

Crossing Cultural Conventions: The Line Between Education and Discipline

Linny Tran

Middlebury Institute of International Studies, Monterey, CA, United States
Email: linnyltran@gmail.com

Tags

Cross-Cultural Issues; Ethics, Equity, and Social Justice; Language Education; Primary and Secondary Education; Student Learning and Development

Setting

Every year, a medium-sized city in Japan receives more than 100 foreign Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) from all around the world to teach English at nursery schools, kindergartens, elementary schools, and junior high schools in the city. At most schools, there are four administrators who sit at the front of the staff room. Among those top administrators, the vice principals (VPs) manage the performance of the ALTs, regardless of their English abilities. The ALTs may or may not have any Japanese language skills. Hence, the ALTs often have to rely on Japanese Teachers of English (JTEs) for translation and interpretation.

Emily is a teacher from New York, aspiring to become a cultural ambassador via English language education. She also strives to be a positive influence on the lives of young Japanese students. Emily works at several elementary schools and junior high schools not too far from where she lives. She teaches English to over 500 elementary school students and 1,000 junior high school students. At the elementary schools, Emily is given full freedom for her lessons – she can teach whatever she wants and however she wants, as long as they are appropriate and meet learning objectives set by the prefectural board of education. On the other hand, at the junior high level, she serves as an assistant to the JTE, co-teaching with them while the JTEs take the lead in course designing and lesson planning. At the primary education level, English education is often comprised of singing, dancing, rhythmic chanting, and many physical games. The homeroom teachers for each class assist the ALT in demonstrating activities and supervising students. At the secondary level, the ALT is expected to demonstrate her native speaking skills and support the JTEs in a structured format of instruction.

Case

One of the junior high schools Emily teaches at is lower ranked compared to others in the city. The school's previous ALTs were not well liked. They either quit in the middle of the academic year or put in minimal effort to interact with the students and Japanese coworkers. Emily, however, is on her fourth year working at the school. She alternates eating lunch with the students in the classrooms and with the Japanese teachers in the staff lounge. She also joins students in their after-school club activities to further build relationships outside of the classroom. She makes an effort to connect with every student. As a result, most students begin to grow fond of Emily and occasionally English as a school subject.

The school is known for having more than a few students with behavioral issues. In Japanese culture, students are taught to be disciplined from very young ages. Students must greet and bow to every adult; knock before entering the staff room; excuse themselves politely when exiting the staff room; and clean their classrooms. If students fail to follow these expectations, the teachers will typically handle the situations. Special cases may be brought to administrators.

Ryo is a second-year student at the junior high school. He often comes to school late, sleeps in class, never finishes his cleaning duties, and rarely follows any rules. In other words, he does not bow and greet every adult, enters the staff room without knocking and exits without politely excusing himself. When it comes to English, he has no interest in the subject and ignores Emily whenever she attempts to connect with him.

One day, Emily notices Ryo entering the staff room, followed by the vice principal (VP). The VP leads Ryo into the staff lounge and closes the door. Emily goes onto her regular teaching schedule as usual. After one class period, she heads back to the staff room for her break and hears the VP's raised voice echoing from the staff lounge. She does not understand what the VP is saying, but her concern grows as she continues to hear banging noises and more of the VP's voice in increasingly louder volumes. She makes eye contact with a Japanese teacher who happens to be in the staff room as well. She gestures for the two to leave together. Later, Emily brings up the incident with a JTE, who tells her to not worry about it.

Emily does not see Ryo at school for the next few days. However, the day that Ryo comes back to school, Emily notices evident differences in his behavior. He gets to school on time, no longer sleeps in class but just zones out instead, and he quietly knocks and excuses himself when entering and exiting the staff room. He still ignores Emily and only reluctantly greets other teachers when asked. The biggest change Emily has noticed is that Ryo appears to be even more secluded now. He never appeared outgoing or extremely extroverted before, but now he seems to be even more hesitant to interact with his classmates and friends.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- What do you think the issues are in this case?
- What would you do if you were Emily? What complications might there be?
- What are the different power dynamics in this case? How do they affect the situation?
- What role does culture play here? How might it influence Ryo's case?