

THE YOUNGER, THE BETTER

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Its March and I have just completed another round of elementary school visits, which like last year left me astounded at the speed with which these young children learn. It also made me regret that I have had so little contact with elementary schools in my time as an AET. So often, at Junior High School I have waited patiently while a nervous student struggles to say a sentence that he or she has no trouble in writing. They are frightened to make mistakes, especially in front of a native speaker, and are unsure how to pronounce words that they often don't hear spoken by their own teacher. On the other hand, I can walk down the road and be regaled with loud "Hellos" from fearless five and six year olds. Elementary school children are at a prime age to learn a foreign language, they are curious, adventurous and have not yet developed that fear of making mistakes that hinders their brothers and sisters at Junior High School.

Adolescence is a difficult time for students in any country, self consciousness is its trademark. It is a difficult time to learn a subject such as English which requires a lot of confidence and enthusiasm to speak. As we get older we become more rigid, by the time we reach teenage our thinking patterns and personality are almost determined. It is difficult to become another kind of person which is almost what it takes for a Japanese student to speak English. Elementary school children however are still unconditioned, they can absorb an amazing amount of new information and abstract ideas.

Every subject has its rules and formulas, all of which are discovered by someone who was brave enough to go ahead and experiment. Elementary students as I soon discovered are fearless to the point of foolishness, and bodily harm. Of course the younger they are the more this holds true. I learnt this after being body tackled by two hundred 1st and 2nd graders wanting to shake hands. This enthusiasm to do something instinctively, to find out for yourself is the key not only for maths and science but Languages too. It is this approach which makes Japanese Elementary Schools so unique and could be exploited to their advantage by sending an Aet on a more regular basis.

All of us learn to speak before we learn to read and write. We apply the grammar after we can make basic sentences, and usually abandon all the rules we learnt at school when we speak informally. I learnt to speak basic Japanese through a desire to speak, not from a textbook. I feel this instinct is a very childlike one, similar to an elementary school

students need to shout "Hello" at every foreigner they see. My Japanese is still very unsophisticated but it got me to the level where I wanted to learn grammar and where it actually made sense to study it. Studying grammar before you can speak, seems to me like memorizing the instruction manual to a machine that you still have no idea to use. I am not of course suggesting that students should not study grammar. It is a very important and necessary part of language studies, but it does not have to be confined to a textbook. When I eventually began to study Japanese formally I realized that I knew a lot of the grammar from my "experimental" speaking.

Unfortunately it is very difficult for most adults to just get out there and talk, and for most Junior High School students too. I agree that Junior High School is the right time and place to begin studying English grammar, the atmosphere is more structured and formal than Elementary School due to the upcoming exams. However I don't necessarily think it is the best time to start speaking English, if anything its too late. 1st year students still maintain the enthusiasm of their Elementary School days and show an amazing capacity to remember vocabulary and mimic a native speakers pronunciation, but by the time they become second grade students only the exceptionally academic retain this interest and then often silently. It is not entirely the fault of the education system but also characteristic of students of this age, and very dependent on the attitude of the teacher.

So it puzzles me why it is left so late to teach Foreign Languages to children. At Elementary school age, learning is a plaything, they do not have the pressures of exams and best of all they have a vital need to communicate. In my recent visits to Elementary Schools I encountered some of the most intelligent and interesting questions that any Japanese person has ever asked me. Children of this age have not yet been trained that the right questions to ask a foreigner are about food, weather and whether you can use chopsticks. Their thoughts are still original and very refreshing to me after a year of Junior High School questions such as "What sport do you like ?" . In my brief visits to these schools I have seen a side of Japan that I would never have seen at Junior High School, an education system that is explorative and creative. The children received me with curiosity and affection rather than prejudice or apprehension, and both they and I learnt something about people and the world.

Recently Aets in other areas of Japan regularly visit Elementary schools. Not to give formal English lessons but to share ideas and games from their own country and familiarize students with a new culture. In this situation it is easy to introduce students to easy

everyday language and develop a wide vocabulary that is not taught in textbooks. This kind of interaction is fulfilling for all concerned. At many of the schools I visited in Ashikaga the Principal and Teachers expressed a desire to have more frequent visits from the Aet. At all of the schools I visited the children asked me when I would come back again. With the arrival of more Aets next year I hope that it will be possible for these school visits to become more regular. As is often forgotten by both Aet and Japanese teachers, the Aets job is not merely as a Language teacher but also a cultural liason. At Elementary school I felt I fulfilled this role. I believe that this an area where every Aet and every student can benefit. It is an opportunity that I would like to see as a normal part of the Aets job in the future.