

What I Have Learned in 4 Months

Drew Peterson

Besides a tiny amount of vocabulary, I have managed to learn a few things in the past few months. Of course, I've learned things about me as a person and who I really am and that sort of thing, but its only really interesting to me (and just barely at that) so I will just focus on job-related observations. At the outset of this, however, I would like to acknowledge my relative lack of experience in teaching, and admit I'm not even a real teacher. I work with real teachers, and they are more dedicated, better trained, and simply more skilled at the very daunting task of educating than I. I have a specific role in the school, and the following pertains to my limited experience in that role.

First, respect, at least for me, is everything in the classroom. I demand it from my students, and they from me. Before I started working at Yamabe Junior High School, everyone told me how difficult the students are. While I found this to be true initially, I firmly believe that by establishing a contract of mutual respect, there is no reason why the classroom experience can't be productive and beneficial for everyone involved. When I was young, I was always in trouble because I was of the opinion that teachers who did not establish this contract were as undeserving of my respect as they assumed I was of their's. That attitude in a 15 year could be construed as obnoxious, but when one thinks about the problems some 15 year olds face--the loss of loved ones, rapid physical and environmental changes, looming life-determining tests, as well as countless other hurdles, one can hopefully see why they are entitled to respect. This includes basic respect from other students, as well. When I talk in class, students should be quiet. Likewise, when a student talks in class, other students should be quiet.

Second, the most important aspect in the study of any subject must be motivation on the part of the student. This means two things to me: the student will work harder than the teacher in the learning process, and the teacher must do everything possible to make the material interesting, accessible, and relevant. Why should students learn English? Do their friends speak English? Do their parents? How many people in Ashikaga speak English? The answers to these questions are probably no, no, and not many. There are several great reasons to learn English, but I'll only give one. It is everywhere. In every country in the world, especially in business, there's English to be heard. However, the 13 year olds I know probably don't think about what they would do if they were at a high-powered telecommunications conference in Zurich, as much as they think about the tennis match on Sunday, the cutest member of W_inds, or getting a new glue stick to keep the old socks up. This should be the concern of the ALTs of Ashikaga. A good ALT should make English relevant, more interesting, and less intimidating to their students. A seed should be planted--which will grow over time in the student's imagination and curiosity. Students should go home and see English on a box of crackers and feel cool because they can tell their parents what it means. They should find out the worst English insult and call their friends that when they hang-out outside of the arcade. They should look a word up in the dictionary just because the want to know what it means. ALTs should try to plant as many seeds as possible in the minds of these students, because otherwise all of the grammar and workbook exercises will seem pretty lame.

Third, Yamabe Junior High School is really hard to find. Luckily, it's right next to Jimmy Hoffa's house, the Holy Grail, and the Northwest Passage which Captain Cook long sought, so at least I can cross those things off from my Scavenger Hunt List. Incidentally, if anyone knows where I can find a viable method of cold fusion, I'd really appreciate it.

So there you go. In my opinion, to succeed as an ALT, one should be prepared to offer respect and motivation. Well, first get a good map, and then do the whole respect and motivation thing.