

The Role of the AET in English Education

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In March of 1990, while completing my university education, I received a rather large envelope from the Japanese Embassy. "Ah, the moment of reckoning is at hand", I thought to myself. Inside was the news of my acceptance to the JET Program(me). At first, I was very excited to learn that I would spend the next year in Japan. Visions of Mt. Fuji and cherry blossoms flashed through my head. However, the more I thought about what the upcoming year would entail, the more nervous I became. "Team-teaching? Internationalization? What do they mean by these things? Which is more important?" I dismissed these questions with the secure belief that someone would tell me during the Tokyo orientation.

Unfortunately, the orientation in Tokyo did not clear up this problem. The JET participants were given grand definitions of educational concepts and shown demonstration lessons that bordered on fairy tales.

After arriving in Ashikaga, I was still unsure of what my job actually entailed. Because of the reaction received at the first Junior High School I visited, I became convinced that my job centered around the fact that I was blond haired.

However, it soon became clear to me that the concepts of team-teaching and internationalization are not that difficult to understand. In fact, on the JET Program(me) they go hand in hand. What, then, are these two goals that this Program(me) wishes to accomplish?

It seems to me that internationalization is the process by which Japanese people become accustomed to foreign cultures and ideas. At the same time, I am also involved in understanding Japanese culture. One of the goals of the Program(me), therefore, is to allow this understanding to take place on an individual level for young students. This is an interesting idea because, to my knowledge, Japan is the only country in the world which sponsors such a program on a large scale.

The second goal of the Program(me) is a little more difficult to define. Team-teaching is an outgrowth of the Ministry of Education's decision to create a new approach to English education. The old method of grammar translation did not prepare the students to "use" English, only to understand the logic behind the structure. However, the communicative approach which is now being advocated is quite different from this technique.

It is my belief that this method is, in fact, better. Because I am not a qualified teacher, the only experience I have to base this assumption on is my own foreign language education. When students in the U.S. are taught most languages (the exceptions being Latin and Greek), they are taught that the language is "alive", i.e. that language is foremost a form of communication. Students study the cultures of the nations which use the language. This study gives insights into how the language is commonly applied. Just as it would be

ridiculous to study Japanese without a minimal understanding of Japanese culture, the same holds true for English education. It is in this respect that the JET Program(me) is beneficial to Japanese students.

Also, not only is this approach beneficial to the students, it is very helpful to Japanese Teachers of English. It is rather unfortunate that not a great number of JTE's have studied in an English speaking country. However, this is not necessarily a feasible economic possibility. Because of the grand scale in which English is taught in Japan, it is unrealistic to believe that a majority of JTE's will have lived or studied abroad. The AET, therefore, is indispensable to the JTE. As native English speakers, we bring our language and culture to the JTE's. Through using the AET, the JTE can develop new language skills and practice old techniques. Through the full utilization of the AET, not only students but also teachers can be motivated to study English and develop their language ability.

What, then, is the most beneficial relationship between the AET and the JTE? The AET is best utilized when the AET and JTE can communicate effectively. A good relationship outside of class will carry over inside the class. The best way for this to occur is for the AET and JTE to spend time together. Because an AET will only see each class, on average, at most four times a year, it is important that the JTE takes advantage of the limited time that the AET spends at each school. Although JTE's are very busy, it seems reasonable to think that a JTE will be able to set some time out of their schedule to talk with the AET during the visit to the school. The AET and JTE don't necessarily need to talk about the merits of team-teaching, the effective use of the textbook, etc. The most important thing to do is just communicate.

Another area of AET and JTE communication which can be quite beneficial is English Seminars. Although these seminars were rather limited before, it seems there will be more in the future. These seminars are good because they enable the JTE's and AET's to converse in a relaxed manner. These seminars are a rare opportunity for the JTE and AET to be themselves, and to develop relationships outside of the classroom. If the JTE is comfortable with the AET, then the students will also be comfortable with the AET, thereby making the time that the AET spends in the classroom fruitful for the students.

Once the AET is in the classroom, I believe that the team-teaching plan should center more on review exercises rather than new material. Although the students can benefit from the introduction of new material by the AET, these usually infrequent visits are rare opportunities for the students to put the knowledge they have accumulated to practical use. This is very important in any educational endeavor.

The JET Program(me) is a very interesting and challenging project for all involved. It is my belief that it can make a positive impact on English education in Japan. However, for this to take place, everyone involved should have an understanding of the goals of the program. I believe these goals are two : to improve the communicative ability of Japanese students and to give the students the opportunity to learn about a foreign culture. The AET is in the unique position to allow these two goals to occur through working with the JTE.