

Reflections of an elementary school English teacher

by Judith Thiessen

The largest class of students I've ever encountered at my private language school in Japan had about 12 kids in it, and the smallest, 1. The kids that attend my classes are there because their parents want them to be—they know this, I know this and most of us seem willing to make it work. Yes, there are some students who are genuinely interested in learning English, but I think the majority would prefer to spend the time with their friends or in front of the TV. So I figure my job is not just to teach the language but make it interesting and useful. And since my class sizes are so small it is relatively easy to build up a relationship with each student so that when they come in they know they are entering a familiar environment even if they do not understand everything being said.

While I do try to make English useful, it may not appear so to the students. The only time they are required to use the language is within the classroom—how can a classroom compare to the outside world? Mind you, I think this question can be applied to most subjects when looked at from the perspective of an 8-year-old—you study because you have to, but the advantages of learning mathematics are not readily apparent to you until later in life. So if the usefulness of English is not apparent then I have to at least make it interesting.

Everything changed for me last year when the powers that be announced that I would be teaching at a couple of the local elementary schools. Imagine my surprise. Double that surprise when you factor in my reaction to being told average class sizes. Since I would be teaching grades 3-6 and alternating between schools for one hour per week with class sizes hovering around 35, I figured all previous assumptions about teaching Japanese children and my own methods would be severely threatened. And to a degree they were, but not the teaching part—the teaching

part was the easy part. I stuck to methods that had worked in the past—establish and maintain a routine and build on that. Encourage those who were unsure. Try to show that English is useful and interesting and can be applied to the world around them. The tough part came from having to deal with a school system that had, apparently, absolutely no idea what to do with English teachers who were there to teach. The experiences of the schools amounted to having an AET walk in and play games. Games are well and good and useful and all that but games, in my experience, cannot be the only way to teach a language.

I teach in two main schools—one has an open policy where they leave the lessons entirely up to me. The other school wants to have more involvement in the direction the classes will take. This was completely okay with me, right up until the first “plan” they sent, which was “Nouns.” The next said “Sing some songs.” They then asked if I could please teach something about Canada. I would be happy to show pictures and butcher the national anthem with my voice but how, exactly, would any of the kids see this as useful? Would they absorb English through osmosis? The teachers themselves have been great for the most part. While some leave me alone for the hour, others stay in the class and help me monitor when the kids are doing pairwork activities. At times some will try to lead the students in answering a question, but most understand when I ask them to stop and let the kids take a stab at it on their own.

I was told that I was not to teach writing skills or assign homework. I found this odd since I have always believed in the idea that to truly learn a language it is necessary to understand all aspects of it and to think about it outside of the classroom. However, I would change my approach of teaching through reading and writing and focus only on listening and speaking. I would teach full phrases which could

be used in a variety of situations (Do you like ___? Do you have ___?). I would not stand in front of a class and sing a song that had no real value when it came to speaking.

My mistake was to think of my role in these schools as a step towards the students learning English. I soon learned that my actual role was to introduce the “idea” of English and get the kids ready for the eventual learning of the language, which wouldn't happen for years yet. So, why didn't they just keep with the AETs and leave it at that? As yet I have no idea. Granted this is all new and the school board is not quite sure how to fully utilize the teachers it has hired through my language school. Teachers at the elementary schools themselves have voiced their confusion saying that they don't understand why we are there—what is the overall direction the school board wants us to take? The levels of confusion happening here would be fascinating if I wasn't involved in it myself.

Instead of railing against the things I don't like about this contract I've been trying to work with the schools to show them that I am, indeed, a teacher who is fully capable of teaching children. And by “show them” I mean that I welcome any and all spectators who are curious as to what is happening in the classroom. This past year almost every concept I have introduced to the students has been accepted easily. Granted, I haven't been trying to get the kids to grasp the zero conditional, however, some of the language I have covered has not been featured on the Japanese “Sesame Street”. The students rarely say “This is too hard” and if they do it is only a matter of spending a few more seconds with that student and helping them. Overall, I am glad I have been given the opportunity to see how schools operate and, in turn, to show the schools that English can be interesting and useful as opposed to something that is merely a game to distract the students for an hour.