

Primary Advice

By Helene J. Uchida

Q:

One of my language school students does well in my class but performs poorly on his English tests at the public junior high school he attends. Because of this, his father wants him to quit my school. How can I save this student?

T.Y., school owner
Wakayama

A: Battling English on 2 different fronts

I admire you for wanting to “save the student.” It’s clear he does well in your school and is benefiting from his lessons with you. Obviously, you see merit in him and his potential if he continues to progress with you. We have been in the same situation a number of times. The dilemma is that the Japanese public school system focuses on knowledge about the English language, while you and I are aware of the importance of actually being able to speak the language.

In the Japanese public school system, English lessons are built on knowledge, which can be objectively evaluated by taking tests — namely, focusing on grammar, vocabulary, reading comprehension and translation. Since fluent English speakers in the school system are rare, evaluating by paper tests is the only way schools can judge progress.

We at the Eikaiwa schools focus on communication skills. This involves our students thinking in English, understanding, and being able to reply to spoken English, and interacting with the teacher and fellow students in simple, easy-to-understand sentences. We also encourage participation in homestays, holiday activities, speech contests and vacations abroad for our students to try their English out.

In Denmark, junior high school students work with texts and themes in English. At the final oral exam, the student presents and discusses the topic of his/her choice. The student is expected to go beyond the class texts. After that, the proctor chooses one of the obligatory class topics to discuss with the student. Students are graded on their ability to organize their presentation, display knowledge and justify opinions on both topics in English. This would not be possible in Japan because Japanese EFL teachers are versed in the rules of the language but are not trained to interact in English.

There is a three-hour written exam, as well. It tests some grammar, but also here the focus is on communication: Fill out a form, write a letter, story, an essay. Grades are based on fluency and accuracy, as well as adherence to

genre and knowledge of culture.

You cannot change the system here, but you can try to save your student by meeting with the parents and telling them you fully understand their concerns. Assure them you and they are on the same team in that you want the best for their child.

During this consultation, I suggest you “interview” their son in front of them to show how much he can understand, answer, think and interact in simple English. They may be pleasantly surprised. Such an interview would reveal to them a communication skill that the public school he is attending can neither recognize nor evaluate.

I would encourage them to support their son’s efforts to move forward on both English frontiers. He needs to focus on his English schoolwork at school to succeed in that system, and he also needs to continue with you in building the solid communicative foundation that will open doors for him in the future.

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Readers are encouraged to send questions to Helene J. Uchida on any themes related to teaching English — particularly those at the elementary and junior high school level — to jn-edu@yomiuri.com with “Primary Advice” in the subject line. Questions to Uchida are also accepted via postcard at “Primary Advice,” The Japan News, 1-7-1 Otemachi, Chiyoda Ward, Tokyo 100-8055. Questions should preferably be written in English, accompanied by your name, occupation and the area you live.



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The next installment will appear on June 22.