

Roll With the Punches

Interesting Ways to Call Roll in Japan

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I used to hate calling roll. It was a drag and a total waste of time. But for educational carpetbaggers - teachers who rely on tape recorders in class, hand-outs by the bulk, and the perennial question of, "What did you do last weekend?" - taking roll is a great way to eat up time, slide through yet another class of boring "fill in the blanks," collect a paycheck, and laugh all the way to the bank. I once had a student tell me that in a certain teacher's class she only said one word all year long. I asked her what that word was. "Here," she said with a rueful sigh of resignation. Yet, with a little ingenuity and a penchant toward the absurd, calling roll "with a twist" can lead to spontaneous conversation, spiced with humor and even a bit of learning thrown in for good measure, without the student ever knowing what is going on. With a minimal amount of Japanese knowledge, any teacher can make the arduous task of calling roll an event to look forward to. Here is how it works.

Method #1 - Direct Translations:

Let's assume that you are plodding through the roll book and you come to the name Ishikawa. "Ishi" means stone and "kawa" means river. Instead of mournfully droning out "Ishikawa" try "Miss Stone River." The class will automatically be jolted out of the doldrums. Repeat the name, as if everything were normal. Furrowed brows, tilted heads and choruses of, "Eh," will follow - I guarantee. Say, "Miss Stone River" again, then ask, "Is Miss Stone River here today?" More blank looks. Then explain the joke this way.

"Is Miss Ishi - Stone - Kawa - River - here today?" Subdued laughter will patter around the room. Now the class is on to you. After you verify if the student is present or absent continue on.

The secret to this method is, don't just simply use direct translations to accomplish your goal. That method will tire after the third or fourth try. Then it becomes, "Omoshirokunai."

Some other names for Method #1 are:

- Mizutani = Miss/Mr. Water Valley
- Ogawa = Miss/Mr. Big River/Little River (Depending on the Kanji)
- Niwa = Miss/Mr. Garden

Remember, don't overdo this method.

Method #2 - Opposites:

Opposites are a great learning technique. Every teacher tries to instill upon their students opposite word groups, big-small, hot-cold, love-hate, and so on. Assume again that you are plugging away at the roll and you come to the name Michiko Ohno. You stop for a second, then intone, "Miss Michiko Oh, Yes." Blank stares belt you in the face. Not to worry. This is Japan and you are the teacher. Repeat, "Michiko Oh, Yes." Subdued whispers begin to scurry around the classroom. Inquire again, "Is Miss Oh, Yes, here today?" If there still is no answer play with the class. "Oh no, she isn't here today. That's too bad." If still no affirmative response, try this. "Well, I guess, Michiko Ohno is not here today. Michiko Ohno is absent." If Michiko Ohno is present she will suddenly cry out, "Hai." You then can respond by saying, "Hi, how are you?" Laughter usually follows. Then you can explain, "Oh, yes" and "Oh, no." This is what I like to call "Subtle Impregnation." The students don't realize it but they are learning opposites - in a positive and friendly atmosphere.

Some other names for Method # 2 are:

- Hayashi = Miss/Mr. Low Ashi (You can also use this name for Method #3, which is explained later as - Low - Feet)

- Inoue = Miss/Mr. Out Ue
- Hiroko = Miss Villain Ko (Hero) (Also again Method #3 - Villain - Child)

Remember, here again, don't overlay it.

Method # 3 - Off the Wallers:

These are my favorites for the simple reason that they challenge the students to think. Still stumbling through the roll you come upon the name Mini Kawasaki. Suddenly you blurt out, "Mickey Motorcycle." Stunned silence ensues. Again, with poker faced deftness, you call out, "Mini Motorcycle." Now you have lost the whole class - and in the undertaking have them in the palm of your hand. Trudge on. They will hang in with you. Trust me. You act perplexed, then rephrase the name in this manner. "Well, then, is Mickey Harley-Davidson here?" Now you have lost them completely. A word of caution is deemed necessary at this juncture. If you have a hangover, are ill-at-ease in front of an audience or hate a dead silent class you are walking on thin ice. But think positive. Don't waver. Stay the course. Now ask, "Isn't Mini Kawasaki here today?" Say her name slowly to make sure it is understood. If Mini-chan is present she will meekly raise her hand, too afraid to answer in either Japanese or English. Now you break the silence with a laugh and explain it this way. "Who is Mickey's girlfriend?" No answer. You handle it for them. "Mini Mouse. So Mini." Keep going. You now have a captive audience. "And what is a Kawasaki? What is a Harley-Davidson? They are motorcycles. So, Mickey Motorcycle." Guaranteed, groans, moans, whines and laughter will emanate throughout the classroom. No problem. They get what you are talking about and have learned something - relationships - in the process.

Some other names for Method #3 are:

- Miss Me-you Sugar = Yumi (Opposite) Sato (sugar)
- Miss/Mr. Yes! Chopsticks/Bridge = Miss/Mr. Yoshi (Yes!) Hashi (Chopsticks/Bridge, depending on the written Kanji)

It will soon become apparent that there are a multitude of names you can play with. The limits of your imagination are your only hindrance. Give it a try and see what happens. The bolder you are, the better.

What have your students learned? They have learned translations, opposites, off the wall/relational aspects, and American style jokes - a cultural insight - all in the course of calling roll. You have also completed the administrative task of taking roll - albeit, in the most subtle and educational manner.

One final note on using this approach. Use one method for a couple of classes. Then another one. Don't try to blow the whole wad at once. Pace yourself. Once you have exhausted your repertoire, then try it over again - later on in the course - as a retention exercise. See if they remember their "names" from past classes. It is a great way to encourage memory retention, foster good relations and promote a healthy classroom environment.

After 15 years of ESL teaching I have found that creative roll calling is one of the most effective ways of breaking the ice, getting the class rolling, (no pun intended), which in turn leads into the planned lesson assignment with the students alert and ready to challenge the English language - and the teacher.

If you are flexible in your approach, not afraid of "bombing" in class, and capable of laughing at yourself, you can instill the same enthusiasm and willingness to take chances in your students. If students see their teacher willing to try - and sometimes fail - they will be encouraged do the same.

However, if you are flaccid in your approach, monotone in delivery and staid in classroom presence, your students will pick up on it immediately - and act accordingly.

So the next time you pull out the attendance sheet and start to call names, take a chance and - Roll With The Punches.