

The JET Programme: A Great Way to Experience Japan

Building Rapport with a Vibrant Community

My first encounter with Japan came when my family hosted a Japanese student at our home in Christchurch. The experience inspired me to study Japanese at high school, where my interest in the country's rich culture and traditions continued to grow.

Japan and New Zealand share numerous aspects, including verdant countryside and snowcapped mountains, as well as a fondness for outdoor activities. Part of what motivated me to participate in the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme was a desire to experience Japan's beautiful natural environment, which is why I was excited to be placed in Minakami, Gunma Prefecture, an area famed for its hot springs, skiing, and hiking.

Since coming to Japan in 2012, I have worked at Tsukiyono Junior High School as an Assistant Language Teacher (ALT). It has been exciting over the last three years to build a rapport with students, whom I strongly admire for their diligence and study-mindedness in and outside the classroom. I have worked to help them overcome their initial trepidation to use English by opening avenues to connect on a personal level and actively conversing with them, regardless of their age or English ability, during class time as well as breaks. A popular topic has been the spectacular performances by Japan and the All Blacks at the 2015 Rugby World Cup in England.

An important aspect of my job has been helping students prepare each year for a regional English speech contest. The competition provides an invaluable experience for students to hone their English communication skills, which I hope will serve them well in the future. The experience has had a positive influence on students, with many expressing to me a desire to study abroad or pursue careers where English is needed.

Outside of work, I take every opportunity to learn about the country and my host community. I have studied the Japanese tea ceremony and *taiko* drumming, and I have enjoyed outings to the surrounding ski fields and long soaks in local hot spring baths during the winter months. The smaller size of Minakami has enabled me to experience a side of Japan different than that of the country's bigger cities, providing unique opportunities to make authentic connections with the local community.

Another great aspect of JET, and a major motivation for choosing the prefecture Gunma, is the opportunity to be a part of a tight-knit community. Over the last few years I have volunteered with GAJET, the Gunma branch of the association of JET participants. The group regularly hosts regional and prefectural events, including ski trips and canyoning expeditions, along with events aimed at the local Japanese community. One of the largest is an annual charity event where items displaying the multifaceted talents of ALTs, such as artwork and even music lessons, are auctioned off, serving to build bridges by encouraging person-to-person interaction and to give back to the community.

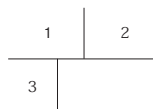
Looking to the future, my experiences have impressed on me the close relationship Japan and New Zealand share, and I would like to give back to JET through involvement in the JET Alumni Association (JETAA), serving as a cultural ambassador between our two countries. I also enjoy my English educator role for the opportunities it provides to expand students' worlds, and on returning home or to my next overseas destination I would like to continue focusing on ESL teaching.



Kimberley Smith

Born in New Zealand. Arrived in Japan as a JET participant in 2012. Currently teaching at Tsukiyono Junior High School.

Smith demonstrates with the Japanese English teacher a new grammar structure to a first-year class. She combines cards and lively examples to keep the interest of students high.



1. Smith talks with students between classes.
2. A group photo with one of Smith's English classes. Students at Tsukiyono Junior High School attend classes at wearing tracksuits.
3. Smith and friends at a local festival.

