

Teacher Assistant Exchange Programme

by Steve Conroy, Tawa College, February 2018

For the past seven years, Tawa College in Wellington, New Zealand and Hannan Senior High School in Osaka, Japan have established a reciprocal programme of exchanging ex-students as English/Japanese teaching assistants. We have spoken with Steve Conroy the initiator of the programme. Here is what he said:

"I took over as the full-time Japanese teacher at Tawa (I was teaching junior Japanese and Accountancy before) in 2005. At the time, we were a one person per language department. As I was very well aware that my Japanese ability was not up to the highest level, I was interested in seeking out opportunities to have a Japanese language assistant to support me. In 2006, I applied for an Assistant Teacher through the Jenesys programme, and was very lucky with the applicant, who worked in the department for 20 months. I applied again in 2008, and unfortunately had difficulties with the teacher who was selected for us.

From those experiences, I realised that it may be better to have someone assisting for a shorter period, and also have at least some control over the selection of the assistant. Maybe it would also be best to have younger assistants; people who were closer in age to the students.

In 2008, I started a sister school relationship with a school in Osaka, which we visited in 2008 and have continued to visit, and they in turn have visited us in New Zealand each year. When I was looking at how to extend this growing relationship, I combined these exchange experiences with both schools' need for a native speaker in the high school classrooms. Out of this the assistant exchange programme was born.

The programme was based on the idea of recruiting ex-students from our partner school as teaching assistants for nine months. I was spurred on to make this reciprocal as my Year 13 Japanese class at that time had some super keen students who just loved Japan and felt this would open up for them the opportunity to spend an extended time in Japan at a low budget.

In 2011, we sent two high school alumni to Japan and they sent two to New Zealand. The programme has continued consistently since that time. Due to our long, strong relationship with Hannan High School, we trust their selection process. It is really nice to meet your teaching assistant and then go back through photos from a previous trip to Osaka and spot them as a student; very cool link.

There are many benefits in this exchange I think. There is the authentic learning experience for the students. There is just nothing like having a Japanese person in the class to provide real life language experiences. It is even more authentic as the students and the teaching assistant are in the same general age group; a lot of casual language is taught along the way. Getting to know a Japanese person completely opens up a student's mind to what a Japanese person might be like, stereotypes are being questioned - while yes, some of them might be confirmed as well. Academically, the students can have natural conversations with the teaching assessment, record those, and hand them in as their assessment. I also would like to mention that it is not only the students but also the staff who have the opportunity to engage with Japanese. Our teaching assistants are visible around the school, the neighbouring Intermediate and in the staffroom. Also, for me as a teacher, my range of teaching capabilities is extended. Calligraphy as an example; I do not have much knowledge, but can easily ask the teaching assistant to run a session. There is also a bank of resources, which they leave behind on their return – written, spoken, videos ...

(cont.)



From left: Barbara - has returned from 9 months in Japan as assistant teacher (2017), Benio - spent 9 months in NZ as assistant teacher in 2017, Jee Won - with Barbara in Japan for 4 months (came to Tawa College as a Year 9 international student from Korea), Hana - 2016 assistant teacher to Tawa College

(contd.)

For the teaching assistants, benefits include offering the opportunity to spend time in a different country at a relatively low budget. The assistants are not being paid for their work but the host school takes care of their accommodation and food, so the cost involved is relatively minor. Often, Hannan School also provides our NZ teaching assistants with small teaching jobs so that most of them return from their year in Japan breaking even.

The selection process is very important. We are looking for those young people who get on well with people, bond well with the kids, who are resilient and are willing to deal with difficult situations, not necessarily those who display great academic achievements. Out of this comes a big benefit for the young assistants I feel. The growing maturity that they experience personally through the experiences they encounter. The adjustment from students to 'workers', and, in a foreign country and culture, is not an easy process. There are many ups and downs along the way, and with it comes maturity and personal growth.

Certainly, such an exchange always also comes with challenges. We find that not all candidates selected (by us and by Hannan) are perfectly suitable. Some assistants' lack of overseas experience mean they do not feel comfortable in their environment and enjoyment is hindered. Their low language levels and their young age at times makes it difficult to bond with College staff. There are other functional challenges such as finding a working space for them, providing ongoing support in our busy working lives, and of course finding appropriate homestay accommodation. This has become much easier with ALLiS funding.

ALLiS also helped us to develop a systematic process with the intermediate school, which was present previously, but a little unstructured. Now, every child at Tawa Intermediate – about 500 students – are receiving Japanese classes every week – rather incredible, I think. Students will be coming into College with a high level of understanding and interest in specifically Japanese, but also a general interest in language learning; a very positive development. We expect this cooperation to continue even after ALLiS funding ends. Finding money for the homestays on the other hand will become a challenge again.

Since we established the exchange programme, we aim to have two students going to Japan, and two coming to New Zealand every year. This is not always the case, so we just go with what is possible. Last year for example, we had a Japanese lady in her mid 50s come over for a term as the second assistant teacher. She was a bit like a Grandma to the kids, they just adored her. An unforeseen positive aspect of the exchange.

When I first started the partnership with Hannan, I was a lone ranger organising the reciprocal trips. As my overall role at the school has changed, more hours of Japanese teaching have opened up and we now have a second teacher. With this comes a shared responsibility; another person with the best interest in the programme and someone to share the vision.

I have found that I have been most successful in my teaching career when I jump into things without thinking too much. This is probably my personality; I am happy to sort out any problems once they occur during the process and don't worry too much about things before. (a pinch of risk-taker and a good dose of naivety!). When we put the idea of a teacher assistant exchange into action, I was actually surprised at how little red tape and challenges there were to start the process. If someone was interested in doing something similar, I encourage them to find a school, start the relationship and see what happens. You will always encounter the odd issue so yes, expect to have problems that need solving. But you will learn along the way - Don't let it put you off."