

English Activity Boards: The AET Perspective

足利市立教育研究所 *Christine M. Polk*

It has been a challenge for me to come up with ways to implement English into the school day during more than just the English classes that I attend. Eating lunch with students, talking during free periods and taking part in various extracurricular activities have all been good ways for me to help students become accustomed to using English outside the usual forty five minute domain set aside for that purpose. I hope that the above tactics will also help students become less shy when speaking English with other foreigners that they meet and with other Japanese English speakers and thus, increase their confidence using English. A problem arises though when I am absent from a school and helping out at another junior high school. What could I do to increase students awareness of English, and various topics related to it, outside English classes, especially when I am not there?

Two of my base school JTEs provided me with a great suggestion for how to solve my dilemma. After attending an English demonstration class in another prefecture they returned to share with me an idea that they had witnessed in process. At the junior high school they had traveled to, they saw a hallway board that the schools AET had created. They learned that each month the AET altered the boards contents but always dealt with subjects using English. I really liked the idea so I took my JTEs suggestion and came up with a similar, but alternative, plan. I would make, with the aid of my students and JTEs, a monthly activity board. I wanted to create something that students could go to in their free time and enjoy, but I also wanted students to be a part of the process. It was important for me that I work together with my students and with my JTEs to create something that everyone coming into the school could enjoy. I hoped our board would make English fun and demonstrate to the students what I'm always telling them, that they are great at English!

Thus far, three very different boards have been created thanks to the combined efforts of myself, my JTEs and our students. Before Christmas we made our first board, a holiday board. A plain green construction paper Christmas tree took up the boards center. This plain tree was then decorated by ornaments that about twenty second year students made after learning about the Christmas holiday during an English AET class session. Third year students painted a picture detailing the myth of Santa, his sleigh and his eight jolly reindeer. First year students cut out foil snowflakes, no easy task, and red letters that I would later use for a game on the board. I organized the board and assigned tasks to each grade, I also fashioned presents for under the tree using bright paper and foil. Then, my JTEs and I created a fun game for the board. We decorated around the tree using incomplete words related to the holiday season. For example, r_i_d_e_! (reindeer), m_l_n_

c_o_i_s! (milk and cookies) and *S_n_a_l_u_e!* (Santa Clause). There were twenty words, of differing ability, in all. We finished the board the day I left the junior high school for my winter holiday. I was anxious to learn about the students' reactions to their board and the challenging English game connected with it. Both proved a hit, according to student responses and to my JTEs' comments. I later learned that even some of the other teachers tried to decipher the holiday word puzzles! It made me happy to hear reports about our first boards' success and upon returning, I was glad to see that all the blank spaces had been filled with correct, and corrected, answers.

Coming up with an idea for the second board was more challenging because there were no holidays in the near future and because I didn't feel that anything could compare to the first board's beauty. Perhaps because of my pessimism, the second board we created didn't interest the students as much and on the whole, was not as successful. For our second board I came up with an idea to create a comic competition. My idea stemmed from the fact that many of my students enjoy reading comics. Also, whenever I choose to give English comics as prizes, the older students really like reading them and learning the humor behind them. I muddled through lots of comics and showed them to my JTEs to determine which strips would best suit the different grade levels' abilities. Then I used half of the board to display the comics that each class could work on. Students could work in pairs to create dialogues on photocopied comics. I set a deadline of two weeks and offered prizes to the top two comics in each grade level; I also offered a prize for submissions from the teachers' room. Students were to pin their finished products on the blank side of the board.

When I collected the comics at the end of the two week period, I had only received eleven comics! I gave all those students and teachers who made comic dialogues a prize. And then I discussed the board's shortcomings with my JTEs. After brainstorming, we came up with several reasons why the second board was not as successful as the first. One surmise was that there was too much work involved with making a dialogue. Students are inundated with school work and clubs, not to mention the traditional dilemmas that teenagers face, spending their little free time on an extra project probably was not an alluring alternative for most. It was also suggested that the comic strips we chose were too difficult for the grade levels. Our final idea was that the comic strips that we chose didn't provide enough stimulation for the students; maybe the students could not find the humor in the characters and situations.

My personal feeling is that our second board involved too much time investment on the part of the students. It appeared that the students liked having a fun and semi — challenging game board that they could visit in their free time before school, after lunch, after cleaning their classrooms, whenever! With that in mind, I was determined to create a board that was challenging but not overly time consuming. I found my inspiration in the Olympic spirit and in my students' allure to the games that were being held so close to home.

Our third board was another word puzzle. This time I wrote out words relating to the Olympics and placed them in various directions: sideways, up and down, and diagonally. The games object was for students to locate the words and to circle them in red. I wrote out the directions inside Olympic Rings that I fashioned from paper. To make the board more aesthetically pleasing I placed pictures of Olympic athletes, that I had clipped out of the newspaper, around the boards rim. I also provided a list of the words that could be found on the board; with my JTEs we came up with more than forty words for students to locate! This third board was an immediate success with the students. Within a week all the words had been located and some students had even written their name and class near the word that they had found! It was great to see the students working with one another to find the English words and to know that the students had enjoyed our activity board.

After attempting three activity boards I feel confident in claiming that it is another useful tool to involve students in English outside the classroom. All students are able to use the board, no matter what their English ability, either individually or with other class friends. I think that a students success with the board may also increase their confidence in themselves, especially concerning English. Also, because students can use the board whenever they have the urge to, they are approaching the board out of desire and not coercion. They are spending extra time with English because they want to. In short, I think the activity board has been a successful tool at my base school. It has not only provided the students with an alternative means of learning English but it has also brought me closer with my JTEs; together we have experimented with various ideas for the board and we have objectively attempted to evaluate the positive and negative points of each board that we do. I hope that the students interest in English is increased by the board and that the students gain knowledge from each activity; I know that I am!