

Do we have a role as teachers on the Jet programme?

Thoughts and lessons learned after 6 months on the Jet programme.

Sometimes I feel sorry for those JET's who came here thinking that their job would be about teaching. I knew that JET was as much about economics and trade as it was about teaching and I consider myself lucky at the amount of teaching time I've had. This is written solely on the 6 months teaching experience I've gotten since coming here and is based on my situation as a JET teaching at eight Junior Highs and six Elementary Schools. I apologise in advance if it sounds a little naïve to those with teaching experience or just plain annoying to those in a different situation.

When I arrived I was amazed at the high level students' English language ability. Unfortunately this says more about my expectations of them than the importance they place on English as having a role in their future. Japan is lagging way behind rival Asian countries in the English race therefore JET is increasingly becoming about actual teaching.

We often find ourselves frustrated at the inability of Japanese students to talk and converse with us naturally. "How are you" will in 90% of cases result in "I'm fine thank you and you?" with the remaining 10% able to arbitrarily choose an adjective (hungry/tired/sleepy) to show off their extended vocabulary. And you can forget about asking them 'What's up?'

How can Jets make a difference?

These are the facts as I see them. The majority of Jets (like me) arrive with no teaching experience or qualifications. Because of this our teaching methods are thought of as inferior to Japanese teachers of English who have both experience and training. It is both naïve and arrogant to think that we can apply communicative learning methodology in the Japanese classroom. Communicative methodology is how most of us are learning Japanese; it requires that the students be motivated and that they are surrounded by an English language environment. If communicative learning were such a cure-all answer to English teaching, it would have caught on by now. You can't take methods designed for self-motivated adults with access to i.e. English language materials and apply it to Japanese students who have a different or no motive and different resources.

Despite these obstacles, I believe that we can have an impact (albeit limited) on the style of English teaching in Japan. The main role of the ALT is to motivate students to learn English by showing them that foreigners can be more interesting than they first believed and it is worth learning how to speak to them. It is important to show the students that communication with a foreigner doesn't require a mastery of the language. This means using English wherever possible and not falling back on your Japanese. It also means using English specifically for their skill level – i.e. don't use the past tense with ichi nen-sei Junior High students. Not knowing my students' skill level was the single biggest obstacle in communication when I first arrived. It would be useful information for Jets arriving this summer.

Our first role in motivation is showing them that they can communicate (on some level) using English. Our second role is making them want to speak in English with us. This means making our lessons interesting and exciting as opposed to the useful but dull grammar and vocabulary that their teachers usually make them study.

I only get to teach each of my classes about once a month, so I am a reason for a change in the normal schedule of studying from a text book. This means I can do something different, and always try to base my lessons on authentic English language materials. This means using authentic written materials like newspaper articles, song lyrics, and cultural props as well as native English. It's also good to make the students think in English by making a lesson based on creative writing or putting forward arguments on a controversial issue. You know you have mastered a foreign language when you can think and dream in it, and the best way for your students to achieve this is to let them practice this skill.

If you teach the same kids once a week or more, it can be harder to get away from the text book, but you can still make your lessons more interesting by exploiting the fact that the students want to know about you. You could give them a five minute listening exercise about your weekend, your trip to somewhere or even your breakfast that morning as long as you spice it up a little to make it interesting.

Of course a lot of their motivation comes from having to pass exams, something we have no control over. The exams when I looked at them were better than I expected due to the balance of communication, comprehension and grammar, although they still lack speaking tests. As JTEs we can correct this omission by making speaking the major focus in our assessment of them.

Teachers to some extent share the test passing mentality of their students, since test results are their only method of formal assessment. However, this problem isn't exclusive to Japan and many teachers are beginning to realise the importance of communication activities in their lessons – these are the teachers who use us the most. Some could be made more aware of it; we can influence this by using alternative phrases and showing that we can be understood. For example, imagine starting a lesson with 'Alright' or 'What's up?' instead of 'Good morning class, how are you today?' If they know the basics then adding some slang makes the language seem more dynamic and interesting.

If your JTE hasn't let you teach your own lesson yet, it's worth asking if you can have a lesson once a month to try your own thing. If they say yes and you plan something the students enjoy then you'll probably be allowed to try again. Some of my best lesson plans are on my website if you are struggling for ideas.

Finally, when you use your own materials, make sure they have some relevance to the students. If you teach a song make sure it has a meaning. If you use an article make sure it's on a topic the students are interested in. Teaching 'Blowing in the wind' by Bob Dylan is better than 'Hello Goodbye' by the Beatles because it is challenging and it has a meaning. The lyrics from 'Hello Goodbye' just sound stupid if you are over twelve years old.

The Conclusion

Basically, I have given up trying to teach my students any English myself - that is the JTE's job. First of all I'm unqualified; secondly I don't get to see them often enough and thirdly it's boring. I can target my language towards them, and even target certain questions to certain students depending on their ability, but my main aim is to make English lessons fun, accessible and interesting. If I inspire some of them to go abroad to work and study then I guess it proves that Jet is about trade over teaching after all.

I'll emphasise again that this essay is based on my thoughts and my experiences. I'd be interested to hear how those in different situations see their role as teachers in the JET programme.

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