

Building Friendships in the Strangest Places: Lessons I Learned in Japan

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Life as an ALT: Early Misconceptions

“Nobody likes me.” I can remember thinking that my first winter as an ALT in a rural area of Japan. I had been teaching for a few months in my school and the “honeymoon” stage where everything was new and exciting was over. I was a little homesick since traditional holidays like Thanksgiving and Christmas had been regular working days in Japan. But I did travel over the New Year’s holiday and came back to school refreshed and determined to try harder to make friends with my English teaching colleagues and our students.

Junior high schools are very busy places and the teachers’ room is always full of students coming and going. However, at lunch time, most of the teachers would leave together. The school nurse, Vice-Principal and I would be the only ones left in that vast empty room. Our school lunches were left on our desks by students. For me, this was the most depressing time of day and I can remember struggling to eat food that I didn’t recognize in total silence.

Based on my own cultural upbringing in the US, I assumed that the students were eating lunch in the cafeteria and that the teachers were going into town for lunch at their favorite coffee shop. How I wished the teachers would just once invite me to go along with them for lunch! But they never did. So based on my experience alone, I concluded that they didn’t like me and thus didn’t ask me to join them. And as the winter got longer, I felt lonelier and lonelier.

One day, I finished lunch in solitude and decided to bring the teaching materials to my 5th period class a bit early as I had many things to carry. Can you imagine how surprised I was to find the classroom full of students eating lunch? And at the head of the classroom was one of my English teaching colleagues! I was shocked!

That day was the last day I ate lunch alone and the beginning of many wonderful memories of teaching English in Japan.

Learning about Japan: Students as Teachers

As soon as my English teaching colleague returned to the teachers’ room, I asked him why he had been eating lunch in the classroom. He explained to me that homeroom teachers eat with their students. I asked him if it would be possible for me to go in his place. He was thankful for the opportunity to have some time to work at his desk and the very next day I started to eat lunch with the students.

It was wonderful to finally learn what I was eating! The students would gesture and use their dictionaries to answer all my silly questions. I ate *natto* for the first time and *tororoimo*. After lunch, the students would share with me the music they listened to and the books they read, and I would bring in things from the US. We really enjoyed this time together to get to know one another and the students became my teachers of Japanese culture.

Other homeroom teachers heard about this and soon I was going to a different classroom each day for lunch. I had a lunch schedule on the board and students would come to the teachers’ room to escort me to their class with great pride.

I realized through this experience that friendships can be fostered anywhere — even a school classroom. My initial misconception caused me to feel lonely but the teachers and students had no idea how I felt or why. It was only through chance that the situation turned into such a wonderful experience. Now in a new situation, I always try to think first of what cultural expectations I carry and then look for opportunities to explore ways to integrate into the new culture.