

Open Class

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Most parents see open class events as a tradition and a right. As paying customers, they feel that they should be able to personally view the tone of the class interaction, the character of the teacher, and the method of the lesson.

For a small school, word of mouth is by far the most effective method of advertising, and this is a great opportunity to stimulate the parents' understanding and satisfaction in your school's uniqueness. Perhaps this is your very best opportunity.

On the downside, no parent can avoid comparing their child to another, and the resulting emotions can be uncomfortable or embarrassing. For the children, having Mom or Dad (we

had three fathers attend) sitting less than a meter away, intently watching, is a major distraction. For the teacher, it can be nerve-wracking. The potential for negative feelings looms large, and everyone is probably feeling some pressure.

So—as this is the time to help the children look good—give them something they can hit out of the park. No major new challenges, just material and activities that they are familiar with and can handle even with the added pressure and distractions.

To accomplish this, the class lessons were planned three weeks in advance; the lessons of The Big Day were mostly material that they had

worked with in the two previous weeks. This was very important, because it gave ME (the teacher) more confidence, and reduced a lot of inner pressure.

Every class did several activities with phonics, partly as a demonstration for the parents. This generated some interest and (two) questions, which was their purpose.

Without addressing the watching parents directly, part of the class was for their education about phonics.

The students did well, the atmosphere was pleasant and actually enjoyable. One mother attended with her video camera (shades of sports day!). My wife took pictures, which

are now in the school scrapbook. There were no disasters, thankfully (unless you consider my bald spot shining prominently in several pictures a disaster).

Our school will continue holding Open Classes, as an annual event in mid-July. This is after the new students who joined in April have settled in, and before the summer break.

We had not held them last year, because the strain of the Open Classes in 2001 actually made the teacher ill.

We then lost more students than usual the following March. The possibility of a connection was a factor in resuming Open Classes this year.

Joshua Myerson of New Leaf Academy posted four questions on the ETJ owners' list and suggested that these should be asked when making business decisions. They would seem to especially apply here:

Consider;

1) What can be gained by doing it? (Good, perhaps great, advertising.)

2) What can be lost by doing it? (A week's worth of fresh lessons.)

3) What can be gained by NOT doing it? (Feeling much more relaxed.)

4) What can be lost by NOT doing it? (Loss of parents' understanding or support.)

Overall, the benefits of having an Open Class make it well worthwhile, but it must be carefully planned to reduce pressure and avoid negative results.

Hiring Staff:

Finding the Right Person for the Job and Protecting Your Business

One of the most timely threads on the Yahoo! ETJ owners' group recently was on the topic of recruiting teachers. Many members of ETJ seem to run small, one teacher schools, and naturally at some point the thought of expanding the operation pops up. The move from solo operation to hiring other teachers is a huge step, and for people with little or no experience of hiring and/or managing staff, can be extremely daunting to say the least.

Don Block of Eikaiwa BLOCK in Shiga started the discussion by offering to send people an essay he has put together on the subject of hiring staff and avoiding "stepping on landmines" in the hiring process. A prolific contributor to the ETJ discussion groups, Mr. Block is known for his caring approach to English teaching and his entertaining posts.

Drawing on years of experience of recruiting and dealing with non-Japanese staff, the advice offered is practical and straightforward, and is enhanced by anecdotes and personal experiences.

Some interesting points that come up in the essay include:

- The importance of believing in yourself and your company. After all, you are offering people employment, however small or insignificant you feel your school to be (especial-

ly in the early stages).

- Advertising, including what information to include in (or leave out of!) the ad. You should advertise more than you think you will need to. This will give you a safety net and ensure you have enough applicants to choose from. If an initially successful applicant proves unsuitable, you will have a list of possible replacements lined up. Also don't demand Japanese skills in the ad. Some otherwise ideal applicants may be put off by their perceived lack of fluency!

- Interviews are your best chance to really probe candidates. Ask tough questions. Get candidates to give you a trial lesson. Explain the job in detail, and don't make it sound better than it is. If you misrepresent the job to candidates, they may well quit when they discover the truth.

- "Red flags" regarding applicants. In general, the following are danger signs: being late for interview, being highly critical of last or present employer, being willing to break contract with present employer, dressing very casually for interview, any inconsistencies or falsehoods.

- An ingenious way of testing punctuality: Ask candidates to meet you at the train station. As long as trains are running to schedule there

is no excuse for them to be late. Serious applicants will be on time. If someone is not on time, you should not hire them.

- The benefits of Japanese support staff are numerous. They can escort applicants from the station, answer phone calls, help with admin and dealing with parents, supervise the classes of any new teacher you hire, and generally receive about 1/3rd the hourly rate of foreign staff! You may think that you can't afford a receptionist, but "hiring capable Japanese employees is what catapulted us into being a real company..."

Of course, you should really read the original essay if you are interested in the topic: it is currently over twenty pages long and besides advice, also includes anecdotes and a kind of FAQ in the form of email exchanges between Mr. Block and people who have read his piece. In that way it has become an organic process, with those who benefit from it also contributing.

All in all it is an invaluable resource to people thinking about hiring new staff. Mr. Block is willing to share his resource with "any school owner who really cares about their students", and can be contacted either through the ETJ or school owners discussion groups, or at: eikaiwablok2001@r4.dion.ne.jp