

Situation Critical: A Native English Teachers' Role in Motivating Troubled Students

James Hershman

(Former AET at Higashiosaka City Nisshin HS, Current NET at Osaka Prefecture Ikuno HS)

My first week as an English teacher in a Japanese middle school completely changed my conceptions about Japanese students. While preparing for my very first lesson, 13 broom-wielding 3rd year boys barged into the staff room and began attacking teachers. It was a group of students who had formed a kind of gang and they had become unglued over having been disciplined for breaking school rules. My unfounded belief that all Japanese students were studious and mannerly was shattered in an instant.

As I later learned, quite a few of the students at my school lived in an orphanage and many others were living in broken or abusive homes. Many of these kids were in serious crisis. How could I teach English to children that were living their lives under such tragic circumstances and who also viewed English as wholly irrelevant to their lives? Furthermore, how could a newcomer like me connect with these troubled students while navigating the barriers of language and culture? Over the next few months I had to learn to empathize with their situations. Once I was able to do that, coming up with a teaching strategy became much easier.

My first attempt at motivating the students started between and after classes, outside of the rigid structure of their lessons. I asked them questions about their favorite bands, manga and TV programs in very broken Japanese. I used my hobby, playing the guitar, as a way to earn some "cool" points with the students by teaching them chords so that they could strum along to some of their favorite songs. They enjoyed these interactions and although very little English was used at first, they began to view me as a fun person that they could relate to. Using their natural curiosity of foreigners and being open with my students in these "hallway moments" built the trust and respect that I could use to my advantage later in the

classroom setting.

The next step was learning to recognize the strengths and limitations of my students, not necessarily in regards to English ability but rather in more basic terms such as the ability to focus and follow directions. Then, I decided to give some classroom responsibilities to the least motivated students like passing out and collecting prints or organizing the students into groups for games and group work. This gave me an opportunity to praise them because I gave them tasks that they could easily perform. The more responsibility and praise they received for accomplishing these tasks, the better behaved they became during my classes.

Over time, the hallway chats became livelier and the students also became more receptive to learning English. After a while, I started to hear students address each other as they passed in the hallways using the common American English greeting of "What's up?" and the typical response of "Not much." These were small but very rewarding victories. Perhaps my students would never be truly proficient at English, but for these students, English proficiency wasn't a realistic goal. Eventually, they saw me as someone they could trust and someone who was actually interested in them as people regardless of their ability as students. Though, every situation is different, with a bit of empathy and a little effort to get to know your students outside of the classroom it is sometimes possible to make a real difference.

At the end of my first school year my efforts were rewarded. The same group of broom-wielding students came up to me after their graduation ceremony. With tears in their eyes they had come to thank me and that was more than enough for me.