

Expectations

Damon S. Jacob

Once again, I was alone with my own thoughts as the morning meeting commenced, and I couldn't understand a single word of the tirade of information that was being communicated around me. Only later, after persistent interrogation of the ever-bustling English teachers, would I come to find out that Kyoto-sensei was in the hospital, Mr. Mizoguchi was having a wedding the next day, and that the assembly yesterday morning (of which I had no idea of its occurrence) had been a success. As an ALT you may find this the most frustrating part of your job. You are often assumed to understand things that you would never have known about, and perhaps will never understand.

Before I began my job at Sakanishi Junior High School, I had several expectations of what my job there would be like. I was very optimistic (if not a bit unrealistic) about how the students would jump at the opportunity to learn a foreign language from a native speaker. I envisioned visiting elective classes and teaching about culture, exchanging letters with the students who wanted to learn about me, and perhaps even starting an after school English club. However, I soon realized that these were all pipe dreams. Elective English classes are either for those students who have no interest in studying English, and so must be specially trained (search me), or as a study hall for those students wishing to pass the grueling high school exams. Private communication with the students through letters/comment board and such is frowned upon because it would be a deviation from the group, not to mention the fact that the students are deathly afraid of one-on-one communication with you. As for the English club idea, the students would not dream of violating the contract they have already pledged to their current club activity.

This all sounds very daunting, it's true, but it is merely a cultural difference which you are just becoming aware of. On the flipside of the coin, the school will have expectations of you as well. Everyday, you must clean the school with the children, you must never scold or attempt to discipline the children (it is a hands-free approach), and, generally, you must behave as a second parent to the children. Although these expectations are not difficult to meet, the lack of language skills certainly puts you at a disadvantage. You can never expect to reach the level of intimacy that the other teachers have with the students. Therefore, you may never be fully utilized or even respected by the students.

As an ALT, one must be realistic about the job and its requirements. If you want to make it a worthwhile experience, you must be persistent with your expectations. Ask to teach culture and/ or new expressions when there is time left in class. Remind your teachers that not only can you not speak the language, but that this office situation is very new to you. Show the students your sense of humor, and let your guard down as much as possible. Be patient, and they will come to feel more comfortable with you in due time. As an ALT, if you get lost in the sense of alienation and frustration caused by dashed expectations, there is the grand pitfall of becoming what I call the school's "English Mascot." You will wander through your day simply as a language on tape. Instead, you must adjust your expectations, roll with the punches, and remain persistent. Stay strong: be a role model, not a mascot.