

Cross-Cultural Communication

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The first six months that I have been in Ashikaga have gone by very quickly. I have experienced many different things in only a short time. I came to Japan feeling that I had an opportunity to see a side of the people and culture that few if any of my friends would ever know. It can be very difficult for ALT's to try and fit in when we cannot communicate well and we often rely on the patience of others, who take the time to listen. Making the effort to communicate is the base of cross-cultural communication.

My first day at Kyowa J.H.S., I was asked to come to the school for an opening ceremony. I had to give a short speech to the teachers introducing myself, in Japanese, followed by a short introduction, in English, to the students in the gym. I had practiced the Japanese introduction at home and while it wasn't perfect, I mumbled my way through and felt ok. The easy part, in my mind, would be the English introduction to the students. One of the JTE's said he would translate for me as I spoke so it would be easy, or would it. I was so nervous standing in front of 600 students that I forgot the name of the school. Instead of saying "I'm happy to be at Kyowa" I said, "I'm happy to be at Showa". The students looked at me and then at the JTE who translated and to my relief changed the name of the school for me. After the ceremony he whispered, "you forgot the name of the school didn't you?" I was so embarrassed but he told me no one noticed. I knew he and I would get along well after that. Our conversations have led to a much better understanding of the school culture and we have exchanged ideas and observations. The result is that I feel very comfortable in my role as an ALT.

I hope that everyone recognizes that it can be very challenging to leave everything you are familiar with and move to a place where nothing seems familiar. While it may seem like a lot of work to have to speak simply and slowly or translate basic ideas into English, remember that it makes a big difference to us. If you take the time to get to know the ALT in your school or office you will usually find something to share. Sometimes it is as simple as a common taste in music or hobbies, other times it can be more complex such as ideas on economic reform. We all have a lot we can teach or learn from the other. The point is that unless we make the effort we will never know what we share and no one will fully benefit from the experience. Ever since I arrived, people have gone to great lengths to help me whenever I needed it. In a lot of ways new ALT's are like *ichi-nensei*'s, we try very hard to fit into the group around us. This is our greatest challenge and we face it everyday, whether we are at school or at home. Without the help and support of the staff at our schools and the Board of Education life would be very difficult indeed.