

PROBLEMS PROBLEMS

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The setting is a late night Ramen restaurant in a small town in Tochigi. A drunk rowdy man puts his arm around the young foreigner who just happens to be an AET on the JET programme. He then bursts into full song. . . . "I am a man" , "Are you American?" "I am very special" . The AET is not American but he wonders why this young guy and many others like him, who 5 years earlier would have sat at the back of the English class asleep on the desk, is so keen to practice English conversation. Well the answers are numerous but the primary one being he was of course drunk. But this very fact highlights one of the difficulties of teaching a spoken foreign language in Japan.

The Japanese are not a particularly extrovert people (whilst sober and away from a karaoke machine). Added to this is a high degree of reluctance to make mistakes in front of one's peers. This is the direct opposite of what is needed to excel at spoken language. There are ways to combat this in the classroom of course: the extensive use of group work (used less than I would have thought by JTE's), the use of "bribery" via some kind of permanent incentive system, and the permanent use of the foreign language in the classroom so as it becomes the "norm" of communication for the lesson.

But the problems do not stop there. For the AET and the JTE have one of the most difficult tasks possible: to make a foreign language interesting when used outside the home nation. When there is no immediate prospect of using a language for the purpose of communication, students can lose interest, for just the technical grammar construction and the lack of information in the words themselves tend to mitigate against student enthusiasm.

So the AET is a perfect resource of communication. In conjunction with this emphasis on communication there needs to be a wider cultural movement in Japan of encouraging international enthusiasm beyond the usual "plaything" status that foreigners take on in Japan. A genuine inquiry into alien cultures. This is certainly evident now in the minority in today's Japan, but it will take more generations before Japan reaches a level of international "maturity" . Of course this is also written from an adult standpoint. Junior High School students have rarely reached that level of individual maturity.

However, this does not mean that one cannot use icons of adolescence from abroad to stimulate this interest. This is also where the AET can help. . . magazines, pop stars etc can help. However, even these can be of a bewilderment to a country which has developed music and entertainment industries which are mutually exclusive to the rest of the world.

Beyond Michael Jordan there are usually blank stares.

So, what is to be done ? It is difficult to imagine that one's individual efforts are part of a wider societal movement; especially when you get reactions to AET's from students in an industrially mature country, that you would expect from a small tribe in the wilds of Indonesia. However, the key word is perseverance. If one ever feels that the Team Teaching project is a) a waste of government money ; b) a nuisance for all involved; c) just an example of political tokenry (and these views are held widely by AET's and JTE's) ; then I think that one should not be so pessimistic.

The AET/JET programme whilst full of problems (and it is still in it's infancy) is starting to succeed in one of the two objectives that it has set itself: internationalisation. This generation of young people will have all met or seen a foreigner which is a start on a long ladder for a homogeneous population. Perhaps they will grow up with a different attitude and hence influence their children; and so on. It is a slow process.

As this gains momentum, then so should the other objective: English teaching. Once the logistical problems are ironed out (how many schools to visit, how long in each school etc) then things will improve. I believe that Japan in the near future (economic and political considerations notwithstanding) will achieve a situation where there is a permanent foreign presence in each school. There used to be "one shot visits" and they are no more. So we are moving in a direction of more permanence, which is important for the self respect of the AET and the relationship between the AET and staff and pupils. All we have to do is look at Ashikaga: last year each visited 6 high schools, this year 4 ; next year there is one more AET; and the year after that one more.

It is also positive that many elementary schools are now getting visits from AET's. Having just finished my (exhausting) schedule in elementary schools where there is real enthusiasm for English and things foreign (in the absence of the dreaded examinations) then I felt that is where interaction with foreigners should start on a more permanent level.

So, in effect what we are seeing is a sacrificing of the shorter term objective (English teaching) so as to help the longer term one (internationalisation). When the latter starts to succeed I'm sure some real progress will be made with the former. Nevertheless 8 months in and this has certainly been a rewarding experience. It is too easy to forget when things are going wrong for you, that the AET project is really an embryonic one. We fresh eyed and wet-behind-the ears graduates are the guinea pigs. So if AET's are still experiencing the same problems in 10 or 15 years (and at the present momentum I don't see why the Program should not be still growing even then) then based on my Ramen house experiences all I can suggest is to take a six pack of Kirin beer into the classroom and you will see enthusiasm for English blossom before your very eyes !