

Sharks and Ladders:

What Surfing Has Taught Me About Starting an English Conversation School

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"One can choose to go back toward safety or forward toward growth. Growth must be chosen again and again; fear must be overcome again and again." - Abraham Maslow

Gazing out from the parking lot at the waves breaking a few hundred metres away they didn't look so big. Upon comparing the size of the white water exploding when they broke to the ant-sized people trying to ride them, I realized they must be fairly large. Not being a particularly high-level surfer myself, I knew it would be a tricky undertaking to catch any that day. Getting in, the water chilled my exposed hands and feet, and made me wheeze when it snuck into my wetsuit and down my back. Getting out to the back beyond the breakers was already a harrowing experience. By hitching a ride on the rip current running along the tetrapods one can get past the breaking waves with relatively little effort, but you need to stay within about arm's length of these giant pieces of concrete in order to do this. I happened to stray slightly off and into the path of the breaking waves which sent me and my brand new board tumbling towards the tetrapods. For a couple of brief moments I sweated under the water as I expected to hear the sound of my board being shattered. Resurfacing and getting back on the board I was hugely relieved to see it all still in one piece.

I eventually made it to the backline, recovered my breathing and prepared to have a go at catching a wave. As I watched more experienced surfers riding the waves, I inched towards the take-off zone. After making a couple of half-hearted attempts I found myself in the area where the waves break, the danger zone. Looking out I saw the next wave approaching and I knew I had to paddle hard to avoid annihilation. Head down, digging my arms deep into the water in a race to beat the break, I looked up to see a 10-ft high, greyish green wall bearing down on me. It was going to be close. I travelled up the face, reaching almost vertical, and as the nose of my board punched through the lip of the wave I thought I was going to make it. Then came that stomach-churning feeling as I was dragged back and over the falls. The next part was the "washing machine". Having not surfed for a long time I wasn't yet back in the habit of holding my breath, but instead blew it all out my nose to prevent water going in, as I would do when swimming. I was probably only underwater for about five seconds, but being tumbled around with no air in my lungs there was a moment when I thought I might not make it. Bursting through the foam after those few terrifying moments I sucked the air in like a vacuum on full power and was glad to still be alive.

After a few more pummelings I finally caught one! For a few moments I was flying. I was the king of the world. I whooped and hollered with delight as I turned around

and made my way back into the fray. It made it all worth the effort.

Unconsciously I've taken the lessons the sea has taught me and used them in other pursuits, such as opening my own English school. Upon reflection though, the parallels between the challenges of learning to surf and starting a school have become apparent. I started off on the road to becoming a teacher back in my university days when I offered tutoring in maths and science to make some pocket money. A little further on I joined the JET programme and became an ALT purely for the sake of adventure. Just like learning to surf, it seemed exotic, daring, and out of my comfort zone. I didn't realize it then but I had set out on a career path that I had never intended to follow.

I have faced some hurdles along the way. First of all, I had no formal teaching qualifications. I've often felt out of my depth because of this, a feeling which has haunted me throughout my teaching career. As an ALT I considered my main roles as being an international ambassador, a game machine and a human tape recorder, therefore my lack of teaching skills wasn't really a problem. However, it registered clearly when I became more fully responsible for my students' success, or lack thereof, in acquiring English. Although I've been running my own English conversation classes for almost 6 years and teaching English for almost 15, I still feel a fair amount of imposter syndrome calling myself a teacher. I realize I yet have much room for improvement, just as with my surfing.

The second major hurdle for me was that I couldn't speak, read or understand Japanese when I arrived. Communicating with most of my coworkers and people around town came down to gestures and pointing, or grunting. Staff social events were particularly difficult. Everyone is expected to communicate in this situation, and it led to many awkward silences when communication reached its limit...

Coworker: *Konbanwa* (Good evening).

Me: *Konbanwa*.

Coworker: *Kanpai!* (Cheers!)

Me: *Kanpai!*

Coworker: (while gesturing enthusiastically): *Anata wa hashi ga jozu desu ne!* (You're very good with chopsticks!)

Me: *Arigato.* (Thank you).

Coworker: ...(awkward silence).

Me: ...(more awkward silence).

At least we had the universal language of alcohol to ease the tension, so I mostly resorted to getting inebriated to avoid feeling awkward.

Gradually I got on friendly terms with my fellow teachers and occasionally got invited to their houses. One particular evening stood out in my memory as a token of

my integration. It was at an intimate gathering of teachers from my school. I was practicing what Japanese I had learnt, like a baby first learning to walk. They were patient while listening to me speak, and spoke slowly to me when replying. Luckily, Mr Kanbe, the English teacher, with whom I got along very well, was there to translate when I got stuck. While we feasted on a giant sushi platter which the host's wife had brought out for us, I looked over to see his two young sons watching a rather rude cartoon called *Crayon Shinchan*. The main character, a preschool boy named Shinnosuke, likes to ingratiate himself with pretty, big-breasted women, and pull down his pants to show his backside every so often. I was a bit shocked. Before long the boys started imitating Shinchan and were mooning all of us. This too was rather shocking to me, but neither the parents nor the other guests seemed bothered at all. We had a little chuckle together and I realized our cultures are quite different. And yet I felt quite at home.

Before starting my own business I was coming to the end of a five year stint as an ALT, on top of my two initial years in Japan. I was growing gradually more intent on having the freedom to set my own working hours, being my own boss and getting away from the 5th and 6th grade classes at one particular elementary school who were draining my soul. One day a week I would be filled with dread at having to do those four classes, one after the other. My function as an elementary school ALT, as I understood it, was to create a fun and relaxed atmosphere for learning English through the use of songs and games. Songs in those classes usually involved me forcing a smile, and clapping or dancing at the front of the class, while 30 deadpan faces stared blankly back at me. I could see some kids wanted to join in and enjoy themselves but they were generally silenced by the buzzkills around them. Games were slightly better because the students were forced to join in, although many gave the impression they'd rather be gnawing their own arms off. I was starting to become the walking dead myself. I needed to get out. With no savings and no venue decided upon to start a school, I gave my notice. It was time to brave the sharks and jump in the water.

Less than a month before my job came to an end, I found a little community centre that allowed the use of its premises for financial gains, which is a rare find. As my daughter was graduating kindergarten at the same time, I managed to net a handful of her classmates as my first students, and together with a mishmash of other jobs I was able to make enough to survive. It was a hectic period but I was flying on the freedom of being a business owner.

Business increased steadily for a few years before reaching a plateau. I had grown stagnant. As a surfer you need to move around and adjust your position to be in just the right place to catch the next wave. After teaching in several locations concurrently for 4 years—a community centre, a family park building, two kindergartens, students' houses, my own house and even a temple for a short time—I was intent on centralizing my operation by having my own premises. Although I had been keeping busy and paddling around I was no longer

in a position which allowed growth. It was time to make a move and get into the take-off zone.

I spent an agonizing half a year or so in which I struggled to find an ideal venue for my new school. Many times I felt helpless and was ready to give up on the dream. I was that inexperienced surfer getting battered by the waves, wondering what I was doing in that position. Why didn't I just go back to being an ALT? I could have the stability plus all the other benefits that come along with it. But I knew that would be moving backwards instead of forwards, and I wouldn't be able to accept it. When you're on the wave you need to stand up and ride! I kept hoping, and as the end of the school year drew closer, I finally found a place. There was one last torturous week while I waited for the landlord to decide between me or a couple of other applicants, but in the end it was me who got the nod. Once again I was standing high and moving forward, feeling elated and extremely grateful.

Although running an English conversation school was never something I dreamed of, or even imagined doing, it's the path I've chosen, and I'm happy with my choice. Maybe it was my calling all along; it just took traversing a long, winding path to realize it. As Walt Whitman (2008) wrote, "Not I, nor any one else can travel that road for you. You must travel it for yourself. It is not far, it is within reach. Perhaps you have been on it since you were born and did not know. Perhaps it is everywhere on water and on land."

I'm in the sea and I can either sink, swim, or paddle hard and catch the wave. I know which one I choose.

References

Whitman, W. (2008) *Leaves of Grass (Song of Myself, 46)*. Retrieved from <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1322/1322-h/1322-h.htm>.

Author Bio

Mike Floquet comes from South Africa and has been living in Japan for 15 years. He currently runs FLOW English conversation school in Takasaki, Gunma, and is striving to make an effective and enjoyable learning environment for his students. He loves music, a good movie and various other leisure activities.

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