

Teaching Culture

Christopher Chao

“How much English am I actually teaching?” I often wonder. As an English teacher on the Japanese Exchange Teaching program, this has been a question I have had to ask myself many times over. In a naïve reply, I could comment on the fact that I am, in fact, an excellent teacher – one who has taught my students a vast and in depth look into the workings and complexities of the English language – it’s grammatical structure, correct usage, punctuation and so forth. Rules and Regulations. Or perhaps I can answer the above question by assuming that I am a expert teacher of English conversation, one who has molded students into proficient speakers of a foreign language. I have guided my students into correctly retorting “I’m fine thank you!” in perfect militant sounding phonetics! Great. But really, “How much English am I actually teaching?” Just the fact that I ask myself this question hints a degree of uncertainty. And do you know why? Let me tell you...

This is my situation. I am an Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) in Ashikaga City, Tochigi Prefecture. I teach at three junior high schools, usually with a two week stay at each school. I visit Monday through Thursday, and am scheduled to teach about three classes a day. I teach all grades – first year through third year. Usually there are about thirty students in class with about four of five homerooms for each grade level. That’s about 450 to 500 students at each of my three schools. A lot of students. Thus in my allotted two week stay at any particular school, I am busy pacing back and forth from on classroom to the next. Sometimes I do not even see a class within this short time at all. At best, I visit a class twice in two weeks. Thus, at the most, one child in one class may be my student of mine two times for a duration of five to six weeks. This is the current “spread thin” dilemma I have come to realize as a junior high school teacher in Ashikaga. I ask myself once more, “How much English am I actually teaching?” Hmm. . . let’s just say I would be kidding myself if I said that it was even a meager amount. The truth hurts.

So I don’t teach these students very much English in reality. I pretty much realized this the first couple of weeks into my manic teaching schedule. Yet although as depressing as this hard truth of my reality is, I refuse to believe that I am here for little more than a couple token classes here and there. As corny as it sounds, I do believe that I make a difference. As a JET, one must adapt to the situation. Given my

situation, I feel that it is necessary to do the best I can within my boundaries. This is why I feel that it is best for me to teach not only language but also equally important, I try my best to teach the students about myself. My culture. As an foreigner visiting the schools, what better way for students to learn about my beliefs, values and mannerisms as an American?

I feel that it is necessary for the Japanese students to gain knowledge about the culture that they are studying from. Learning just the language alone would be quite uneventful. Giving the children an added lesson about the background from which the language has come from (culture) can prove as the added stimulus to which children can gain interest and motivation. In many of my lessons I enjoy talking to the students about the differences of American life compared to Japanese life. Students gain much from these conversations by learning from me as much as I learn from them. It is a comfortable exchange of ideas between myself and the students. As a ALT, I try my best to befriend students through the sharing of cultures. Club activities. Eating lunch together. Spend my free time in and outside of the school with them. Have fun. And does this make a difference? Yes, I believe it does. Just seeing the smiles on the children's faces as I walk into the classrooms and having them eagerly talk to me tells me that I have made the difference. They are trying because I have given them an added interest.

I remember one child in particular who told me the first day that he "hated English." Yet I noticed that he enjoyed skateboarding as much as I did. I now skate together with Junji and his friends about two or three times a month, spending most of those days skateboarding, eating, and talking about the interesting differences between us. We learn so much together about language and culture without even realizing it and that is what I feel is so special. Now, whenever I teach Junji's class he is eager to listen and participate in my lessons. He recently told me that he enjoys my lessons and will study English hard so that one day he can come to see me and my country. . .

"How much English am I actually teaching?" Maybe more than I even realize.