Speaking Point 1 (Reflect on how popular culture was used when I was learning Japanese) -

Let me start by saying I am not a professional. Clearly. My name is Dennis Gross and I am an ALT for elementary and middle schools in Isahaya City in the Nagasaki Prefecture. (CLICK) I’m only in my second year, but it has been an incredible experience for me so far. I absolutely love the job! From teaching kids English with tools I create, to creating bonds with my teachers, and of course, having a strong connection with the students. This job is like a dream to me. But it didn’t simply start with me as an ALT. (CLICK)

But for me, this goes back to when I was in college and possibly even earlier. But for all intents and purposes, let’s focus on this Japanese class in college. I took the class to knock off an elective and ended up meeting a fantastic professor. Not only did she provide me with a caring instructor who wanted to see me succeed, but she presented the learning of a language in a way that was completely understandable. For example, we had a class when we were describe characters by saying body parts in Japanese which can be dreadfully boring. (CLICK) However, my teacher used this image of Dragon Ball Z characters and the class, full of college-age students, mind you, exploded into a frenzy of fun and excitement. Now, it could be that most of us were in our early 20s and we had all grown up on watching Dragon Ball Z, Sailor Moon, and other anime like this, but the point stands that pop culture not only had students paying attention, but also having a blast! Do you think this same thing applies to elementary school and middle school students? Of course it does!

Speaking Point 2 (Discuss the benefits that using popular culture can have in and out of the class room) -

I have used pop culture in my classes almost constantly and so far my teachers and students seem to have really enjoyed it. (CLICK) This can be as simple as attaching a character onto a worksheet or powerpoint if it relates to a piece of vocabulary or even tailoring a whole game towards popular culture. For example, here’s the worksheet. Nothing too out of the ordinary, but it’s cute to have characters there and the kids will like it. But then I have my Ghost Box game. (CLICK) Here, I take popular characters or celebrities like (character names) and put them in a small scenario. I have the Ghostbusters theme ready to go on my iPhone as well. The fact that I have the characters, I have the music, and I have the context can really get the kids really into it. This is actually one of my most popular games. Before I continue though, I do not claim to be the originator of the survival game as it was originally introduced to me by one of my previous JTEs, but I added the pop culture spin to it. Thank goodness this game can be adapted to elementary and middle school. (CLICK) This is just one example because you can make a game based off of popular game shows, video games like Super Smash Brothers, TV dramas, or original scenarios like my UFO game. The last one is popular too. If you want to know more about any of these games, please let me know afterwards and I’d be happy to share anything.

 It isn’t just a fun and productive class. I have found that using popular culture in the classroom will have kids ask more questions, have the quiet kids speak up more, and even, and this was incredible for me, had kids write down questions to ask for the next time I would be in class. It doesn’t necessarily mean it is increasing their skills to perfection of the material, but it’s a step. Sometimes my JTEs have asked me about games that worked saying that it had the kids interested to play it and I passed my materials onto them.

 While the fun atmosphere and familiar characters work great in the classroom, it also transcends out of the classroom too. This, for me personally, is the most incredible part of the job and it is connecting with your students with an actual bond as people. (CLICK) It might sound silly to think that you’ll connect with Chisato-chan over Knuckles from Sonic the Hedgehog and J-pop idols, but it has actually happened to me before. I had one kid at a recent sports day festival eagerly come up to me so we could discuss Captain America: Civil War. The fact that a student wanted to speak to me about something besides school AND in their best attempt at English means the world to me. (CLICK) Actually, at the beginning of this semester, I started a “Movies with Dennis” section on my English board and I write simple reviews on recent movies and I actually see my students doing their best to read it and ask me about it afterwards. I have also been able to get closer with students and have even started occasional English discussions during recess. Being able to have this bond, to better know the students is by far my favorite part of being an ALT. Finding what the kids are into whether it be an anime, game, J-pop idol, movie, actor/actress, sports team… ANYTHING, has done amazing things to allow me to connect with my students. Also, if you’re anything like me then a huge hurdle you are trying to get over is remember all of the names of your students and connecting over popular culture definitely helps! I say definitely helps, but I still struggle over names… baby steps. (CLICK)

Speaking Point 3 (Mention some drawbacks I have had) -

Now as much as I have found using pop culture to be very beneficial, it also has drawbacks as well. (CLICK)

Are you familiar with these characters? Well that isn’t too bad as these are pretty famous characters. (CLICK)

How about these ones? To my surprise, most of my students didn’t know these characters. Especially Bugs Bunny! (CLICK)

Now do you know these characters? If you do that’s very good, but as you can see you may not know who your kids like and vice versa. If you end up with a character that your kids don’t know, then they’re going to shout “Who’s this!?” and it’ll waste class time. If you use one you don’t know, but your kids do then you better pray that they don’t ask any questions about it to you. You may have to do some research as to who they like. The internet and magazines are great sources for this, but also, but it also is great to just ask and see what your kids like directly. (CLICK)

While using pop culture is great it can also be distracting as well. Having the page littered with characters won’t aid anything and if your kids are too excitable then you won’t get anything done. You have to be sure you don’t lose the focus on English and the topics you are trying to teach. If it feels unneeded or unnatural to have them in there then… it probably is. Also, some JTEs just aren’t too keen on using pop culture in the class room. So, as with most things, you should run it by your JTE first. Lastly, if you are just the “pop culture sensei” then the kids may not take your criticisms or teachings as seriously. Pop culture can be used enough, but if you overdo it then it is a shot in the foot. This is a balance that I didn’t really understand at first.

Speaking Point 4 (End on a happy note on what it has meant to me) -

(CLICK) In the end, I have had so many wonderful experiences in just my one year of teaching. My family and friends back in New York often ask me, what is the best part of being in Japan? I always give the somewhat corny answer of “the people I have met.” My coworkers, the other ALTs, and my students mean so much to me. The relationships I have with them all are irreplaceable. But what was my start to being interested in teaching and working in Japan? It was my professor building a connection with me through kindness and pop culture. Cut 3 years into the future and I am doing the same thing. I know this is going to come across as the schlockiest thing you’ve heard today, but if I am able to do the same as my professor did, that is build a relationship and foster an interest in learning a foreign language through popular culture aids then I feel I am blessed… fulfilled… and a success with this job. Thank you. (CLICK)

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