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The ALT in Elementary Schools

by Justin Dart

In 2011 English will be formally introduced at elementary schools as a full subject with 35 hours a year. Many municipalities have already begun implementing a program of ES (elementary school) English incrementally in order to prepare teachers and to accumulate materials to make the program successful.

These next two years are even more critical than the actual initiation date of English as a formal subject at the elementary school. This is the time when homeroom teachers (HRTs) can become familiar with the concept of teaching English on their own or with the ALT as a supporter.

Up to now, and until 2011, English at the elementary school has been at the discretion of the Board of Education and the schools. It is optional. Some municipalities send their ALTs to the elementary schools while others don't. Even among those elementary schools that do have English lessons, the number of hours of English and the content varies greatly. Some schools have 30 hours a year of English at the 5th and 6th grades while others have only six hours a year. While some BOEs have established a standard curriculum, many schools and municipalities have simply left the content in the hands of the ALTs. This creates massive variations from school to school, class to class, and region to region, depending on each ALT's company or organization, experience, training, hours at the school and personal reasons for teaching.

Though Eigo Note has received a lot of criticism since it was published, and though it may not be perfect, it will help bring some consistency to what is taught in the 5th and 6th grades of elementary school, and therefore



enables HRTs to plan English lessons more easily. It provides a syllabus that HRTs can follow and the challenge is how to use it effectively.

This is where the ALT comes in and becomes more important than ever before. I know many ALTs like to have control of the content and approach and giving it up to the homeroom teacher is like getting cut off at the knees. But instead of looking at it as a loss or a prescription for failure, think of it as an opportunity to influence the system from the bottom up.

ALTs have been teaching in the elementary schools for about 20 years. Most of the materials for instruction of this level were developed and implemented by ALTs. At this stage they are far more knowledgeable about how to teach ES English than the HRTs. As the system transitions from the ALT leading the classroom to the HRT leading the classroom, it is important to support HRTs with all the accumulated experience of ALTs in the elementary school.

This means providing them with activities, materials, approaches to teaching and even ideas of how to manage the class so that it can remain exciting. ALTs can help HRTs build confidence in using English and seeing the teaching subject not as an annoyance but as a new challenge. The ALT must also help them



see past how English is taught in junior high and high school, as this may be the only experience HRTs have of English lessons. They should encourage them to read the teachers' notes for Eigo Note and the Guidelines for Teaching Gaikokugo Katsudo. Most HRTs have these books but rarely open them. These cover every detail from listening activities to Total Physical Response to the goal of ES English.

If ALTs sit back and just let the HRTs take over without support simply because they don't like the system or they don't like Eigo Note, then the system will fail and a few more years later MEXT will discuss moving English down to even lower grades. ALTs are not outside the system. They will be critical to the success of ES English. They must overcome any aversion they have to Eigo Note, and help HRTs to use it effectively as one of many tools in the English classroom.

A native of Wisconsin in the USA, Justin came to Japan on the JET program for three years from 2000 to 2003. This year Justin became the co-founder of The Archipelago Group, which provides JTEs and ALTs an environment to share and develop ideas to

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