

Trying To Cross The Cultural Barrier In The Classroom

足利市立教育研究所 Sarah Oaks

Teaching English in Japanese Junior High Schools provides one with many wonderful serendipitous moments. The students often surprise and amaze me with their abilities. The problem lies in the fact that these abilities are well hidden under layers of societal training, and masked by cultural tradition.

In class, I frequently have the feeling that no one understands what I'm saying - even after I have reduced it to the most elemental English. Students' reticence and unwillingness to participate in class, even if only to say, "I don't know", was startling to me at first, and has increasingly become a major frustration. Japanese children seem to have such a fear of failure or of "sticking out" that they won't even try. Through the JTE I have made it clear that I welcome any utterance! I've told them that mistakes are okay - we all make them and it is part of the learning process; that trying is the most important thing. I have supported that statement by rewarding volunteers with extra points, prizes, and the seemingly much coveted prize cards - simply for participating; regardless of whether their answer or example was correct. Still it is like pulling teeth to get more than a few students to raise their hands.

It is especially difficult and maddening when I hear the correct answer being whispered throughout the classroom. No one is sure of the answer, so they won't volunteer. When I call on a student (all of whom have been avoiding making eye contact and look like a deer caught in the headlights when I choose them) whom I saw mouthing the correct word, he or she will query the six people in the immediate vicinity for the answer to verify what they are about to say. As an American this absolutely floored me, because we would not even think of trying to do that in an American classroom.

In my estimation these two factors significantly hamper a student's ability to learn English, and be comfortable using what they have learned. Students are

not encouraged to think for themselves or to practice using what they are being taught. AET's often discuss why it is that the Japanese have such trouble speaking English when compared to people from many other countries who also study English from the 6th grade through high school. I believe Japanese students are destined to encounter great difficulty in mastering the English language until they begin to think and speak independently.