

# In Transit

by Doray Espinosa

The transition from teaching at a private English language school to teaching at a private Japanese elementary school may not sound radical or dramatic to most, but it has created and is still creating such a revitalizing stir in me that I feel like a neophyte teacher all over again.

Like a neophyte, I examine with fresh eyes what, where, why, whom and with whom I teach. In the process, I'm also redefining and realigning much of what I have, until now, believed to be proper and possible.

## Coping with Change

All my former work places were "safe" places. They were either in a culture I fully understood or among colleagues who, though belonging to diverse cultures, shared the same philosophy, goals, and work ethic. At the very least, teaching was conducted in a language I knew, using a method I subscribed to.

Now, I have committed myself to working in an academic institution that has a century of history behind it and whose founder and faculty have upheld a tradition over the years within which I am expected to operate. I have been hired not just to teach English or, more precisely, "International Understanding", but to provide "hands-on instruction" so that each child learns from her own experience and internalizes "the importance of the individual within a group" while promoting "the spirit of service and cooperation" (These quotes come from my school's English brochure.).

As I do not have the luxury of running my own school and developing a curriculum according to how I think children should learn English, I have been provided, in no uncertain terms, with a framework within which I can go about my business. Fortunately, I believe this framework is sound and solid. Many teachers are not so lucky.

Like most new ideas and technologies, English education in Japanese elementary schools takes getting used to. All partners in this new movement are uneasy—the children, the Japanese teachers, the English teachers, the parents, and the general public. They are uneasy with it and with each other because everyone has his or her own idea of how to acquire and what to do with this English. Children, particularly, have very definite ideas about whether they should acquire or use it at all. It doesn't help that the movement is in its initial, almost experimental, phase and is being refined as it plods along. This adds to the unease and frustration all around.

A faculty meeting we had last year, wherein we were supposed to discuss the English curriculum, illustrates the confusion and defensive stances that stem from different expectations and levels of perception among us.

This meeting was attended by the foreign English teachers and the Japanese teachers who assist them in every lesson. The meeting got off to a good start until a Japanese

teacher mentioned something about how students found reading and writing in English difficult.

One of the native-English-speaking teachers, who felt the comment was being directed at her, launched into the importance of balancing the four skills in English instruction. I sat in silence, nursing a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach, secretly agreeing with the teacher, and slowly realizing that the kindly school principal meant what he said when he told me during my interview: "Please, there shall be no reading and writing in English".

Visions of the phonics materials I had painstakingly collated and developed came and went. So did nostalgia for the twice-weekly faculty meetings at my previous school where ideas were shared and discussed, sometimes passionately, always with the goal of improving ourselves as teachers of English.

The meeting ended with the chairman stopping the debate in mid-gear by announcing that we would have to tackle the issue at a later meeting. We never had another faculty meeting after that.

Much later though, I did have coffee with the Japanese teacher who brought up the topic. She told me she was saddened by the fact that the English teacher who responded to her comment "got angry" at her. "Perhaps", the Japanese teacher said, "my communication skills are very poor. I didn't mean to upset her".

The lessons I derived from that lone faculty meeting were many, one being that while effective communication skills are definitely an asset at intercultural encounters, other skills are needed to bridge the divide. By "cultures" here, I mean, not just the obvious Japanese and non-Japanese differences and commonalities, but the other points of divergence and convergence of teachers with different backgrounds and beliefs.

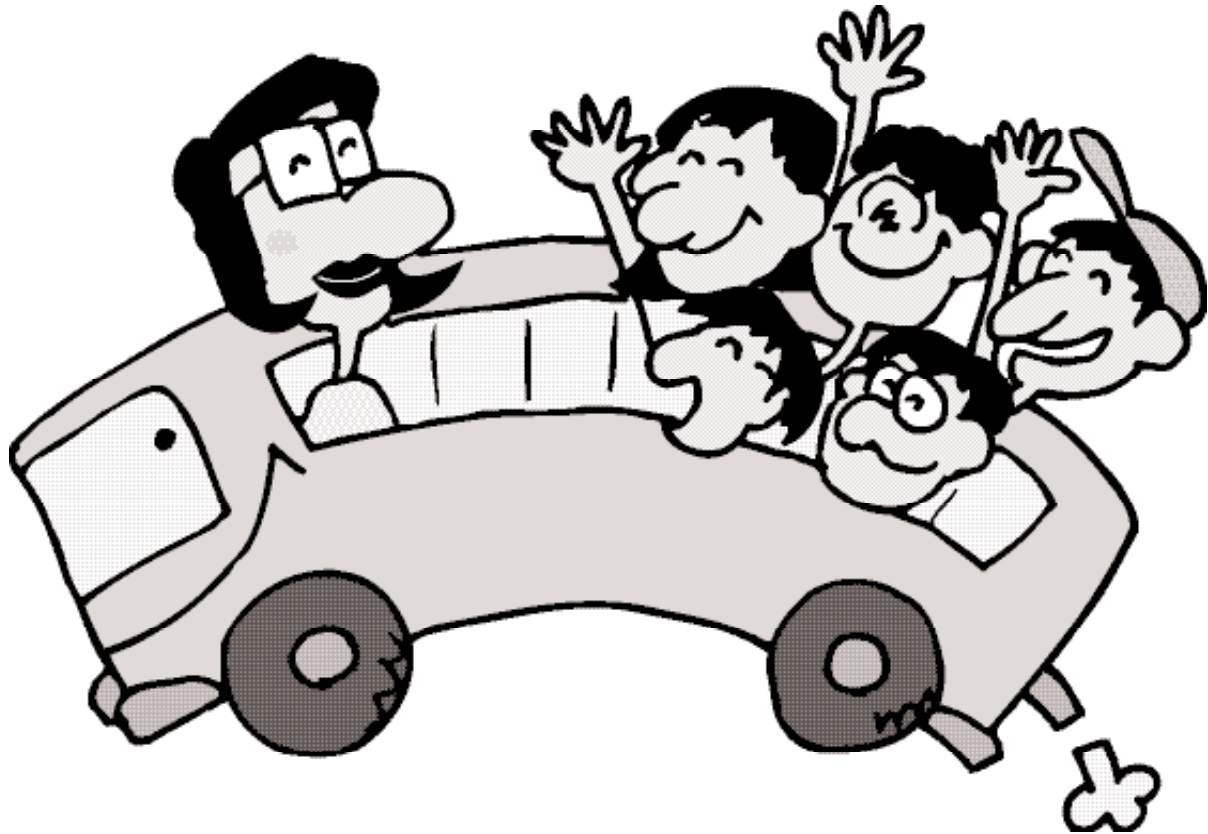
We may all share the same profession, but we have different goals and strategies. We have various tried-and-tested ways of doing things that we often feel particularly proud, protective, or sensitive about. It takes some amount of humility and maturity to respond positively to someone who questions our motives and our methods.

## Expansion and Integration

For me personally the main question to be resolved was this: "How could I be part of this system and this process without getting lost in it or, worse, ending up loathing it?"

The first thing I decided to do was what I call, for lack of a better word, a process of expansion. It is a process of stretching yourself and making room for others. It is trying to be aware of what the other players feel, think, and do, not just what you want to accomplish.

As much as possible, get to know the school system and its objectives, its history and traditions, the faculty and staff,



the students (even those you don't teach), and the parents. Make an effort to understand their position by imagining how you would act and feel if you were back on your own turf and being forced to adopt an alien concept in an alien language.

And while you're expanding in this direction, do a lot of integration as well. Dissolve, but do not disintegrate. Be part of the team, go with the flow. Be active. Better yet, be proactive. Engage and be engaging to others, not because you have to, but because you want to. Sincerity is discernable in any language.

That's common sense, a colleague once told me. Anyone living and working in a foreign country knows that. In fact, anyone who is new to a job knows that. However, having the "common sense" to realize that one's job as a teacher does not begin and end in the classroom isn't that common, I've discovered.

Aside from the official orientation (which unfortunately, in my case, didn't go into much detail), you must orient yourself to the written and unwritten rules of the work place. Find your space and figure out how that overlaps or links up with the rest of the moving parts in the institutional pattern.

The most significant and useful information I've gathered didn't always come from the classroom and wasn't always directly related to English teaching. It was significant and useful because it showed me the bigger picture. My informal and spontaneous interactions with the children and my colleagues gave me ideas on how I could make lessons more relevant and more interesting. More important, they put English in its proper perspective. English may be my passion

and preoccupation and I may sincerely believe that it fulfills an urgent need of the 21st century citizen of the world. However, to other teachers and learners, there are higher priorities with richer benefits that need care and attention.

*Expand:* A classroom of twenty or forty students needs more energy, more patience, more humor, more empathy, and calls more deeply on your memory bank than a class of eight. Your voice, your face, your gestures, your body movements, your teaching and walking space, your peripheral vision, even the size of your flashcards and other visual aids—these need boosting to a higher level. A word of advice: learn how to project your voice, not scream. Now is the time to put those theater and performance skills to good use.

Students in the elementary school come "packaged". They come as a group with a distinct personality. They know what is expected of them, and they know what they can and cannot do. They know each other and they have established a routine or system. This is both an advantage and a disadvantage. You may get a class that has a higher than usual level of chaos and confusion or you may have to work with a Japanese teacher that believes in total silence and absolute control. Either way, you will have to adjust and adapt.

Fortunately, my current school pays particular attention to politeness and "good behavior" so classroom management hasn't been a problem. If there is any problem at all it is that I sometimes wish my Japanese colleagues would give the children some space in which to be children in all their hyperactive and excited glory and not think of them as noisy



and unable to sort things out by themselves. Sometimes I want my English class to be “noisy” and the students to be confused because I like watching children construct meaning and order out of the most volatile and unstable conditions.

Apply The Lemonade Principle. Consider the possibilities of things, not just the sour realities. While doing 15 lessons in one year (other English teachers have even fewer to work with!) may seem like an exercise in futility with children forgetting what they’ve learned time and again, every lesson can always be a “new” lesson with children recycling the same material in a variety of ways and still being intensely involved in it because they’ve “forgotten” what they took up two weeks or a month ago. Reuse and recycle. Reuse and recycle. It’s a great mantra to soothe frazzled nerves—yours, especially, when you begin to think you are an incompetent, ineffective teacher.

*Integrate:* Know your limits and learn to work within them. Make your term/lesson plans dovetail with the general curriculum, if possible. If you must go beyond the limits, be creative about it, expect to get caught, and try again if you do get caught. Are the first graders learning addition and subtraction of numbers 1-20 in their math class? Reinforce that in your English class. Second graders studying metamorphosis? Eric Carle’s *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* will fit well and has the added attractions of

food vocabulary and days of the week. Third graders learning to write the English alphabet in the lower case for their computer class? Now is the time to slip those phonics cards in and “practice” the sounds of letters. Just don’t call it phonics.

### **Conclusion**

You may think of yourself as a crusader, but in the eyes of many, you are an intruder. Tread softly but do not carry a big stick. A mind that can handle ambiguity and uncertainty is a far more useful tool in this environment. At best, you are a traveling salesman who has a small window of opportunity to show your wares and convince the customer that what you’ve got is really good stuff that they truly need.

You may consider yourself a pioneer, who boldly goes where others fear to tread, but always remember that you’re not alone. Others have embarked on the same journey to the unknown, many of whom are there without their consent. Life in that limited space can be more satisfying if everyone makes an effort to get along.

Lastly, enjoy the ride. Think of it as an adventure where the only constant is this: You love teaching English and you love teaching kids. Pretty soon, the patterns fall into place and the void becomes familiar territory. Then, the journey gets really interesting.

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