

English Education in Elementary Schools and Role of AET

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Languages are infinitely creative, expanding entities which carry with them culture, tradition, history, memory, and possibly the intrinsic fabric and networking which allows us basic cognition. Language is the defining characteristic of humanity. And as each language has innumerable folds of depth, significance, and wealth, so does teaching of any language require a profound degree of sensitivity and understanding. Unquestionably, the teaching of languages is one of most important professions in the world.

I.

In the year 2002, the Ministry of Education will allow elementary schools to teach courses beyond the traditional eight subjects (arithmetic, social studies, science, Japanese, art, P.E., music, and home economics), such as computer courses and special classes on internationalization (i.e. taught through English or other foreign languages, as a complement to social studies classes and prep work for junior high English). Certainly it is here in primary school where a potentially realistic foundation for not only language comprehension but also usage may be cultivated with here to unprecedented efficacy. If Japan's educational system utilizes students' energy, interests, and lack of test pressure, the elementary schools of Japan have a chance to catalyze a new generation of language acquisition/learning and teaching, which while challenging might eradicate many of the problems which have plagued English education in the past anachronistic interest murdering rote drills, low test scores, poor speaking and listening skills, and fractured pronunciation (dreaded katagana lilt).

I. Cause and Effect and Theory

Most linguists agree that language acquisition is not simply limited to exposure but also inherently tied to adolescence and age. Children for the most part naturally acquire language rather than learn it. In fact in a few tragic cases in which children were isolated and had no contact to language until 12 or 13, they were psychologically and phonetically unable to learn a language. Furthermore, in many of Ashikaga's junior high schools, when foreign students come to Japan at 12 and above, often the students have many more problems and achieve only rudimentary skills after three or four years of study. Conversely, when foreign students come to Japan at a younger age, especially around six or seven, they are able to learn Japanese — reading, speaking, writing — to the amazement of many

within less than a year. Many linguists and psychologists theorize that from puberty language acquisition/learning becomes more difficult. Puberty is the linguistic Rubicon : the point where the human cognitive structure changes and acquisition becomes less wholistic and more linear and restricted. The wealth of possibility is absolutely on the side of elementary school language education, where curiosity and interests are less dulled by junior high re-orientation and test taking. The elementary school is the El Dorado of language education. In addition to this, there is also sufficient evidence which states that pronunciation is also easier to teach and retain and perfect for younger students, as exemplified in the incredible fluency foreign children have accomplished in the past in Ashikaga's elementary schools. Some have even been said to be "More adept with Japanese than native Japanese students." While English language education in junior high schools is neither unfeasible nor nonproductive, both teachers and students are at a great disadvantage. Like a clump of clay, which hardens slowly as it dries, students too are incredibly flexible and resilient and impressionable before puberty. The role of the AET is necessary in both elementary and junior high, however, the elementary environment is much more sensitive and responsive to the advantage of internationalization.

II. The Role of the ALT

The role of the ALT is not only as a one shot game player. The ideal position of an ALT is to be a functional and integral part of an elementary school, active at all grade levels (assistant for multiple classes) and in a variety of positions. His/Her role does not have to be strictly as a formal English classroom teacher. The position in elementary school must be more fluid and pliant. ALTs must be willing to assist P.E. teachers with a volley ball game, science teacher with an experiment, arithmetic teacher with addition and subtraction exercises. In a perfect world, an ALT would visit an elementary school at least once or twice a week, though this is logistically impossible. Also, the role of the ALT would be as an English speaker. While extremely basic phrases said now and again would be tolerable, 99% of his/her work should be done in English. The basic condition of acquisition is exposure and naturalness. If English is spoken, treated as a non threatening reality in the school and classroom, a substantial, tangible foundation will be laid for future study of and encounters with English and other foreign languages. Moreover, foreign language instruction should and must not be limited to just English.

Since most AETs are competent in at least two or more languages, those languages should not be ignored but also promoted and practiced and punctuated in the daily life of the schools. Especially languages which are relative to primary subjects, like the study of geography, social studies, art, music

(especially since music is so prominent in elementary school life and pedagogy) and home economics (foods of respective countries). For example in art, "Picasso was a painter. He was from Spain. He spoke Spanish and French and English. His favorite Spanish food was..." AETs can act as a bridge, a conduit between two seemingly different areas of study. Often showing the relationships and similarities between disciplines helps students to process, retain, and recall information. Language is a world where all study converges and intersects. It is not only instructive but communicative – the goal of all forms of education. The creation, dialogue, and sharing of ideas is the primary goal of education. Learning a foreign language opens doors, lets in world after world. Language is the key to life, love, and happiness. Without language, we would be nothing.

III. Food for Thought

As vague as these aforesaid ideas are there is still much, much more to consider.

Time is our enemy and as we wallow in the doldrums of theory without practice, we are wasting hundreds and thousands and millions of educational opportunities. Language is an infinitely creative and evolving thing. It is reinvented everyday. Language is the medium through which we define and are defined by our world. Even the slightest understanding of a language other than our own is worth our time and effort, as is any other subject. Ultimately our educations are minimalized into financial and social status and occupational opportunity (credentials), yet at its heart, the heart, education is about love and creating order from the chaos, light from the darkness. Education is the hope, is the force by which we are justified. From our first breath to our last, we are looking to the heart of others so that we may find our own.

Yet I am a foot for hope.