

## Success of the JET program in Ashikaga

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Japan is a wonderful and fascinating country. However, I have to admit until about 2 years ago, I did not have much interest in Japan. In the United States, Japan is always in the news and there is much exposure in the business world. On the other hand, there is little talk about the people and the wonderful culture.

When I was a senior in college, I spent one semester student teaching at a small elementary school located in my college town. One day some Japanese teachers came to visit the school. The teachers visited the classrooms and ate lunch in the cafeteria. The students gave them gifts and sang some popular children's songs. I thought how fortunate it was for these Japanese teachers to be exposed to the American school system. But then I thought, "I can teach overseas!" I wanted to teach abroad and learn about another culture.

After graduating in December 1988, I began looking into many teaching programs. I was currently substituting in my hometown when I found out about the JET program. I applied, interviewed, and in less than a month, I had been accepted. Now I have been here 7 months. I feel very fortunate to have this experience. Very few countries have foreigners working in their public schools. I feel that Japan is very wise to open its educational system in this way and the students will definitely benefit from it.

I also feel fortunate to have been placed in Ashikaga. It is a wonderful city in a beautiful part of Japan. Plus Ashikaga has a history of Assistant English Teachers. The teachers and students are familiar with the program and its purpose. However, Ashikaga needs to look at the future of the program. What are the city's needs? What are the students' and teachers' needs? These questions should be addressed for the success of the JET program in Ashikaga.

In addition, the type of person that this program attracted 5 or 6 years ago is very different now. In western countries, people realize that they can have very good jobs in Japan. Many people are coming here to work and to make money.

Most of these people are independent in their countries and they are used to making their own money. It is not difficult to live in a foreign country, but it presents an interesting and exciting challenge that many people want to participate in. It is important to remember that AETs are professionals in their home countries and they want to be treated the same here.

I have to say I had some frustrations in the beginning. There have been many arguments from Japanese English teachers that the participants in the JET program should be qualified teachers. I argue against this point. As a qualified teacher, I came here expecting to teach English. Initially I became frustrated because I could not communicate with the students and some of the teachers. This situation presented a whole new challenge for me. Not from a teaching stand point, but I had to learn to be cooperative and patient in an unfamiliar environment. However, I do feel that same TESL training is helpful. Very little of our job is actual teaching with lengthy lesson plans or activities, textbooks, tests, review, grading or language instruction. It is an exchange. I am learning about myself and Japan while Japan is learning about me and English.

The right kind of person for this job is someone who can adapt to many different roles, or "wear many different hats". Within the first 3 months of my stay in Japan, I had been introduced to everyone in City Hall, had spoken on the radio to the city of Ashikaga, participated in a festival in which we were on TV, and spent time giving speeches to several groups. Again, very little of our job is actual teaching. The best person for this job is someone who is flexible and can adapt to change.

Now, regarding the teaching that we do, many teachers have commented that they feel English conversation is so much greater now than a few years ago. I would have to say that this is true. It is definitely a positive action to have native speakers in the classroom. But, we are only there a short time of the year. The real English education takes place all year long. Today, students are constantly reading and listening to English. It is in the stores on the radio, TV, and even on their pencil cases. Teachers need to challenge their students to learn English as a communicative language. I feel that this challenge is in their future and the future is NOW!

Another point I would like to address is the elementary schools. If English education began in elementary school, students would feel much more comfortable speaking English in junior high school. Many studies show that children in early elementary years have a much greater ability to learn a foreign language than later in life. Just a few simple phrases for conversation can make all of the difference. I have seen and spoken with a few students and it is really exciting!

Lastly, I would like to commend all of the English teachers in Ashikaga. You have quite a task set before you with which you are doing quite well. The AETs are here with a wealth of information, so please ask. It is obvious that if the people of Ashikaga are open and receptive to the JET program, the program will lead to many wonderful exchanges of language and culture. This will in turn lead to a greater understanding of the world in which we all live.