

Trouble-Shooting in Elementary Schools

By Mitchell McBroom

Welcome to the wonderful world of elementary school teaching. There's nothing quite as joyous as going into a class full of happy, energetic, eager little children. You've got your lesson plan (hopefully) and you know what you want to teach. Their attention is completely on you as you teach the words, why can't the junior high kids be as good as these kids? Finally it's game time and all of a sudden the kids are out of control and treating you as if you're a jungle gym and where'd the teacher go to restore order? And what is wrong with this boy behind you always trying to shove his fingers up your butt crack!

I think every ALT has had days where things just didn't go right or classes that they just couldn't control. As an ALT who has one-shotted elementary schools in Hokkaido and regularly visited three elementary schools here in Niigata for two years, I've had my problems and have been able to resolve them rather well. Hopefully some of my advice on various problems will help some of you out.

The Cornerstone

I have found that in elementary school teaching, flexibility is the best way to work through problems. Each class is going to have their own needs and problems that an attentive teacher can pick up on. A class of fifty is going to act very differently than a class of five just like some classes will pick up on English faster than others. Further, each school is going to have its own feel that may affect the classes.

While I don't expect any ALT to know the full dynamics of the school and each class, a general feel after teaching two or three classes is invaluable. For example my four second year classes I know that class one and two are full of energy and need constant supervision and woe be it when they are brought together. Class three is really bright and learns fast so I need to plan more as they'll get the main lesson done with time to spare. Class four is also energetic but is extremely small (5 students) so normal games don't always work well and the kids tend to burn out from the constant attention such a small class brings.

Problems All Around

There are a lot of things that can go wrong while teaching English. I have broken them down into three categories: teachers, students, and classroom problems.

Teacher-related Problems

The home room teachers can be one of the most helpful parts of teaching English. If they show enthusiasm or even just a little bit of interest towards learning English, it can make your classes

so much easier as the students will pick up on their enthusiasm. They also know their students and can help you pick stuff that works well for that class. Also, issues sometimes come up in class that need the cooperation of the home room teacher and the ALT to resolve.

Where'd the teacher go?

Some teachers think that English class is a time for them to relax. Not long after you start or even before, they'll disappear to go do their own thing. Depending on the class, the teacher's inactivity or disappearance won't affect a thing or the students may just go wild.

One way to solve this is to talk with the teacher, or a more senior teacher at the school, or there may be a teacher at the school who is generally responsible for the English curriculum. Since the Japanese prefer indirect, the first time should probably be an expression of concern about things that the ALT isn't up to resolving (language barriers etc) and that it would be appreciated if the teacher does not leave. If that doesn't work, then you can always state your issues in a more direct way, though it may not go over well with the teacher in question.

Another and more insidious way is to find ways to make the teacher more active in the class. This can be done by putting it into the lesson plan to begin with and when you explain the plan, emphasize what the teacher will be doing. Try to make sure that at least some of their tasks are fun to hopefully draw the teacher into the class more.

Check the teacher for a pulse please.

Almost as bad as leaving the class, some teachers aren't attentive to the goings on in the lesson class even though they are there. I've heard of some teachers who will sit in the back of class and read a book, catch up on work, sleep, or basically zone out from the activities of their class to the point that they may as well just leave. However in some cases the teacher may want to be active but for some reasons just isn't up to it. This includes sickness, pregnancy (I have a class that in the past 2 years has had three teachers in succession leave due to pregnancy) and sometimes emotional stuff like a death in the family or maybe they are just afraid of English.

For the first group of people, the same tricks for those teachers who leave would work. But for the second group, would fail completely. Communication is very important to find out what they can and cannot do. Try to work with them to make them more active or be understanding and accommodate them as needed. If the pregnant teacher wants to take part in the class but doesn't have the energy for much, then maybe find something for her to do while she's sitting down. If the teacher is afraid of English, ask why. Maybe he can help by being an energetic student during your classes.

I'm a teacher too!

This is the opposite of the first two. There are some teachers who like to take charge of English hour and push the ALT to the side to do nothing. This can especially be a problem if they teach

really strange, bad or unnatural English.

Communication is a good way of resolving these problems. Ask if there is more that you can do in the class with them, or try to schedule things that require more than one person to teach. If that doesn't work, it might be best to talk to a JTE, kyoto or kocho-sensei for mediation or advice, as the kids are missing out on some valuable English learning experiences.

This is too hard for the kids.....

A lot of elementary schools seem to be afraid of the idea of teaching kids how to read & write, or how to use anything but nouns. Try to teach adjectives to 4th graders and they freak. Try to teach 5th and 6th graders how to read and write and they'll claim that the kids aren't bright enough. One of my schools was happy to have me teach how to write the alphabet but when it came to learning how to write words and play a game using those words the JTE went nuts.

The easiest way to deal with this is to sugar coat it at first. Want to teach adjectives, start with adjectives that work for how are you (hot, cold, happy, sad, busy) then move on to others and if the teacher hesitates, point out that you've already taught some. If the teachers are still wary, just ask for a chance to try it once and see what happens. Always be prepared to compromise, gain trust, and then push for more.

Student-related Problems

Lone Student Problems

There are a wide variety of ways that a sole student can disrupt your classes. From the glory hogs to those who don't care about anything but the games to the crybabies. Sadly there isn't always a quick fix to these types of students.

One of the easier ways is to tell the kids to stop and in many cases they are more than willing to. For example if a student is ramming his fingers up your butt, just grab his hands and say in a very stern voice dame and hopefully he'll stop.

Other kids need the intervention of the teacher. However, most teachers are far more lenient than in the US and as a result let the kids get away with more. Most of the time, if you express to the teachers the problem, they'll try to help out and sort things out. Try to express your frustration at what the student is doing so that the teacher can address it as to them maybe it's not a problem or maybe they know a way to control that kid that you can use.

Usually the above two ways will solve the problem. However there are some students that just don't seem to get the hint no matter what you do. The only two ways I have found to work with these kids are both tricky to do. The first way is to make your lessons that cover for the kids problems. If they're always running around, make a game that requires them to run around. This is a good short term solution but it won't stand up to long term use as you run out of running

games and pandering to one kid is just begging for things to go wrong.

The most effective way I have found, and probably the hardest way to do, is to get the class to control the student through peer pressure. To get students to do this though, you have to show them that there is a problem, not just to you but to them too, and you have to have them like you and your class enough to put the effort forward. If the students know that one student (never mention their name directly, just say one student) is making it so that they can't have fun in class, the kids are more likely to keep an eye on the trouble maker and keep him from causing trouble.

Group of Students Problems

While one trouble student is a pain, several students are a nightmare that can keep you and the homeroom teacher too busy to teach. This is especially true with first graders who are so full of energy that it's almost impossible to contain them long enough to teach a simple sentence.

Probably the first way to try and deal with this is to handle each student similar to a lone student problem, however you and the teacher risk using all of your time to handle that rather than teach English. You can relieve some of the pressure by bring in a third teacher or the principal to help out though scheduling difficulties may make this a hard task.

Another way is to work with the homeroom teacher to increase discipline in the class. Find out how the homeroom teacher enforces discipline and use it. For example, the kids are goofing off rather than lining up I've found that in most schools, the teacher will start counting down from ten to get the students to hurry up.

The last and final option is to stop and end the class early. Call the class to halt, explain why it's ending and do the farewell part of the class. If you or the teacher (or preferably both) does the explaining right the kids will get a hint that this isn't allowed and the bad students will either straighten up or the other students will keep an eye and try to stop the trouble students. You may want to discuss this option with the homeroom teacher first though.

Classes

This is a catch all category that involves the whole class or classes rather than individuals.

We are not alone

There are two types of visitors, planned and unplanned. The planned visitors are when the Board of Education or parents come to see how their children's classes are. These can be nerve wracking because they are all watching you. Of course the easiest way to deal with these visitors is to ignore them. However I find that trying to include them into the lesson plan much more entertaining, and for the parents who get to work with their children, a much more satisfying time in the class. If you can impress the parents, they will tell the teachers and I can guarantee that the school will be more accommodating of your requests.

The other type of visitor is the unplanned visitors. This usually involves insects such as bees or flies deciding to take a jaunt through your class (and the bigger they are the more the girls will scream). Other times it's something more interesting such as a bird or a lobster who's escaped from the fish tank. The problem with these types of visitors is that they have a tendency to cause a loss of control in the class as girls scream and the boys want a closer look. Trying to regain control of a class like this usually takes five to ten minutes depending on the nature of the visitor (the lobster took about ten minutes as it kept trying to pinch the teacher).

Since you can't really deal with unexpected visitors till they show up besides locking the classroom down tight, finding a way to maintain control of the class is the key. Incorporating it into the class by teaching the visitors name and different actions like 'go outside' in English is one way to try and keep an English perspective. Another way is to try and force attention back on you while the teacher deals with this problem. The last way is to let it run its course and then try to gain control of the class afterwards. Of all of these solutions I find the first one is probably the best as you're keeping the students at least a little bit focused on English and that gives you an edge into regaining control of the class. Forcing attention back is usually a futile effort as sooner or later someone will act up and distract the class again.

They're getting complacent

Okay so you've been teaching a while and the kids are getting complacent. The games are fun but they're falling into a pattern and they aren't behaving as well. This is usually worse with 5th and 6th graders.

A lot of ALTs like to hand out stickers or prizes in class. While this works well for them I haven't done this as I feel that a sense of accomplishment that the students can now speak more English is reward enough in the classroom. I strongly reinforce achievement through praise and smiles and I gently help those who are struggling. I prefer to use stickers as a reward for communication outside of the classroom (including a sticker card) as a way to get them to use their English more frequently.

Instead, one of my most favorite tricks to keep students interested is to keep things unpredictable. I've done this by having the class in the gym and doing a massive game that keeps them running while they use their English. I toss in fun words (tail, too bad) and interesting sentences (Do you eat TV?) during the regular lesson plans to keep them on their toes. I'll break out dancing or over gesture at the strangest times. I've even had the teachers not list that I was coming and list my class as say math or PE and when the class starts the students are shocked to find me teaching English during their math class. I've even taught greeting to my kids in Korean, Thai, German, and Russian. My kids know that something fun is going to happen and none of them are willing to miss it.

Halloween and Christmas but no St. Paddy's Day?

Every kid here knows about Halloween and Christmas, it's more or less a yearly event. However that's all the teachers seem to do. Part of this is that they may not know about other events and another part is that it's hard to teach kids a new holiday. To break this it'll take a lot of effort on the ALTs part to help the teachers through. I would suggest starting small rather than making a day of it, but if you can pull off a full day the reward is beyond belief. Also be accepting of advice and ideas from the teachers as they may see ways to make it simpler or more fun.

I ended up introducing St. Patrick's Day to one of my schools. They were quite nervous to do it as none of them knew much about it and my ideas were met with skepticism. I took the effort to explain in detail what I wanted to do and I kept it down to a 45 minute assembly and a little bit afterwards. I explained exactly what I wanted them to do and made sure that they didn't have to do much besides make paper gold coins and provide a basket. I even volunteered to help them do all the leprechaun mischief in the classrooms the night before. It was great fun for the kids and the teachers to have to find out what all the leprechauns had done to their classrooms and the kids reactions.

Communication

After reading that I am sure that some people are asking about how they can effectively communicate with the teachers when they are new to the Japanese language or know only a little bit. While complete and full sentences (even if they are simple) are truly beneficial, there are other ways to communicate to the teachers if need be.

The dictionary is your best friend when it comes to getting your thoughts across to a teacher. Look up a word and show it to them and it'll speed things up greatly. If you can combine the word with a sentence to point out context you'll be able to express yourself to a good extent.

Gestures and drawing pictures or diagrams are helpful as a guide during explanations or to point out exactly what kids are doing. Many times it seems that the teachers need to visualize things before they are comfortable with how the lesson is done so the ability to creatively express will save you many problems.

The last resource is to talk to a person that is more fluent in English and have them translate something for you into Japanese. While this might be the most clear, it can also be the hardest if they're at another school or call in sick the day that you need them (gotta love Murphy and his law) so I would suggest using this as a last resort.

And in Conclusion

Teaching at elementary schools is a very rewarding experience. After two years at the same school I can see the differences I've made with the students. By working to resolve problems, I've been able to take ok and poor programs and make them better and it has shown at my junior

high school with how easy the first term is and how surprised the teachers are. And the greatest success is when the students ask to practice English using your games during the lunch break. It's not always easy to teach in elementary schools, but if one puts in the effort, the rewards will be worth the time spent.