and so on. After this process is completed, you will receive your answer, which still may not be a straightforward yes or no. Patience and a level head are the most effective tools for communication in these situations.

An important aspect of Japanese society is the "*gaman*" spirit. *Gaman* is a Japanese word meaning 'endurance' or 'perseverance'. Part of being considered a responsible adult in Japan is the ability to 'hang in there' in a less-than-pleasant situation instead of drawing attention by making a noise. There may be some cases where, up to a point, you will be asked to act with that same *gaman* spirit.

Working as a team member of a Japanese group can be a very rewarding experience. Furthermore, it is one of the best ways for you to learn exactly what makes Japanese society go round. It is important to remember that when you feel your frustration level hitting a peak, it is best for you to sit back and take a good look at the situation before you act. Tactfully try to make yourself understood in a way that can resolve the situation with the most ease. How you respond to a situation, regardless of who is in the wrong or where the misunderstanding lies, can greatly affect the success of your school and of your time in Japan.

One other cultural note which I wish to allude to is the important concept of what is 'said', or *tatemae*, and what is 'meant', or *honne*. The former being polite linguistic formulae which serve to preserve the harmony between people. This understanding of what constitutes politeness is pervasive in all aspects of Japanese communication style. This is not to suggest that there is no disagreement between individuals. However, efforts are always made to express differences of opinion without disturbing the *wa*, or harmony. Thus, while what is said is polite and non-confrontational, subtle variations in what is said point to the truly intended meaning - the *honne*. This may be frustrating for someone who is still working on deepening their knowledge of Japanese as a language without necessarily focusing on subtle intended differences or unexpressed true meanings, as some persons carry over that communication pattern in their use of English as well. This is a fact of life in Japan, and for some people a difficult one to come to terms with. *Tatemae* might even come off as deceit but it is not meant to be. It is simply that the concept of using logical argument to convince others is rarely practiced.

There are a number of ways to adapt to this cultural phenomenon. Some people try to absorb this

element of Japanese culture to the extent that they can play the *tatemae* game, whereas others confront a problem in the same way they would back in their home countries. A compromise stands the best chance of success. Make an effort to find a balance between the two. Incidentally, both approaches have value at the cross-cultural level: practicing the *tatemae* gives you a valuable insight into the Japanese mind; sticking to the *honne* brings cross-cultural interpersonal skills employed in other countries to real life Japan.

Vagueness and ambiguity are evident in many aspects of Japanese life. The lack of clarity is considered by many Japanese to be an asset. Communication skills are centred on the ability to hint in an effective manner, slowly working around the main point. Personal opinions and criticism are generally expressed with simplicity and softness. This is in order to avoid bringing special attention to oneself as an individual and is considered to be a sign of strength and mature self-control. Exhibiting strong individual characteristics in a group may not only cause conflict among the members, but ultimately cause imbalance in the harmony needed for the progress of the entire group. The individual, then, is expected to be strong but self-sacrificing for the progress of the group.

In my opinion it is necessary for all ALTs, and indeed, all foreign teachers and workers in Japan to take note of these cultural customs. Insufficient appreciation of these cultural traits can lead to confusion and frustration and a sense that organization is absent. Occasionally there is even a feeling of panic – one is overcome by the desire to know exactly what is going on. This is not always easy to deal with, but working in the Japanese bureaucracy fosters the attitude that one can learn to cope.

### Challenges for the JET Programme

Given the vast scale of the programme and the nature of its participants, one would expect numerous problems to arise and countless anecdotes about cultural and professional conflicts, for example regarding teaching methods or personality clashes. Voci-Reed (1994) provides a detailed list of stress factors which ALTs and JTEs have expressed, and states that ALTs have experienced problems relating to:

1. Uncertain or differing role expectations between school staff members and the ALT.
2. Poor communication.
3. The ALT's limited sphere of influence, often including limited interpersonal relations.

As a former JET participant working at one junior high school from 2000 to 2003, the author can comment on these points drawing on personal experience. The first issue is true to some extent as the degree to which I was given duties in the classroom varied greatly depending on which JTE I was teaching with. I would say that this was a great stress factor personally, but it was also a

learning experience. Poor communication with some JTEs and especially other co-workers was more stressful on occasion. In a sense the ALT is treated as a special guest. This is due to the fact that the ALT is assigned very limited duties and responsibilities because of various factors (including for example a limited knowledge of Japanese). While being treated as an outsider is advantageous at times, consistently being treated as such is certainly a stress factor.

Voci-Reed (1994) goes on to describe stress factors for JTEs:

1. Teachers are under constant pressure from external sources such as parents and other school staff to ensure successful performance on University Entrance Exams.
2. Cultural differences.
3. Lack of support for creativity in class.

During my experience of team-teaching with my Japanese colleagues I found that to what extent the ALT was 'utilized' in the classroom varied greatly not just depending on which teacher I was working with, but also on how far each class had progressed in the textbook. All classes had to be on the same page by the date of the next test, which meant that if a class was behind schedule in the textbook we would not be able to instruct in a fun way during the ALT class. In other words the class would be focused on repetition and explanation of that month's grammar point. In my opinion cultural differences which in turn lead to miscommunication and lack of communication could be a major cause for stress for both Assistant Language Teachers and Japanese Teachers of English.

### English Education in Elementary Schools

English education has just been officially introduced in the curriculum standards of elementary schools for raising international awareness in Japan. But almost ten years before this official announcement, a number of elementary schools started English programmes based on their own objectives and necessity as a part of so-called "International Relations" study. When my time as a JET Programme participant concluded, I was personally part of that trend as I was privately hired by the then Town Board of Education to teach 5 elementary schools, visiting each school on a prescribed day of the week. Because of the fact that there were great differences among the size of classes, the English ability, and moreover the level of enthusiasm toward English shown by both the students and by the homeroom teachers, the task was a challenging one. One of the differences between junior high school and elementary school was that I was no longer the 'assistant' but in most cases the sole teacher. Undoubtedly one of the positive aspects about teaching at elementary school was that I had full freedom regarding the curriculum and what I would instruct in class. At junior high school the ALT's freedom was constrained to a degree that occasionally inhibited the scope of creativity.

One of the prevalent issues in elementary school English education is regarding the introduction of

the English alphabet. According to curriculum standards, introduction of letters is officially neither included nor omitted from the teaching of English at elementary schools. It is only suggested that writing letters should be carefully introduced so as not to confuse the students and thus not to focus too much on it. However the alphabet is such an essential part of English that it would be quite awkward in some ways to perform a lesson without including it in some way. Due to the fact that even just living in Japan daily means that you come across English words and letters repetitively. For example, children's snacks, drinks, the brands of clothes and sports teams, television programmes all use English letters regularly. In other words children are familiar with the shapes of English letters even before they actually study them.

One other fact that makes elementary school children familiar with alphabetical letters is the introduction of the Roman alphabet, which happens for many students in the fourth grade of elementary school. This is an obligatory curriculum for elementary schools in which the students study the Roman alphabet or *romaji*, which is used to write Japanese with alphabetical letters, naturally reflecting Japanese sound pattern, with a pair of consonant and vowel. One personal grievance I had at some of the schools where I taught was that the children were not primarily taught the Hepburn style *romaji*, which more accurately represents the sounds of the Japanese language. The *kunrei* style which is taught at elementary schools does not accurately convey the sounds of certain syllables, for example the sound *tsu* is written as *tu*, and *shi* is written as *si*. The original and revised variants of Hepburn style remain the most widely used methods of transcription of Japanese. As Hepburn is based on English and Italian phonology, an English speaker unfamiliar with Japanese will generally pronounce a word romanized in Hepburn style more accurately than a word romanized in the competing *kunrei* style.

It must be said that the introduction of *romaji* in itself could confuse students with the spelling of English words, for example the word 'case' might be mistakenly written as /keisu/. As for my own experience of teaching at elementary schools, I met my students at most two times a month which meant that I did not have enough time with them to teach any spelling or reading per se. However, I did try to spend some time introducing the alphabet, both large letters and small letters, to grades three, four, five and six.

Generally I found elementary school pupils to be quite open to things new and extremely interested in all things foreign, not least language but also games, festivals and customs. Recalling the time I spent teaching elementary school pupils I would like to think that I contributed in some way to both broadening their minds toward things foreign while at the same time introducing basic English words and expressions.

## Conclusions

As you have gathered from reading this paper, I have focused on the team-teaching aspect of my experiences teaching English in Japan. I would now like to sum up my assumptions and make some observations from my experiences. First of all I must say that introduction to a foreign language can only be a good thing for the intellectual development of children and should be done as soon as possible so that the student can get familiar with both the way the language is written and how the language sounds. In my own experience while growing up in the Republic of Ireland, which has two national languages, we studied both the Irish language and the English language in equal volume from elementary school level. Upon entering secondary I had my first encounter with a foreign language, French, and I must admit that merely attaining knowledge of the sounds of the language was quite arduous at first. For this reason I believe that the introduction of English education at elementary school level, if only for a few hours per week, will prove beneficial if taught correctly. Where possible I believe team teaching to be a viable way to teach proper English accents to the students. However, in the present global age we live in, I consider it important to recognize the fact that there are many varieties of English and that one should not put too much emphasis on speaking with a proper accent. This is not to say that elementary school students shouldn't learn from a native speaker. The most important thing is to be willing to speak and not to be over-concerned with one's accent.

There are cultural differences and language misunderstandings that can cause problems among the educators both in elementary and junior high school but once these are overcome students can benefit from a rewarding educational experience. Not just from a linguistic point of view but also from a cultural perspective the Assistant Language Teacher has an important role to play in the Japanese English teaching classroom.

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