

English in the Classroom

足利市教育委員会 Tamara Speis

“Good morning everyone. How are you? I am fine, too, thank you.” After these few words of greeting, the class falls silent and it is up to myself and the JTE to encourage reluctant students to speak up and use more than the infamous “classroom English”. More often than not, this can be a frustrating experience for the student as well as the AET and JTE.

I cannot count the number of times I have entered a classroom after the initial self-introduction period to face a roomful of frightened students who are too scared to make eyecontact with me, lest they be called upon to speak in front of their peers. In addition, there have been several instances when English teachers do not want to speak with me for fear of making a mistake. Perhaps sensing the discomfort of their teacher, this exacerbates the student’s apprehension and stifles any impulse to use acquired skills. It is difficult for me to believe that so many students have retained so little of what they have been taught, especially as they advance to third year.

What can be done to alleviate the fears of both the JTE and the student when it comes to speaking English? In my brief experience, I have found that only knowledge overcomes fear. Although English is difficult, it can be mastered with practice. Unfortunately, many students are so worried about failing that they refuse to try. Mistakes are natural and should be considered part of the learning process. When a student makes a mistake, it is often a key to helping him or her understand the problem and remember the correct way. Unless the student as well as the teacher attempts to use English, much time will be lost relearning forgotten material. I believe that this is one of the biggest stumbling blocks in English education in Japan.

As the AET only visits each classroom a few times, it is imperative that as many students as possible have a chance to speak freely with the AET in order to gain confidence in speaking ability and boost an interest which, by the third year, is

understandably waning. In addition, if students observe other teachers conversing with the AET, they will be more inclined to try to communicate. This is especially important in regards to the JTE.

Confidence in communication is not easily won, but every experience will add to the skills of the JTE and the student, no matter how miniscule.

The benefits of having a native English speaker in the classroom can be greatly enhanced, I believe, if the JTE uses English on a daily basis. The time allotted to listening and speaking skills does not need to be long in order for it to have an impact. When the AET visits, spoken English does not need to be a total mystery.

Building confidence can heighten interest and improve communicative skills. It would be a great feeling for a student hear me say "I'm O.K." and comprehend the meaning. Everyday use of spoken English can ensure this goal will someday be reached.