

This weekend I went to “girls’ night” with a bunch of ALT friends at an American’s apartment down in Isobe. In Mie, there are a lot of ALTs from all over the world, and because we share a common language, it is easy to forget that our cultures are all so different!

In America, there is a popular comedy show called *Saturday Night Live*. It has been on television for more than thirty years, and most popular American comedians get their start as regulars on the show. Every Saturday night there is a new, live performance that begins at 11:30 at night, and the comedians perform the skits that they have been practicing all week. The skits usually make fun of politicians, musicians, movie stars and American pop culture in general. Even people who don’t usually watch this show are familiar with the famous opening line, “Live from New York, it’s Saturday night!”

My interest in this show has gone up and down as my favorite comedians have come and gone. Even when I’m not particularly interested in the show, it’s good for a few laughs before bed on Saturday night. This show is such a huge part of American TV culture, that it never even occurred to me that English-speakers in other parts of the world might not be familiar with (or enjoy, for that matter) this humor.

My friend in Isobe had just gotten a DVD that highlighted the most popular skits of one of my favorite comedians from the show. There were a few Americans there, and we all thought it would be great to show it to our friends from Australia and England. Even before it began, we Americans were chuckling to ourselves, because we could remember the jokes that made this comedian so popular. As soon as it came on, the unthinkable happened. The non-Americans were not laughing and very clearly not enjoying the show, AT ALL. It suddenly became painfully obvious to me that this humor was really specific to North America. When I realized that it wasn’t funny to my friends, I started to see the jokes from their perspective and almost got embarrassed that this was the “hysterically funny” show that we had told them about. I always knew that American humor is quite slapstick and not very intelligent, but most people enjoy it anyways.

We quickly switched gears and stopped watching the DVD and managed to salvage the rest of the night. I know our non-American friends are still our friends, but I was still a little bit embarrassed about the incident. It is a very unique situation to be living in Japan and learning Japanese while lumped together with a bunch of other English-speakers from different countries. Japanese society is a lot different than what all of us are used to at home, so we tend to bond over the fact that we are not Japanese, and forget that we all have distinctly different backgrounds.

This sometimes makes it hard to teach English, because an ALT from England might find an “Americanism” in a textbook and tell his or her class that it’s totally wrong, not even realizing that in America it is indeed correct. I am guilty of the same thing! Recently, my students were repeating a tongue twister after me, and they told me that when I say “better,” it sounds like “bedder.” “You’re saying it wrong,” they told me. I tried to convey the idea that it wasn’t wrong, only different from what they had learned. For students who have been studying for years the grammatical rules that I forgot in high school, this didn’t sound believable.

I came to Japan as an ALT because I am interested in learning about different people from different countries, but I didn’t realize that there would be so much cultural exchange even within the community of ALTs. I’m glad that, in addition to Japanese culture, I have this chance to be exposed to so many different Anglophone cultures so that I can begin to understand our differences, and hopefully become a better English teacher because of it. Especially now that I’ve decided to stay another year, I look forward to improving myself so I can have more of a positive impact on my students in the future.