

Using English in Class

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I have now worked six months as an Assistant English Teacher in Ashikaga. In doing so I often think about the Japanese classes I took in America. The one thing that I remember about my classes is that we had an active role in the class. We did not just sit at our desks and recite words and sentences put before us. We had to make our own sentences and conversations using the grammar point we just learned. We were often put in a certain situation and then required to act it out. The important thing was that we were made to think in Japanese. The conversations did not have to be difficult, but they were our own. We did not read them from a book or a hand out.

Unfortunately, this was not always the case in the English classes that I have attended. In too many of the classes the students remained passive in their seats listening to the teacher, often speaking in Japanese. They may repeat some word and recite sentences from the book, but they did not have to really think in English. They did not use it to communicate with the other students or the teacher.

This, I believe, is one of the major problems with the English education in Ashikaga. From the very beginning the students should be made to think in English. For example, commands should be given in English, NOT Japanese. The first time a command is given it should be accompanied with gestures and hand signals or a short demonstration. An example is when the teacher wants the students to open their textbooks to a certain page. All they need to do is say "Open your textbooks to page 45." Then they open their own textbook and hold up four fingers and then five fingers. This is then repeated slowly a number of times, both the sentence and the gestures. The students will get the meaning of the sentence even if they don't completely understand how to say the words. Eventually they will be able to put the exact words and sentence structure with the meaning they already have learned. In this way, even the first year students are getting the idea that English is not just sounds in a book that they say, but an active everyday language. One that is very useful for communication.

A related problem is that in a number of classes too much Japanese is being spoken. It should only be used to explain a difficult grammar point or game. It is not needed as much as it is being used. Many things can be explained through examples and gestures like the command example states. The students should not be allowed to answer questions either written or spoken in Japanese. If they are that takes the focus of the lesson away from English. Also when the teacher uses lots of Japanese – translating what was just said in English – the students don't have to think in English. The students become lazy knowing that they will soon hear the Japanese equivalent. They know that they can always use their native language to ask and answer questions and will hear their teacher doing the same.

The English lesson should be centered on the students use of English – written, spoken, and heard. It is not important, I believe, for them to memorize the stories from the text. The text should be used to learn a grammar point not a specific story. They need to learn how to take the sentence structure from the lesson and to make their own sentence. It is not necessary for them to remember that 'Rammaru is barking. He is moving his ears.' but that they can change that sentence to give information to someone else.

If all the teachers remember that the focus of the English class should be on the students learning how to communicate and think in English, the English education in Ashikaga will improve. This will also lead to the better use of the AETs in class. When the AET visits it is the perfect opportunity for the students to practice communicating with a native speaker. The AETs should not be just a live tape recorder. This is necessary at times, but should not be their only purpose. They should interact with the students in a natural way throughout the lesson. The AETs are capable people who are here to help the Japanese teachers teach their native language. They are a useful resource that is not always being used effectively.

The AETs and JTEs have the same purpose and goal – to give the students the ability to communicate in English. If we work together as a team, the goal can be reached.