

The Role of an ALT

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As I've begun my third contract with the JET Program (despite having only recently celebrated the second anniversary of my arrival) I've been thinking more about what my position as an instructor and, more specifically, an ALT means in the grand scheme of my students' education. Of course, it's important that I teach my students the grammar and guide them in their language learning journey. It's a large part of the job description and our main day-to-day task. But anyone with a solid grasp of the language can do that. What makes an ALT different from a JTE? The answer is surprisingly simple.

We are native speakers of our language, which gives us a natural mastery of what we are supposed to be teaching our students. I've been speaking English for 25, nigh on 26 years, so I should probably be pretty good at it, right? I have a mastery of English that can only come from having been surrounded by it from my childhood, with a solid idea of what sounds natural, an ability to hear an incorrectly placed word in an instant, and a number of casual ways to answer the simple question, "How are you," that would make our students' heads spin. ALTs are a source of authentic and genuine English that can provide insight into a language that can change dramatically between countries. It's important that we can provide an insight into class that gives the language legitimacy and can help clarify what is correct in moments of uncertainty. ALTs can help guide their students, and even JTEs, away from unnatural speech that is not immediately apparent. Even if an ALT doesn't know how to explain a grammar rule, they can still serve as a role model for the rule to be followed.

Now, our position as a native speaker doesn't automatically make us an authority on the subject, of course. There have been many times where I, and many other ALTs, have found that we had no earthly idea how to properly explain a grammar point that we've been using flawlessly since we were children. We are *not* automatically good educators because of our proficiency in the language. Many ALTs, like myself, have never studied education formally, which can give us some disadvantages in our lesson planning and instruction methods. There'll be times in the classroom where we can find ourselves struggling to explain a concept, our students will be struggling to communicate their ideas. These disadvantages and struggles, however, lead to what I think the most important aspect of what being an ALT is: genuine multi-cultural communication.

When you don't know how to say something to your students or JTE, and they don't know how to communicate something to you, you can always find a way to work around the miscommunication. It may take several minutes to find the right words, but the wonderful thing about language is that there are several ways to come to a conclusion, and all of them will exercise everyone's linguistic muscles. The satisfaction of having reached across the language barriers successfully is satisfying for both parties involved. ALTs can prove to our students that there is a practical use for English out there in this way, while building their relationship with their students in the process. These instances aren't scripted textbook conversations. They're genuine moments of the students being able to use what they've learned in the classroom to talk with someone from another country. Most of our students don't have the opportunities to use English in their everyday life, and their ALT can be the only chance they get during their week.

To further elaborate on this point, the ALT might be the students' only opportunity to interact with a foreigner, in general. We're a window into a world they otherwise have no access to. It's important that we take the opportunity to build positive relationships with our students and show them that language can be a great tool to connect with all sorts of new people from all over the world. They are much more likely to be interested and engaged in a language class if there is a direct, tangible person they can communicate with and develop a bond with that they wouldn't be able to otherwise. I know for a fact that putting myself out there and developing a more personal relationship with my students has been a great help to me in the classroom.

For example, one of my first-year students might fall along the lines of being less-motivated in class. He often sleeps during lessons, even when they involve games, and doesn't care for any activities related to the textbook. I was struggling to find ways to try and pique his interest. But the instant he found out we had a shared interest in American food, hip hop, and rap he came alive. Anytime he sees me outside of class he tries to spark a conversation about random topics, like what my favorite food is, which rapper I like best (he likes Nas, and I've told him I like Kendrick Lamar many times, but he keeps asking regardless), and if I like New York City, despite the fact that I've told him a couple times that I've never been there before. I would argue that he's spoken more English to me in the few months since the school year started than some of the third-year students have in the entirety of the time I've been teaching them, even if it is outside of class, and on a topic that isn't really covered by any of the textbooks. He may still try and sleep during class, and he still doesn't care for textbook activities, but he performs very well with speaking activities, and he has communicated in English both genuinely and enthusiastically. He didn't use any rehearsed dialogues or prepared sentences, and he shared his real thoughts and interests with me.

While this one student is a single example, I have had many similar interactions with students that have led to increased efforts in the classroom, and all it took was making a single genuine attempt to connect with students. Showing an interest in both them and their interests is so important for their English journey, showing that there can be real connections that can break language barriers and even propel them to break those language barriers themselves. ALTs can help inspire students to continue to pursue friendships with other foreigners and increase their openness to other cultures, which in turn better prepares them for a rapidly globalizing society.

As 2023 comes to an end, we ALTs should reflect on how we've progressed towards the concept of breaking language barriers and ponder further on what we can do better in our lessons to make genuine attempts to connect with our students and their interests. We should clearly work on honing our skills as educators, as it's a large part of our job description, but part of our role as an educator and an ALT extends beyond the classroom. We're tasked with bridging the gap in our students' world with that of our homeland, both linguistically and literally. We should keep this in mind moving forward and face 2024 with the goal of genuine connection in mind!