

Two ALT Perspectives on Elementary School English Activities

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Abstract

Naruto City has been lucky to have consistently good ALTs who have renewed their contracts for multiple-year stays. This article presents the opinions of two of those ALTs. It is hoped that it will provide a window into what some ALTs are thinking. The article is written in casual English rather than academic English to serve this purpose. Hopefully it will be of interest to both local teachers as well as teachers around Japan.

1. Maria Serourian: Ways to Create a Positive Atmosphere in the English Classroom

My name is Maria, and I am currently working as an ALT in Naruto City. Working at three different elementary schools, I've had the opportunity to work with several teachers, observe various teaching styles, and work with students of different age groups and personalities. At all of my schools, the students from 1st to 4th grade have an incredible amount of energy and love participating in English class. However, the attitudes of my 5th and 6th graders vary a lot. Some classes are very dynamic and exciting while others are very quiet and slow-paced. This isn't due to the material or lesson plan. Most of the teachers that I work with go off of the same lesson plan and use the same or very similar materials. So why is it that some classes are more motivated than others? Of course, some of this is due to the nature of the students in the class. However, I believe that the students are heavily influenced by the environment that the HRT and ALT create. Based on what I have observed in my classes, I will write about some of the ways HRTs and I have contributed to a positive learning environment. It is equally important not to discourage students in any way, so I have also listed a few things we should avoid doing in English class.

Do: set a positive example and encourage the students.

My most excited students have the most excited teachers. If you show your students that you enjoy speaking English, they will follow your example. One of my favorite HRTs always greets me with a smile and asks me interesting questions both in and out of class. Once, when I was eating school lunch with her class, she asked me a question that she knew the students had been wanting to ask but were always too shy to do so, “Maria, do you have a boyfriend?”. When the students saw that I was open to share information about myself, they became even more curious and started to ask more and more questions. On another occasion, she asked the kids, “Oh, I wonder if Maria likes Japanese food” to encourage the students. Of course, I also try to encourage students by asking them questions about their hobbies, their likes, and their families during lunch time, but the older 5th and 6th graders rarely ask me any questions in return. They are usually too shy, which is understandable considering the language barrier. But when the HRT gives them a topic for them to question me about, as simple as Japanese foods, it makes it so much easier for the students to think of questions. It also ignites their curiosity. Soon, they were asking me all sorts of questions: “Do you like natto?” “Do you like sushi?” “What sushi do you like?”

NEVER say: “English is difficult.”

The students look up to their HRT. If the HRT says English is difficult, they will automatically assume that it is impossible for them. One teacher that I worked with was very afraid of speaking English. So much that he tried to avoid any direct communication and eye contact with me both in and outside of class. And whenever I tried to reach out to his students, I got the same reaction: no eye contact, little or no response. It was so sad! Of course, I understand that it is very difficult to speak in a foreign language. It is just as difficult for me to speak Japanese as it is for some HRTs to speak English. But for the sake of the students, please make an effort to be positive. There will be times when the teacher or students will not understand me. But that is okay. That is a natural part of language learning.

Don’t: correct every little mistake that a student makes while speaking.

It takes so much courage for these children to speak English in front of the whole class. Even the most outgoing students become a bit nervous. If we correct them as soon as they make a mistake, we lower their confidence and discourage the other students from speaking. On numerous occasions, I’ve witnessed teachers interrupt a student before he even had the chance to finish his sentence simply to correct a small grammatical mistake. No wonder so many

students refuse to speak English! Please, don't stress about incorrect grammar. English isn't all about grammar. Neither is Japanese, nor any other language. It's about communication, and it's very important that the students feel comfortable using English to express themselves. Trust me, a small grammar mistake won't prevent a native speaker from understanding. Everyone makes some grammar mistake from time to time, even native speakers. Of course, there are some occasions when I feel I should correct a mistake. I just try to be sensitive to the student's feelings when I do so. Once, when I was questioning a student, "How many bats are there?" The student replied "Three bat." So I asked "Three bats?" while holding up three fingers. The student nodded, yes. So I replied, "Okay, good job! Now, everyone, please repeat "three batsssssss." Good!"

Do: reward your students for their efforts.

Students love recognition. If they make an effort to participate in class, praise them for their enthusiasm. If they think they are good at English, chances are they will like English class. If it is possible, try to track their progress. At one school, the English teachers post pictures of the students participating in games and presentations as well as written activities that students work on in English class. Before or after class, some of the students look at these pictures and read the work of the other students. These pictures and activities posted on the walls are a constant reminder of words and sentence structures that they have learned throughout the year. Seeing their progress, they will be more motivated to continue their hard work.

Do: challenge the students to guess the meaning of new words.

ALTs need the HRT to help the children understand them sometimes, but translating everything defeats the purpose of the interaction between the ALT and students. Of course the students will be exposed to many new words, but if the HRT and ALT encourage them to do so, they can often guess the meaning of the new words from the context. Of course, the ALT can always repeat the sentence, rephrase the sentence, or gesture and draw some of the difficult words. There are so many ways to communicate. And if we can show the students that it's possible to guess the meaning of a new word, it will make them better communicators. Another great way to encourage them is to ask the students if they understood a part of the sentence. The students can work together to guess the meaning.

Don't: write English words and sentences in katakana.

Katakana is not English. There are so many sounds in the English language

that do not exist in katakana. For example: orange. In katakana, it would be written オレンジ. But if you ever say orenji to an American, they won't understand you. (Unless, of course, you ask an American living in Japan.) Many of my HRTs don't think it's a big deal. They just assume that the students will be able to differentiate the katakana pronunciation from the actual pronunciation. It's actually very confusing for the students to read what the HRT wrote, and then have their ALT pronounce a different word, "No, no! It's not lefto! It's left." Why complicate things? The more complicated it seems, the more likely your students won't enjoy English lessons. Secondly, why should we create bad habits that will be difficult to undo later on? Believe it or not, many of my junior high students continue to pronounce English words based on their katakana spelling. So let's avoid katakana!

Do: involve your ALT in classes or school activities outside English class.

This is a big one. One of the biggest roles of ALTs is building the students' confidence and cultural competence. But in order to do so, ALTs need to interact with students in different situations. I've been lucky to have some HRTs that involve me in different school activities. One of the teachers invited me to study Japanese with one of the foreign students, and it was a great way to bond with the child. She also organized a Halloween day for students last year, so that we could go around and trick or treat together. It was great! I'm very grateful for all the hard work that she has done! Another one of my HRTs invited me to play badminton and table tennis with the kids. She also invited me to calligraphy class to learn with the students. At another school, I was invited to participate in one of the mukashi no asobi club's outdoor activities. All of my schools have invited me to different school events at one point. I feel so grateful because these are the few occasions that I have with the children to just be myself and get to know them better. Once I played *onigokko* with my students during lunch break. I was scheduled to teach them after the break at 5th period. When I went into class, they were extra *genki* because I had just spent thirty minutes chasing them around! It's also nice because it helps me break some of the stereotypes they have of foreigners, and they learn that we are not so different after all. I still love the way students react when they find out that I do not like hamburgers, and I love natto. So if you are reading this, please help ALTs get involved in school life. Think of one class besides English class that they can visit, or a club, or a school festival.

Don't: be afraid to ask your ALT to leave the staffroom.

Trust me, the ALT will be glad you did. There is so much time I spend in the staffroom that I would rather be spending with the kids. HRTs please, make

use of the extra time ALTs have in the staffroom to interact with the students.

2. Natasha Hackshaw: Starting English early: An ALTs perspective

2.1 Differences in the last four and a half years

As an ALT (assistant language teacher) half way through my fourth year of working in Naruto city, I have had a very wide range of experiences. During my time here I have had the pleasure of working with every age group: from infants at the library and children at preschool, to students in elementary, junior high and senior high school, to adults in *eikaiwa*. I am a strong believer that the younger you are when you start to learn a language the easier it will be. Though I have held this belief for a long time, my time here in Japan has only supported this idea.

My position is quite special in that I get to work with many students even after they have transitioned to their next school. Having taught at elementary and junior high school for so many years, I have witnessed incredible growth and change in the students. My old 6th grade students are about to graduate junior high school, and the third grade students I played ‘tag’ with at recess are about to become junior high school students. The students have learned so much and have improved their English communication abilities, but more than just the students’ achievements, the whole English education system has changed as well. First, English education became compulsory for students in the 5th and 6th grade. Second, the materials used at elementary school have changes from “Eigo Noto” to “Hi, Friends”, and third the curriculum has changed for junior high schools. Have the changes in the last four years been effective? Absolutely. Well, in my humble opinion, I can at least assume so for the compulsory introduction of English at elementary schools. The other two changes are too recent to tell.

One of the most noticeable differences in the students English ability is their pronunciation. When I think back to my 3rd year junior high school students when I first arrived, so many of them had ‘katakana’ pronunciation. Now, only a small minority of students use ‘katakana’ pronunciation. I am so glad to be able to understand my students when they say a speech in English in front of the class. It seems absurd to think that when I first arrived I couldn’t understand my students when they were speaking English because their pronunciation was so strange. The second noticeable difference is that I can have simple conversations with my elementary school students, and they can actually respond instead of just repeating a learned response phrase. Before when I would ask “How are you?” to students ranging from elementary to high school, their response would be silence, “eee?” or “Fine. Thank you and you?”.

Now my students reply with a variety of meaningful responses like “I’m good”, “I’m sleepy” and “I’m hungry”. The third difference is that the transition from elementary to junior high school English has become easier. The assimilation of vocabulary, the alphabet and classroom commands has become a lot less daunting for students and teachers because it involves a lot of familiar words, phrases and activities. English at junior high school must cover so much material in such a short amount of time, the simple review of basic material really helps them to progress faster.

Lastly, I believe that the attitude towards English has changed from simply being a school subject to becoming a means of communication. One of my favorite moments was at junior high school when a few first year students warned me that my break light wasn’t working on my car. The students approached me before class and began with ‘Natasha’s car’ gesturing driving. And then ‘lamp’ and ‘back’ using more gestures. Finishing with ‘bad’ making a large X with his arms. I can’t even express how much this made me happy. The year had just started, they barely had any vocabulary and didn’t really use grammar, but I was so proud that they were able and willing to communicate something of real meaning to me. In short, I think the introduction of compulsory English classes has greatly improved the student’s attitude toward English, their pronunciation, and their willingness and ability to communicate. I believe this is true for several reasons.

2.2 Elementary kids are capable, ready and eager to learn English

I like the focus on games and communication in the elementary school curriculum. Students really seem to enjoy English class and are using it to communicate, which is often difficult to achieve at junior high school because of the heavy workload that is placed on them. Students are starting with a positive attitude towards learning a foreign language, which is a great starting point. Kids are so excited to communicate with me at elementary school, especially those students from the 1st to 4th grade. These students have very limited English and yet they are able to explain to me how to play “cops and robbers” and “freeze tag” using gestures and words like “run” and “touch”. At lunchtime when I eat with younger grades I am bombarded by questions asking my favourite colour and what fruit I don’t like. Often kids ask me to read English from their t-shirts and they smile and cheer even though they don’t understand the meaning. Some students go around the room pointing at things and saying what they are called in Japanese and wait for me to say the English equivalent. These kids are so excited to simply hear English being spoken that often I barely have time to eat. When they know a word, they are so eager to use it. Students often come up to me in the halls and say “hello”, and then they

realise they don't know how to say anything else and they run away. Other students proceed by introducing themselves to me and then run away after that. They also try to show off the English they know by shouting "oh my god" when something happens, or pointing at food items and naming them off in English. I really enjoy teaching at elementary schools because you get so much more out of a lesson. At elementary schools the students are full of energy and curiosity, which is the ideal environment for teaching anything.

The younger the students are, the more open they are to singing songs, playing games, making mistakes, and making foreign sounds. The older the students get, the more these excellent traits are subdued, and their attitudes change. Even though there are only a couple of weeks between being a 6th grader at elementary school and being a 1st grader at junior high, the difference in their attitude is enormous. I have a hard time comprehending how the same chipper students can change so much in two weeks time. I don't know if it's because the students think they are supposed to act differently, if they are just unsure and shy, or if they have been told to completely changes their demeanor. Essentially, the students enthusiasm is greatly lowered. Junior high school English is very different from elementary English, and much more difficult. The curriculum demands the students to learn even more vocabulary, etc. and high school English is even more demanding. To learn a language without much exposure to it is a very difficult thing to do, and they must learn and remember so much within only six years of formal English education.

To be honest, it almost seems like the wrong six years are being used to do this. With the students' energy, positive attitude, willingness and curiosity all being at their highest in elementary school, I would think the ideal time to learn anything new would be during those years. There are years of research and probably hundreds of studies that show that the younger someone is, the easier it is for them to learn a language. Young children are able to assimilate grammar in ways adults simply can't, as well as hear unfamiliar spoken sounds that adults cannot. An adult can spend 10 years studying a language, and though they will become very competent with the grammar and know a great amount of vocabulary, they may never master the language like a native speaker. Why? Because the native speaker learned their language when they were young.

My native language is English. I, however, am completely bilingual and I am fluent in French. Why? Because my family put me in a French school when I was 4. And, though I had some simple homework for a few months to help me catch up, I didn't really have to study much, and by the time I was six and entering the 1st grade I had already become fluent in French. In Canada, our schools try very hard to teach English and French to students. However, like in Japan, and in most countries, students remember very little after their time at

school. Schools in Canada, just like in Japan, only introduce learning a second language around the 5th grade. Two years ago one of my best friends from Quebec came to visit me here in Japan. When my supervisor met him she was so impressed by his English ability and asked him if he learnt it in school. His answer was no. To be honest he was horrible at English at school because he didn't know the difference between an article and an adverb, or the past tense and the past continuous tense because he, like me, learned to speak English when he was a child, purely from communication and didn't understand the grammatical structures of English in that way. In fact, most of his English ability came from playing with me as a child, but today he is the only English speaker in his workplace and handles all the English speaking clients at the company he works for. The core message here is that as well-intentioned as school boards are, the approach of teaching English formally when students are no longer children (when they are adolescents) just doesn't seem to be very effective in either country. Exposure at a young age seems to be the key.

Living in Japan, there is very little natural exposure to English and so this creates probably the biggest challenge for anyone to be able to acquire English by exposure alone. I was very lucky when I learned French that I was surrounded by a French environment at school, but also in the community around me. My sister did not have the same advantage because, by the time she was placed in a French school, we had already moved to an English community. Her French suffered because of it, and she struggled at school for a while. My mother made my sister watch a half hour of French TV every day. She also decided that we would have times during the day during which we would have to speak to each other in French. These steps seemed to help because before long she was no longer struggling with French at school. The situation is even more disadvantaged here. At least in Canada, where French is an official second language, it was easy to find french material such as music, books and TV shows. In Japan, I find it quite difficult to find things in English.

Obviously in order to expose students enough to master a language in just two years is almost impossible in Japan, but if early exposure is that effective, why not expose young children as much as possible? If the government does not want formal English education in the form of reading and writing until junior high school, there is nothing stopping schools from taking steps by adding games, simple communication and simple exposure in elementary schools. Though my purely idealistic suggestion would be to have very regular English classes starting from the 1st grade and continue until the end of elementary, I realise there are constraints to this. If a school has the means to do this, however, I would highly recommend it because I know that it would be very successful. One of my friends here works at a private preschool where he teaches three year

old students English every day. It is an immersion program and it seems to be quite effective. Every time he encounters students from the average high school he is amazed that his three year old students have better English than many of them. Though I don't find this surprising, as it only matches my own experience.

For the majority of schools this will be impossible, and so this is my realistic suggestion: increase exposure outside English class. Many elementary schools have already taken great steps towards this and at those schools the students' attitude towards English education has followed them even into junior high school. I am constantly inspired by the enthusiasm, tenacity, creativity and achievements of the teachers I have worked with here in Japan. Though not everyone can be exceptional, there are many teachers and even schools as a whole that have such positive attitudes towards teaching English that it is truly a pleasure to work with them. There are many opportunities outside class where students can be exposed to English.

2.3 Realistic and useful solutions to increasing exposure

One particular school has taken a lot of initiative and does many things other schools could do as well. One example of this is that each year at the school's festival the 5th graders have incorporated English into their skit and song and have allowed me to participate in the play as well. Another example is a few times a year I have been asked to read a picture book to the school. And yet another example is during cleaning time English music is played on the intercom. This is something extremely simple, but it increases exposure to English and because the songs they play are often used in the classroom as well, it creates a familiarity and liking for the songs. At many schools music is played during lunch time or during cleaning time. Why not have it in English?

At another elementary school they have done a remarkable job at creating an environment with English all around them. The first thing you see when you walk into the school is an English map of the school that the students made. Matching the map, at the entrance of every room there is an English sign with a picture displaying what room it is. They have done this for every room from the "Teacher's room" to "Class 2-1" to the "music room". As you continue to walk around the school you can see the steps counting up in English, and the names and flags of different countries. Scattered all around the school are several famous quotes with a picture of the speaker or character. Some of these quotes are from notable cartoons like "One Piece", "Pokemon", and "Conan". When you press a button on the image you can hear the quote said in English. Also, during recess, sometimes I read English picture books to interested students. Finally, at the end of the day announcement, the last thing said is "See you!". One of the other Naruto ALTs has told me that the lunchtime announcements at

one of their elementary schools are made in English. Describing what's for lunch using English food vocabulary when it is known such as rice, bread, carrots, and milk. I think this is a brilliant idea because it's simple and a great review.

Other than decisions that affect the entire schools, some individual teachers have taken steps to include more English in classes or include English and me in other aspects of the students' school lives. One 3rd grade teacher requested to have more English classes, and from that the 3rd graders that year improved so much and so quickly they had nearly the same ability as the 5th and 6th graders. Some other teachers have simply invited me to join in a few other classes on rare occasions such as singing an English song in music class, or playing dodge ball or jump rope during PE, or having me participate in several different school clubs. All of these have made a difference because they have created more chances for the students to share their experiences, culture and hobbies by communicating to me with English, gestures, and demonstrations.

The teachers have made such a difference. Even though it may seem like the smallest effort, just having the homeroom teachers show an interest in communicating with me inspires the students to do the same. Though some teachers may be afraid to do so because of their limited English, I believe when those teachers try, it influences the students even more because they themselves are extremely limited, and so if the teacher can do it, so can they.

Having talked to many ALTs all around Tokushima prefecture I know that most of us feel underused. I really think at elementary school we could make such a difference. Many of them want to get more involved in the school, with the students and especially in special events. ALTs often feel out of place and will be unlikely to ask to get involved because they don't want to be a bother or are just unsure who to ask. If you would like to get your ALT involved in any of your classes, events or clubs, ask them if they would be interested in participating. The easiest classes to get the ALT involved in are ones like cooking classes, PE classes, music classes, and arts and crafts classes. However, I have heard of some ALTs participating in math classes and others (this is easier if the ALT can speak Japanese). These lessons don't necessarily need to be changed at all, it simply gives the students opportunities to communicate with the ALT, and hopefully some English communication will happen and some new words may be learned.

2.4 Summary

In conclusion, the most effective time to teach students a new language is when they are young. Increasing the amount of exposure to English to younger students can greatly improve their attitude toward English as well as their ability.

Therefore, including mandatory English classes for 5th and 6th graders was a great start, and already I believe we can see the difference in our junior high school students. Students in lower grades are even more excited and interested in English and increasing their level of exposure to English can only help in the goal of mastering English. Many teachers and schools have taken inspiring steps increasing the exposure of English and their efforts have greatly affected the students' ability and attitude. I hope that their actions can inspire others to take similar steps because many of them are simple and all of them make a difference.

3. Conclusion

Several common themes emerge which we would like to highlight. Both ALTs seem to view English at elementary schools very positively and feel that the new curriculum is improving students' communicative abilities and attitudes. ALTs can play an important role in facilitating this change. Many ALTs, however, seem to say that they are not very busy and are not sure how to become more involved in their schools. They are very appreciative when their Japanese colleagues invite them to do extra-curricular activities and are eager to become more involved, both in and out of the classroom setting. Making the best use of ALTs is an important challenge for schools. Japanese teachers are very busy and it is often difficult to find time to work with ALTs. However, native English speaking teachers are a valuable resource. If used effectively, they can make a substantial contribution both in the classroom and in the broader school community. Most ALTs are keen to make the most of their time. We hope that Japanese teachers of all levels (elementary, junior, and senior high school) think about how to involve ALTs and make the best use of their unique talents and abilities.