

## Learner Development in Japanese High Schools



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I started my journey in teaching English abroad a while ago. I'm currently a third-year Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) at a senior high school in Hamamatsu, Shizuoka through the Japan Exchange and Teaching Program (JET). After JET, I hope to develop an academic career teaching and researching at the university level.

As a first-generation American, I have always felt drawn to exploring the intricacies of learner development. Watching my parents achieve their own ability in speaking English growing up inspired me to instill the same motivation in my students. My parents immigrated to the United States from Pakistan in the early 1990s, and our family lived in a Latino community on the outskirts of the Washington DC area. Before attending preschool, I would only hear English from *Sesame Street* and the local news. My first day at preschool was also my first day of integrating with American society. Since that day, I started to bring English home with me. By the time I was around 6 years old, my parents were able to interact with almost everyone and everything in English so freely. I want my students to also become more curious about English and create their own voice when they express themselves in an L2 environment.

Before coming to Japan, I was a literacy tutor for 5th and 6th graders at a public charter school in Washington, DC for two years. Although I have taught L1 learners how to read in their first language in an English-speaking country, when I first arrived to Japan, I experienced a few challenges that contrasted with teaching back home. In the US, I was able to show the students that learning to read efficiently in English was relevant to their ability to connect with their environment and expand their knowledge of it.

How could I instill similar values onto my current students, who realize that their native language is all they need to thrive? My main challenge was motivating my Japanese students to participate in class.

At my school, only a quarter of the students attend university after graduation, so many of them generally feel unmotivated to study most of their curricula. They're definitely not "bad students", but rather, students full of potential who have not practiced engaging in class for a long time. Over the years, I have learned that providing a context for them is the key to motivate them and essentially create a framework for their learner development.

The context I have found to be the most successful is role-reversal; having them teach me how to navigate their own language and culture. In my classes, I show different scenarios where they would be able to use English in a real-life setting. Most of them are based on jobs or daily life experiences that they would have after graduation. This includes helping other foreigners order food, explaining Japanese customs to English-speakers, and acting as tour guides. Additional themes that have worked for my students are foreign cultures and traveling. Before starting their role-play activities, I would show my students videos of high school life in America and of Japanese Youtubers exploring English-speaking countries to fuel discussion. Exposing them to these themes through different forms of media has also seemed to develop their vocabulary and grammar through repeated exposure and use. Showing them real-world examples of L2 communication in an L1 and L2 environment helps them remember that learning and using English could fulfill them socially and academically even after graduation.

As a new member of JALT and the Learner Development SIG, I hope to expand my knowledge of building my students' language comprehension and use as an ALT. I would also like to use this group as an opportunity to share my experiences with learner development in the JET Program to prepare to teach in a university setting.