

WORDS APART OR WORLDS APART ?

International Education At School.

足利市教育委員会 Siobhan Sparks

Since I have been in Japan there have been many times when I have wondered exactly what my job should be. I am sure there are many Japanese teachers who have had the same thought about the role of the AET. Officially I am not a teacher, but all AETS are native speakers who can be a wonderful resource and source of motivation for their students. However the time I spend at schools is too short for me to make any real contribution to language education. With the present system, I feel my visits merely serve as an opportunity to practice communicating in English.

Unfortunately these exchanges are brief and there is little interaction between myself and students. For many students the AET's visit is the only time they come into close personal contact with a non-Japanese person. Taking this into consideration these meetings are very important if students are to widen their understanding and acceptance of people from other countries. During my school visits I have received many different reactions, excitement, interest, nervousness, indifference and even fear. Unfortunately a students negative feelings are not always produced by their inability to understand, but often by a nervous or fearful attitude towards foreigners. This is understandable when the Japanese media stresses the danger and violence of other countries. It is important to keep things in perspective, and realize that every country has its problem areas, even Japan. Having an AET in school is a great chance for students to learn not only language but cultural differences and beliefs. Perhaps most importantly of all it is a time for students to recognize that foreigners are individuals and as such, each person has their own cultural and personal identity.

The recent arrival of many immigrants in Japan means that there are now foreign students studying alongside Japanese students. As numbers increase the need for international understanding and respect grows. At present, based on my experiences at school, I would say that the average Japanese student holds the idea that there are two types of people in the world 'nihonjin' and 'gaijin'. For students to gain a more balanced image of different nations it is essential to break this pattern of thought. International education is the responsibility of all teachers not only those who work with the AET. Nor should it be restricted

to the English lesson. The majority of Japanese people have, I believe a very strong idea of their national identity. One would think therefore that it would be easy to acknowledge and respect the difference between people of different nations. However as the first English AET, I have come to realize that my nationality is of little relevance to many of my students.

After seven months I am still asked to tell American jokes. I wonder how they would feel if I asked them to tell me a Chinese or Korean one? I may not look any different from an American or a Frenchman or South African for that matter, but my attitudes and beliefs are different. When students call me gaijin, I feel uncomfortable for a number of reasons. Firstly it indicates they do not see me as a person that they know, ie Siobhan, but just another AET. Secondly, it means that I am grouped alongside people from many other countries, who are just as foreign to me as I am to the students. Thirdly its a form of psychological rejection.

This way of thinking is not conducive to learning or indeed to creating a harmonious society at school or in other areas of life. If English is to be taught as a communicative activity it is essential that students have a positive attitude towards the AET. The most successfully communicative classes are ones where the JTE has created a relaxed atmosphere and encourages students not to be nervous with the AET. This kind of environment can only exist if the JTE and AET are comfortable with one another. However because the visits are so few, many teachers see the AETs as little more than visitors and have no time to develop a working relationship.

As I have grown older I have realized the benefit of learning a language while you are young. When I was at school I studied French and Spanish but these subjects seemed irrelevant to me because I never needed to use them. I am sure this feeling is common to most Junior High School students in Japan. Students sometimes tell me 'I am Japanese, I don't need to speak English'. I can fully appreciate this sentiment but I often wish I could explain the advantages of having an international language and an international mind.

I am often told that English education in Japan is improving. I would like to see International education included in this pattern of change.