

The Importance of International Exchange and Its Effect on Our Lives

James Davis

Tokushima Prefectural General Education Center
School Management Support Division

International exchange is one of the most important aspects of an ALT's job. We're required not only to be an educator, but to be an ambassador of our homeland. Education is an important part of what we do, of course, but I would argue our role as a locus of international exchange is far more important. Our students could still learn every grammar point in the English language with a decent JTE, but they might never have the opportunity to have a one-on-one interaction with a foreigner without our presence. The international population of Japan is very small, and with the world becoming more and more globalized it becomes more and more important that our students be given the opportunity to interact with people from different countries and backgrounds so that they can successfully join the global society. By being present in the classroom, we give our students the ability to connect with people they would never have the chance to meet organically.

But an ALT's job doesn't finish when we leave the classroom. We participate in clubs, chat with our students in the hallway, talk with the other Japanese teachers in the teacher's room. As we become integrated in our schools, we build relationships with the teachers and support staff as well. It doesn't end when we leave our schools, either. Whether we desire it or not, we represent our country at any given moment that we're in public. We stand out in grocery stores, at train stations, shopping malls, and convenience stores. If we participate in cultural events, it's a bit of an oddity. In a sense, we never really have the opportunity to "clock out." Regardless of where we are, ALTs are always at the forefront of international exchange in our communities.

I've said all of this about how important international exchange is for an ALT, but *why* is international exchange important in the first place? Well, simply put, the exchange of ideas and cultures beyond borders is crucial to having new experiences and developing both ourselves as people and our countries. Exchange beyond borders has led to countless nations experiencing new and exciting ideas, goods, and cultures for the first time. Without cultural exchange the American people wouldn't be able to enjoy delicious Japanese dishes like sushi or udon. Without cultural exchange the people of Japan wouldn't be able to enjoy a nice hamburger or pizza. Because of exchange we can drive German cars, use Korean phones, and chow down on some delicious Chinese snacks. Other people's cultures permeate our daily lives in almost every aspect. It's difficult to experience something that comes exclusively from a single culture these days, and it will become increasingly difficult as the world becomes more globalized.

When we come into contact with people from different countries, we come into contact with people with different thought processes and ways of understanding, histories, cultural contexts, and customs. Hundreds, and sometimes thousands, of years of history and happenings have led to the creation of the present. It's a very, very large picture created from these histories and happenings that's impossible to appreciate while looking at just a tiny corner. Our students might only have access to this tiny corner of the bigger picture without being aware of how large it truly is. That's where their ALT comes in.

Our job as an ALT is to use our educational role to expand both their linguistic capabilities and their world view, with both responsibilities serving the same purpose. We are trying to equip our students with the tools they need to properly interact with the world at large. ALTs' differences of histories, cultures, and mother tongues, make up chunks of the big picture that our students have never seen before. We show them how people are different and see the world in other ways, which in turn opens their minds to new possibilities. We exhibit parts of the world that they might never have the chance to see otherwise.

Now that we've discussed the importance of an ALT's role in international exchange, we must discuss how we can incorporate it into our classroom education. One must ask how they might be able to pique a Japanese student into forming a genuine interest in the world that seems so far away from their lives. For some students it will be quite easy. It's as simple as being an encouraging presence in their school life and showing a genuine interest in them. Much like respect, effort must be exuded by both parties for progress to be meaningful. I've always found that if my students know that I care about them and their education, they'll be more likely to return that effort in class. Building interpersonal relationships gives a face to the language that they're using and an idea of the different people they can communicate with using it, which in turn makes it feel more personal and relevant to their lives.

Yet for other students it will take more effort to pique their interests. They'll see the ALT walk into class and know that it's time for them to practice a language that there would be a solid chance of them never using in their daily life. Finding ways to engage less-than-enthusiastic students can be a challenge, but it's doable. If we cannot engage them in the field of language, we can find other ways to grab their attention. If the students are interested in sports, make a sports-themed lesson. If the students are interested in music? Why not do a listening activity. I also find that competition, regardless of the format, and games of chance will get the class fired up even if they're just answering questions on verb conjugation. While they might hesitate to put an -ing on the end of their verb during a lesson on gerunds because you asked them to, they'll be itching to confirm it with their friends to put their team in first place. If we show the students that English is applicable in the real world and allows them to access new facets of their interests and hobbies, they'll be much more likely to take to it with enthusiasm.

Language is not just textbook filler, nor is it solely academic. Language is a tool used to communicate our thoughts, feelings, passions, and words. To learn a new language is to connect yourself to a new country, new people, and a new way of life. It opens one's world up beyond their norm. To be able to communicate with someone is to be able to avoid conflict

and forge both bonds and understanding of each other. If we could help our students to experience the exciting feeling of interacting and making friends with people from all over the globe, then we can consider our job well done. We as ALTs and JTEs owe it to them to give them the tools they need to expand their world so they can experience new cultures and share their own culture as well. The end goal in English education, after all, is to provide the students of the world with the ability to come together and create a more empathetic, connected global society so that we can tackle the big picture of the world together. Let's work together and give our students the pieces of the puzzle so that they can create a better world!