

REMEMBER ME

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This past December, just before I went home for Christmas, I found myself in a very awkward situation with one of my third year students. He was a tall nice looking boy. He approached me during cleaning time and said, "Ms. Kenyatta, I can speak a little English." "Wow," I thought. "Isn't that nice." Generally my third year boys are a bit shy about speaking to me outside of class. Yet this student obviously wanted to talk and had worked up enough courage to approach me, so I gave him my undivided attention. He said (with a grin?), "Ms. Kenyatta, I want to (expletive) you." I was shocked. I thought perhaps I had misunderstood him or, if not, maybe he didn't know what those words meant, but he also made a sexual gesture that showed me he knew exactly what he had said. When he saw that I wasn't amused, he tried to disappear into a crowd of other students, but I caught him. He said "sorry . . . sorry" so I wouldn't be so angry with him. He said, "Ms. Kenyatta, I want you to remember me." He had already accomplished that goal. I won't soon forget him. But as I think back on that day, I realize that I didn't know his name at the time. It would have been difficult to ask another teacher to stop him from running away since I didn't know the boy's name. The incident reminds me of how important it is to learn people's names. Since then I have learned many names, but I can still use help.

I understood how the boy felt when he said, "I want you to remember me." I know that our names hold our identities, and that it is important to people that they be recognized by their names. Yet I don't want my students to feel they have to use drastic measures so that I will recognize them. As an Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) in Ashikaga, I am constantly meeting people. I am usually pretty good at recognizing faces, but putting names with all those faces has been a bit overwhelming. I have found myself struggling to memorize the names of people I see every day, so imagine what a time I've had when I've gone to my assigned schools. I have been teaching at two large schools, each with faculty, staff, and students totaling about 700. And, of course, all of these individuals would like for me to know their names. I only hope they will consider the number of names I am trying to commit to memory and not think me rude when I have trouble remembering one. I usually just need a little help. More often than not, I know their faces, where they sit, something they like, etc.

Here are a few ideas that would help me and others in my situation as we try to learn the names of those around us: First, please don't ask me if I know a person's name when I am standing in front of that person. I usually try to greet people by their names. If you don't hear me refer to a person by name, chances are I don't know the name. Asking me if I know the name only embarrasses me and that person. Second, it would be nice if the Japanese Teachers of English (JTEs) would make seating charts that have the students' names in both Kanji and Romanji, similar to

the ones that we use for the teachers' room. Japanese teachers have the advantage of being able to read Kanji name badges that the students wear on their uniforms. Most ALTs do not come to Japan with the knowledge of how to read Kanji. A Kanji/Romanji seating chart would serve both the students and the ALT. It would give the students a better sense of identity because the ALT would be able to call them by name, instead of by number. It would help the ALT to learn to read and say different Japanese names. The more times ALTs encounter a name, the more likely they are to remember it. Finally, ALTs might find it easier to memorize names if they make a game of it. I found that in helping with the cups at cleaning time or tea-time I could make a game of matching names and faces to the cups. Making memorization a game took away a lot of the stress that had previously blocked my ability to memorize.

With work and the help of some of the ideas listed above, I'd like one day to be able to call my students by name in class. Perhaps then they won't feel the need to shock me.