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Justin Nightingale

After teaching English for 10 years at Seigakuin I was finally asked to go on a school trip with grade 5 to the countryside (I could only hide so long). 5 days, 80 children, countryside, all day activities and - most terrifying of all - no convenience stores.

Founded in 1999 by Dan Junker, Northstar is an outdoor activity focussed lodge situated in Matsumoto, Nagano with room for about 50 guests in shared rooms and eating communally in a dining room. Guests usually come in groups, sometimes from schools and colleges, private groups but they also cater for professional outdoor competitions that are held in the area throughout the year using Northstar as a base. Activities cover the whole range: mountain biking, rock climbing, skiing, snowboarding, night trekking, etc. If it's active, they do it.

With a small group of wired, outdoor-junky leaders, they make schedules and lead groups of (in our case) children and exhaust them with smile inducing activities that most of them have rarely experienced in their Tokyo/Playstation/Juku everyday life.

The week was split into two: Monday to Wednesday for the first half of grade 5 (40 kids) and Wednesday to Friday for the second half with the same schedule for both halves. Yours truly was there for the long haul with an hour's break between one group leaving and the next arriving.

The motivation for me to take part in the week's events was to have a bit of a reality check. At

school, I have my allotted 45 minutes of English time in the classroom which I try to use in a way that will pull them kicking and screaming a step closer to (and hopefully, beyond) the level of English that will be expected of them when they progress to secondary school. But, I don't know what happens outside; would they actually use the English they've learnt? Here are some thoughts on my week in the wild.

Understanding

The week's schedule was packed with activities all day with some free time in the evening. Each activity was lead by at least 2 leaders and usually more depending on the danger level. My role was a little indescrpt from the outset which gave me the freedom to move around and be nosey.

The staff always spoke English. This was the point. At the start of every activity there was a detailed introduction/safety speech/explanation segment that was spoken only in English that was faster and more dense than they had had experience with in the classroom with me. In other words, it was real English.. watered down a fraction.

As I stood at the side of one group during one of these English intros watching their faces, the intercommunication they had with each other in Japanese as they shared pieces of understanding was... educating. While the leader was speaking, they were whispering to each other (within the predefined boundaries of gender and friendships) what they understood and what they didn't. As a group, they shared and made sense of leader's

words as a whole. As individuals, most of them only grasped parts. I never foresaw a listening exercise becoming a group activity.

As a group, they were consistently able to follow all the instructions. I was impressed.

Adjusting

To all intents and purposes, the kids were visiting another country. When they stepped off the bus they were greeted by young, smiling foreigners welcoming and guiding them through 'immigration' where they were asked various questions before they could enter the kingdom that is Northstar. There was a fun but nervous tension in the air as they lined up before the immigration officers. Friends clumped together before their turn sharing snippets of English wisdom they remembered from distant lessons of mine ready for the interrogation that was to follow.

After the initial introductions, fumbling around and bag moving, it was food time in the dining hall, sat in groups of 6 + teacher with all the paraphernalia that comes with a western meal. I smile now as I think back at the number of kids' steaks I cut into pieces due to them being flummoxed by the device known as 'a knife' but obviously, this was the objective: a different perspective for even the everyday things. I explained how we wait for the prayer, pass the plate around, serve others, etc and I found myself impressed how willing there were to comply - in English. They were happy to adjust and accommodate to this foreign (but often not so different) way.

The problems started when they started to relax

and feel comfortable with their surroundings because that's when the Japanese flowed. I tried to steer things back on course when I could but it became an uphill struggle as you realise that the excitement and nervousness of them having to use English 'under pressure' (it was all very light hearted but to a 10 year old it may have felt like the end of the world was nigh) at the start was the strongest motivation for them trying.

Confidence

I've been around these children for years - some of them as far back as nursery school. While it is hugely advantageous for them to feel comfortable with different nationalities, my presence promotes a jaded view: in reality, most English speakers don't speak slowly, adjust their vocabulary and are unable to respond to Japanese. The children need contact with fresh foreigners who match this reality or they're going to be in for a shock when they get older.

With this in mind, It was comforting to see the children happily ask questions to the leaders irrespective of their nationality. You didn't sense the 外/内 thinking that is prevalent in Japanese culture. The Japanese and English faces of the leaders seemed, from what I saw, equality approachable from the children's point of view without the reservations that some Japanese adults have with the difference between 日本人 and 外国人. I have no doubt that this is down to the fact they have had weekly contact time with myself and others, and they dutifully transferred this trust onto these new faces. This fact alone gives me a nice warm feeling inside; English is only part of an English lesson.

But the more comfortable they became, the less they spoke English: a constant battle I face. The staff were fantastic not only because of the activities they did but because they kept it in English but kids know when you understand Japanese (as a few of the staff did) and as soon as your cover is blown, the children will use the path of least resistance - Japanese. Even if you speak English 100%, they'll return the favour with good 'ole Japanese. Breaking this pattern requires constant effort.

Reflections

In a previous life I used to teach English to adults at a conversation school. Comparing adults with children, adults are often more embarrassed or reluctant to speak when they lack confidence in the correct way of saying something. Children, in general, have no such childish reservations in using their finite English resources when given the chance but this is not usually through their own self motivation but rather due to the fact that they enjoy rising to the challenge that has been set by us the teachers and the leaders at Northstar. It's all part of the game.

But, If we don't set tight borders and restrictions around the pseudo English world we try to create, they will just slip into Japanese which would just leave us with.. well, a wildly fun few days for all concerned.

Between you and me (don't tell anyone I said this) but just for the kids to get away, enjoy REAL air and develop their personal skills doing team bonding games and wearing themselves out is more than enough to justify the trip. Putting my teacher's hat back on and speaking as a person

that can understand what they say when they fire Japanese at me, promoting an English atmosphere often required me to not participate, step back and leave everything to the leaders' capable hands as this often proved the most effective way of creating the path of most resistance.

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