

The Pen Pal Project

I would like to discuss the benefits of having a cross-cultural pen pal project for English language learning in Japan. Why is that? Because what if you, as Japanese Teachers of English (JTEs) and as Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs), can take this unique opportunity in which your students can apply their English into actual use, leading it to a purpose and an educational goal. Do you ever wonder what they can get from this experience? If you have doubts of making this project doable or think this is too much work, then I encourage you to think positively about it, have confidence, and enjoy the treasure it has in store for you and your students. With time, you'll see its reward that can last for a few years or even longer.

First, I will tell you of my experience when I taught at a junior high school in 2012. In this school, the head JTE and I established a partnership with two schools abroad. There were other JTEs who took part in this project and it became the beginning for many of our second year Japanese students to exchange pen pal letters in English. Furthermore, it was perhaps the students first time to make friends overseas. With one of the two schools from abroad, the students had little knowledge of the Japanese language and the Japanese culture. As time passed, fewer letters came and some of these students were losing interest in writing. Moreover, our students had to use the English/Japanese dictionary to translate their letter and for them that felt like additional work, while the students abroad received and wrote their letters in English only. This seemed unbalanced and challenging on our side, especially when there were over 200+ Japanese students participating in the project and not everyone had received a letter. So, what to do?

Did I just say 200+ Japanese students!? That would mean the students from abroad had to have 200+ students too, totaling up to 400+ students on both sides. That's a lot! Well, as I mentioned above there was a second school participating in the project and this one was different. What made this one different? The simplest answer would be the Japanese program in which that school has. Because the teacher from abroad teaches Japanese, that meant there were students who were interested in studying Japanese and learning about Japan, as well as liking to become friends with Japanese students.

Into the second year and third year of the pen pal project, there were two schools from abroad that both had a Japanese program. This new school not only had main Japanese teachers, but it also had a Native Japanese Assistant Teacher. Thus, with more teachers involved, the project became much easier to maintain on both sides and there was a system to organize and sort the pen pals' letters. Letters were being exchanged up to 3-4 times a year, so at the beginning of the Japanese school year, it was a transition period which our third year Japanese students had to end their project, while the new students entering into their second year of English had the opportunity to start theirs.

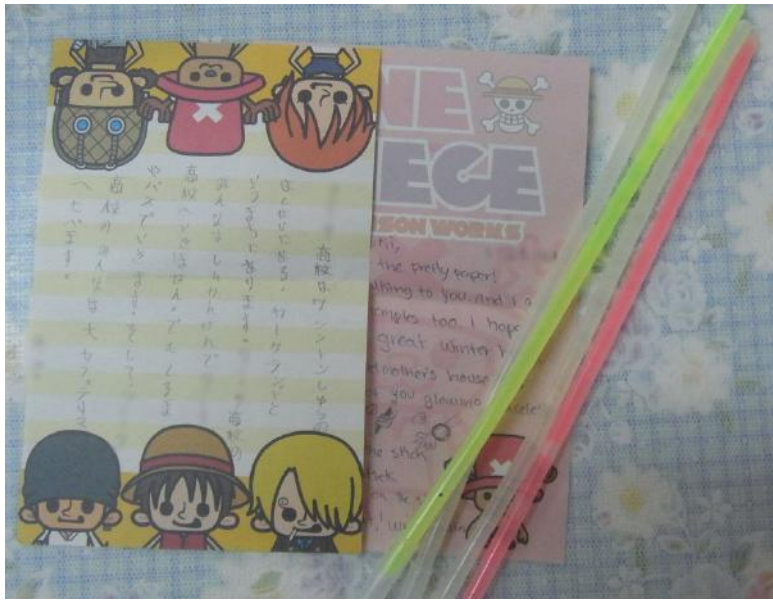
When you have this kind of combination of pairing a Japanese student with a student abroad by similar age and language level, you get hundreds of students who become fascinated about the world outside of their own. They can even encourage each other to study hard in the language of their study. What's interesting from the experience I had of observing my students and hearing in their own words about writing to their pen pal was not considered homework to them. In addition, I had seen Japanese students who once had no interest in English, those with the lowest English level, and students who could no longer attend the English club, get encouraged when they received their pen pal letter and then try their best to write their letter in English. What was going on here? Their pen pal's replies were in Japanese!! And, some were able to hold souvenirs which their pen pal gave them. Then, looking at another perspective at the other schools from abroad, were selected students who didn't sign up for the Japanese class and were automatically put into that class, but our students helped to encourage them to learn more about Japan and the Japanese language. Thus, writing letters are alternative ways of communicating, sharing each other's culture, and building international relations. However, be patient when waiting for the letters!

If your school has an English club (or an English circle), why not integrate an extension of the pen pal project into it. In my case, I had the English club members make pen pal posters, video presentations, and so on. Then, on a couple of occasions when the pen pal letters arrived to our school, I was astonished to see how the club members were able to quickly sort out their classmates' pen pal letters in only a few minutes! Furthermore, as the pen pal project became more developed by their *senpai classmates*, they had this rare one-time opportunity of doing a LIVE video chat with one of the schools' Japanese club. This was like a glimpse of the next future step for the English education in Japan to have an online communicative speaking with students from abroad. In a way all of these experiences gave these members new practical skills, self-confidence, and they became cultural representatives on behalf of their school to the schools abroad. These extracurricular extensions, the pen pal project and the English club, can someday be systematically applied into the English department in Japan and can bring two countries closer.

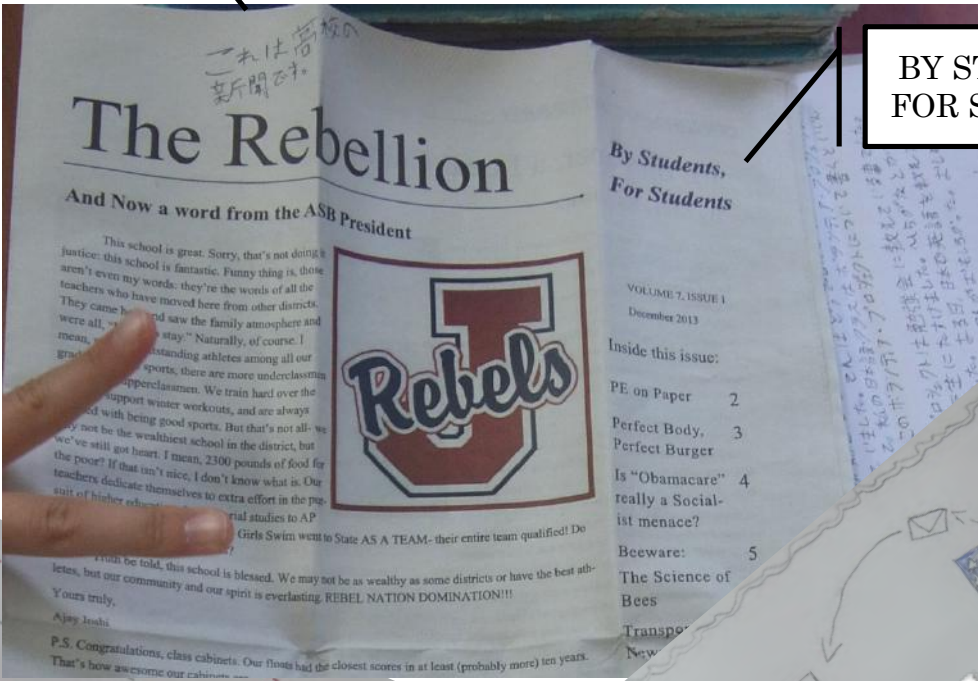
Therefore, I am very thankful to the head JTE who gave me this opportunity to contact these schools because international relations were made and I am thankful to the other JTEs who did their best to make the pen pal project successful. There were challenges and you may have your own unexpected challenges if you try it, but you can be creative to work around it, please don't give up, and have hope for your students.

For now, the most difficult task will be the connection. Where do you find these kinds of schools abroad and how do you prepare? Well, please check my website on Eigoganbare.com. Because English is all about learning the language of western countries and their ethnically diverse cultures. Thus, it can take you all over the world!

Letters from abroad!



これは高校の新聞です。



BY STUDENTS,
FOR STUDENTS



プレゼント

