

Resolving the Culture Clash in the Team-taught Classroom

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It is no secret that we teach in the same manner that we learn best. If you pause a moment and recall your favorite teacher, you may find that you “teach” in much the same way. While this may work in your home country, it becomes slightly more difficult when you begin to teach abroad. This article will address the four main patterns found when an ALT teaches in a Japanese English classroom and offer suggestions and ideas for bridging the culture gap for both ALTs and Japanese teachers of English (JTEs).

1. Human Tape Recorder

This is by far the most frustrating situation but perhaps the most common pattern found when an ALT enters the Japanese classroom. The name says it all: the ALT is used like a tape recorder. The JTE will ask the ALT to read aloud and have the students repeat after the ALT. This approach is very interesting to me as I have studied three foreign languages in the US and I have no recollection of my teacher bringing a tape recorder into the classroom. The teacher was always the “authority” and taught using her/his own voice to read aloud. Compare this to a Japanese classroom. I think back to when I first started to study Japanese in an elementary school classroom. I was mesmerized by the teacher writing *kanji* on the board. We were all to follow her example exactly—there was a correct stroke order and way to write each *kanji*. If this approach is taken into the English language classroom, it would suggest that there is a “correct” way to pronounce or produce each and every

word. Hence this results in the need for a tape recorder. While it may be frustrating for an ALT to be used in such a manner, it may help for the ALT to realize that indeed they are fulfilling a very important role for a Japanese learner.

2. Paralysis

This is another situation in which neither the ALT nor the JTE know exactly what to do in the team-taught classroom. Oftentimes, the ALT has all good intentions but they haven’t really thought about what they are trying to teach. This confuses the JTE and places them in a rather difficult situation. They want the students to enjoy English, but they can’t see how what the ALT wants to do is related to the goals and objectives of the class. So they become like two separate teachers and not at all like a team. The ALT does a game or something and then the JTE does something completely differently. They both get frustrated and the “team” teaching does nothing but confuse the students. After living in Japan for some time and learning more about the guidelines established by the Ministry of Education and the pressure of examinations, the ALT will realize that they have to take into account the needs of the students more. Games can still be enjoyed, but if they are focused on lessons in the text using vocabulary and sentence patterns the students are already familiar with, the result will be much more satisfying. And in addition, the JTE will be able to communicate what they envision as the goal for a lesson and the “team” will move directly out of paralysis and into

productive team-teaching.

3. Culture Clash

I have always loved English and I remember my favorite teacher well. She would come into the classroom with a coffee cup in hand, sit on the desk and say to us, "OK class, what did you think about the reading?" We would then offer up our ideas one after the other in a very stimulating discussion. Can you imagine what happened when I tried to emulate her teaching style in Japan? Obviously it was a complete failure. Not only was it extremely rude to sit on a desk, the students couldn't tell me what they thought about the questions I asked. I couldn't help but wonder how the students acted in other classes and so I asked if I could observe some of their other subjects. What a learning opportunity this was for me! Observing other classes helped me to reduce the culture clash in my own classroom. Asking a student point blank, "So, what do you think?" is difficult on a variety of levels. The student is not used to answering such a question in their own native language and thus the task becomes twice as difficult. They are trying to adapt to a new mode of responding and that must take place in a second language. A very high order for a junior high school student! I also experienced this culture clash when I tried to study Japanese. I wanted to learn to speak but my teacher was set on my learning *hiragana*, *katakana* and *kanji*. I got very frustrated practicing the correct form for symbols and wanted to hurry up and get to "learning" Japanese. But in reality I was learning Japanese. I am certain my teacher was teaching me in the way they had learned Japanese and had I been more patient, perhaps my written Japanese today would be far better than it is today.

4. Synergy

This brings us to the fourth and best pattern for both teachers and students. It stems from an understanding of both

learning styles and teaching methods. It encourages the ALT to be creative and contributing in the classroom but within the structure and needs designated by a Japanese learner. What is exciting about this pattern is that it is dynamic. As the team-teachers work together they will begin to create something brand new—and this is what is meant by synergy. Synergy can easily be expressed in mathematical terms: $1 + 1 = 3$. This means that (1) the JTE has one mode of teaching which suits a Japanese learner. But the same can be true for (1) the ALT who has a different perspective on learning and uses a more hands-on or active learning approach. If the two team-teachers can combine these approaches, they will not only add value to each other ($1 + 1 = 2$), they will actually create a brand new entity making the equation into $1 + 1 = 3$. This should be the goal of team-teaching. So how can we bring synergy into the team-taught classroom? I think it begins with preparation and careful planning. The ALT can ask the JTE for guidance on vocabulary to highlight, new sentence patterns to implement and then incorporate these into an active learning activity. The JTE can provide feedback on the activity pointing out in particular what tasks may be difficult for a Japanese learner to perform. As the two teachers work together, they will begin to gain a deeper appreciation for each other's talents and be able to build upon these strengths in future lessons. The result is not only a well prepared lesson but also a united approach to teaching in the classroom. This will allow the Japanese learner to relax and look forward to team-taught lessons. Students will gain respect for their JTE as they can see the "correct" way to effectively communicate. The ALT will feel much more satisfaction when a lesson goes well and students become more confident in using their English. Not every lesson will be perfect, but when synergy is present, everyone benefits. Someday a student may even teach as they learned from you!