



Hi all,

It's getting close to the end of the academic year. For first-year ALTs, especially, this can be a surprisingly confusing and stressful time as such a lot happens in such a short time and you probably won't be told much by your schools or teachers. As such, for this article, I thought I'd describe the types of things that may happen in the next few weeks or so.

I will note here that, as usual, things will vary slightly by school and, of course, COVID-19 restrictions may also result in things being a bit different or even being outright cancelled, but all the following information is based on my experience at multiple schools throughout the years.

I hope that you will find it useful and that it will help prevent and dispel any anxiety that may be caused by the sudden dash of activity, especially when it comes to staff changes.

Keep well!

Michael

Tome ALT Leader

3 March 2022

FAREWELLS TO GRADUATING STUDENTS (おくかい 送る会)

These may already have happened at your school. They are small celebrations / ceremonies for the students that will soon be graduating (6th graders at elementary schools and 3rd graders at junior high schools). Junior students make speeches and even do small performances for and give small gifts to the graduating students. As a member of staff, you may be asked to attend, but its unlikely that you'll have to do anything more than just watch.

GRADUATION CEREMONY (そつぎょうしき 卒業式)

This is probably the most important ceremony of the year and, as a member of staff, you are expected to attend. At some schools it is held on a Saturday whilst others are held during the week. Your schedule will have been set with this in mind.

A day or two before the ceremony the school gym will be prepared. This involves a lot of cleaning, setting up of chairs, putting out of flowers, and attaching large red and white striped banners – 紅白幕 (こうはくまく) – up on the walls. Depending on your school's COVID precautions, this may or may not involve students. In either case, there is a lot to do and the other staff will really appreciate any help that you may be able to give. As a lot of dust can be involved, make sure you have some appropriate clothes to wear. I recommend that you get yourself a set of those white cotton gloves – 軍手 (ぐんて) – (especially the ones with some rubber grip on the palms) as they will be useful when carrying things and give some warmth, too, as it is still rather cold.

The ceremony itself is a very formal occasion. Parents (and some VIPs, COVID restrictions allowing) will be in attendance, too, so please dress appropriately (i.e. a formal suit) otherwise you will stick out. Many male teachers (especially those directly connected with the graduating class) will wear a white necktie for the occasion. Others (usually female staff but occasionally male homeroom teachers) may even wear traditional kimono. Graduating students at some elementary schools will usually dress in formal, western style or sometimes even traditional kimono. Junior high school students are usually in full school uniform.



You probably won't have any particular role to play unless you've been asked to do something ahead of time (I'm usually the official school photographer) but you may be asked to help out with various small things on the day. After the ceremony there is usually a final homeroom class where students and teachers may get rather emotional, especially at junior high schools where old friends may be parting due to going to different high schools – tears are common. You may be asked to sign graduation albums

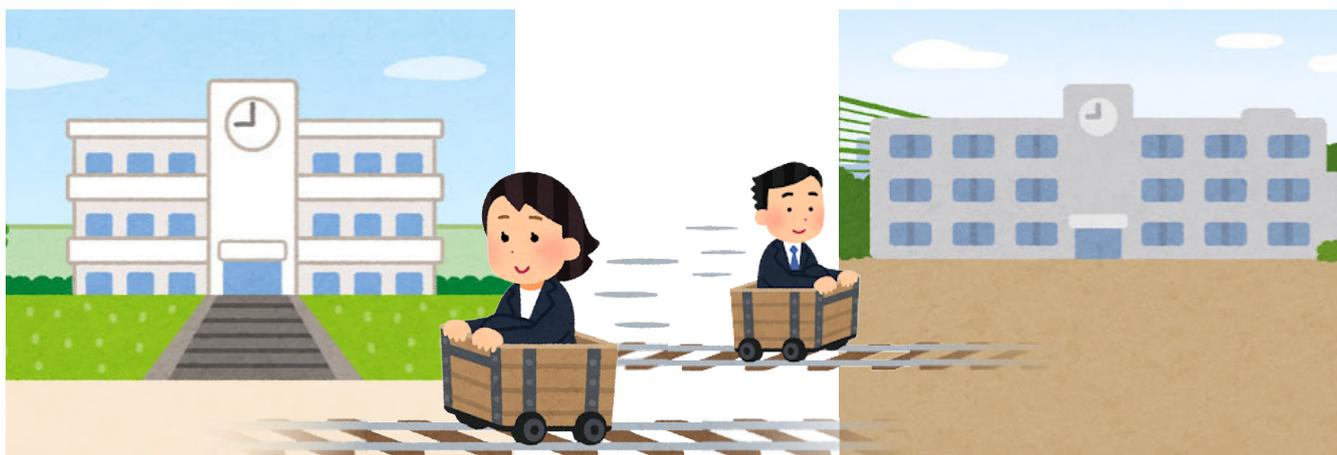
for students and asked to take or even be in photographs at this time. Usually there is a period of time after the homeroom class where students, teachers and parents may gather for various photographs. When the graduating students leave, especially at junior high schools, they are usually mobbed by their juniors – especially those who were in the same clubs as them – and given flowers, small gifts and sendoffs. Sometimes, male students may be asked for the top buttons from their uniforms by crushes and admirers as mementos. Sadly, all this merriment may very well be curtailed by COVID restrictions and will probably vary by school.



Lunch on graduation day is usually a fancy bento box so ensure, ahead of time, that you are included in any bento-ordering plans. You may also be given various snacks and sweets that will have been given to the school as presents from parents, VIPs and even previous staff.



STAFF TRANSFERS



The Japanese academic and financial year ends in March and starts in April. This is the time when companies, municipalities (including the Board of Education) and schools will schedule staff rearrangements, promotions, and retirements etc. Many of these arrangements are steeped in secrecy and the sudden change can be quite jolting for ALTs, especially those in their first year.

Unlike some other countries, Japanese school staff do not stay permanently at the same school. Although there are always exceptions, I've found that school staff usually stay at a school for 3-5 years before being transferred to another. As most of the permanent teachers work for the Miyagi prefectural board of education, this can sometimes mean that they will transfer to posts outside of your City to other towns and cities around the prefecture. This is especially true for younger staff as they often don't have spouses and children for whom moving house and changing jobs etc. would be difficult. They do, of course, have some input into the process and will have had discussions about these arrangements with school management etc., but these will be kept very secret.

Sometime in early March, you may notice something called, ^{ないないじ}内々示 on your school schedule / staff room blackboard. This is a provisional notification to staff about what and where their assignment from April are likely to be. Teachers will dress formally, be quite nervous, and will be called, one-by-one, into the the school principal's office. As ALTs do not change school assignments at this time, you will (most probably) not be called (although it has happened before). It is important to note that, at this point, everything is considered top secret and the staff will not yet tell others if they are being transferred or not.

At a later date, another announcement - ^{ないじ}内示 - will be scheduled. In this meeting, the school principal will formally announce to staff exactly what their final assignments are and where they will be posted for the new academic year. About an hour later on the same day, there will be a special staff meeting - ^{こうないはっぴょう}校内発表 - held where the names and new assignments of staff transferring out of and into the school will be announced to the whole staff. It's usually all done quite quickly and you may or may not be given a printed out list of the transfers at this time, so it might be confusing as to exactly who is transferring away or not. Usually, following the announcement, staff members will approach those staff who are transferring and wish them well. You are most welcome to do so, too. A good basic Japanese phrase to use is, 「^{せわ}お世話になりました」 ("Thank you for your kind assistance" / "I've been in your care") which is commonly used when parting from colleagues.



Some senior staff, who are ending their careers, may be retiring. Sometimes, younger staff will resign for other reasons like marriage plans or if their spouse is being transferred from their job etc. Others may be being promoted to higher positions which is usually done hand-in-hand with a transfer to a new workplace. An exception to this is a promotion of a teacher to the post of head teacher which is often done internally at the same school, with them taking a more managerial role with a much reduced class schedule.



It is important to stress here that this announcement is internal to your school (although often word does unofficially spill to other schools) and you are expected to keep things quiet, too. After about a week (March 25th) following this internal announcement, all the school and public worker transfers for the entire prefecture will be formally announced to the public in the newspapers. Once this has been done you are free to talk about it with anyone. If you are interested in the transfers from other schools (your visit elementary schools, for example) you can do so by consulting the newspaper announcement but, as a multi-page spread with tiny text, this may be quite difficult. The format usually only shows transfers as [FROM] → [TO] and uses names in kanji so its quite complicated to find out which teachers are being transferred to your visit schools. I'd recommend you ask a teacher to help you.



The reason for this being a stressful time for first-year ALTs is mainly due to the secrecy I mentioned above. Staff who may have been helping you or that you may have grown close to (especially your JTE) may suddenly be transferred away. In addition, there is not very much time between the announcement and their departure and they'll be busy with packing things up etc. ALTs can feel blindsided by the abruptness and may feel betrayed or disappointed that they were "kept in the dark" but this is just how things are done here. There is nothing personal in the secrecy so please don't let it affect your relationship with any transferring staff.

I'll point out, here, that this is also the case with the Board of Education. BOE staff are public workers and may be transferred internally around the department or even to another department or building completely. Many of the upper-management at schools have spent a year or two working at the BOE before being promoted to their school positions – you may find that your new principle or deputy principal may be a familiar face from the BOE!

FAREWELL CEREMONIES, PARTIES AND PRESENTS



There will be a farewell ceremony for the leaving staff – ^{りにんしき}離任式 – both transfers and retirements. Usually this is done in the school gym with the whole school in attendance. This usually includes the students who have just graduated who come back especially for the occasion. Large bouquets of flowers are given and many tearful speeches are given by those who are leaving. Remaining staff and students usually give those departing a big sendoff with students often giving them small gifts and letters of thanks. However, COVID precautions will likely downplay these celebrations considerably. Please check with your school for details about what is and is not happening.

Especially in smaller schools and towns, immediately following the farewell ceremony the departing teachers may then be taken by the deputy principal on a “farewell tour” where they visit feeder schools (in the case of junior high schools) or the town junior high school (in the case of elementary schools) and possibly other places like local city offices or to see local community leaders briefly to say their farewells. If you are a junior high school ALT sitting in your staff room, this may well be the last time you see some of your visit elementary school teachers when they come around but they will probably not have a chance to talk so just a small bow to them will be appreciated. At larger schools or towns this tour may not happen for logistical reasons.

Before COVID, this big staff shakeup would also include a farewell party, usually an upscale event at a hotel or restaurant where the departing staff would be given a big sendoff. This would usually include the giving of flowers, tearful speeches from departing staff as well as from remaining staff, especially junior staff whose mentors may be moving on and would usually be followed by afterparties at bars or karaoke venues. Especially for retiring staff, an envelope containing a money gift may also be given. This is usually from the staff association so don't worry if you haven't been asked to contribute. Unfortunately, these are unlikely to happen but your school may well have a small event or bento lunch at the school to say farewell. Please check with your school for details.

Departing teachers will likely give small gifts to staff. This is usually considerably downplayed so don't be surprised if a teacher you've never spoken to sidles up to you and quietly gives you a small wrapped present or if you open your desk to find a gift inside with not much to identify who it's from. These gifts are often something small like handkerchiefs, socks or stationery and there's no expectation for you to give a gift in return. Of course, if there is someone departing that you have been particularly close to, you're more than welcome to give them a small gift, but I'd recommend you give it to them quietly and privately.



In their final days, departing staff will often bring snacks, cakes or drinks for the whole staff so you will likely find a lot of things on your desk. Finding out who they are from and giving a small head bow and saying 「ありがとうございます」 for general gifts and 「ごちそうさまです」 for edible things will be appreciated.

On their final day, when all of their things have been packed and they have finished with all their preparations, departing staff will usually give a brief farewell and leave. They will often try to do so quietly but usually all the staff currently in the staff room will accompany them to the entrance hall and send them off with much bowing. Be aware that, sometimes, departing staff will leave a day or two earlier than expected – especially if they are moving house to a different town or city – so keep an eye on the ^{ねんきゅう}年休 list so you don't accidentally miss out on saying goodbye to someone you'd been close/friendly with.

THE BIG CLEANUP AND NEW STAFF ROOM LAYOUT

Once all of the end of year ceremonies have been completed and there are no students at the school, the big cleanup will begin. This is often done straight after the farewell ceremony – ^{りにんしき}離任式 – but may be different at your school. In order to start the new year properly, the staff room will be thoroughly cleaned. Desks will be moved, floors will be swept and vacuumed, and bookshelves will be emptied and cleaned. Old papers, outdated files and textbooks will be shredded or thrown away. Floors around the school, including the staff room, will probably be waxed so be careful not to step over any barriers that may be set up for this purpose.



Obviously, this will result in a lot of dust and dirt being kicked up, so make sure you have appropriate clothing so you don't get your smart clothes dirty – especially if it happens after the farewell ceremony and you're wearing nice clothes. Similarly to the preparation for the graduation ceremony, I recommend using the white cotton gloves – ^{ぐんて}軍手 – when moving desks as they may have sharp edges (metal desks), splinters exposed (wooden desks) or have greasy or dirty areas.



Once the staff room is spick and span, the desks will be arranged in the order that will have been decided for the new academic year. You will probably get given (or at least shown) the new desk map. Your desk may well change to a different location. Depending on the situation, you may need to move your things to a different desk or even move your desk itself. In any case, now is the perfect time for you to clean and rearrange your desk, getting rid of any old documents and other assorted junk that will probably have piled up over the year.



If you're at junior high school, you may well be surprised to see staff putting up barriers at the door, putting up signs warning students to not enter and even closing curtains or otherwise covering the windows of the staff room.



I'm not sure if this is done at elementary schools or not. They do so as the new assignment of teachers – especially the new homeroom teacher assignment – is considered top secret! If students were to see where certain teachers are now sitting, they may be able to deduce who the homeroom teachers will be, so everything is hidden from view. This may seem a bit much and overly secretive to you, but it's traditional and is taken quite seriously by staff so don't spoil things (and potentially working relationships with staff) by giving any information to students.



Additionally, you may be given a document detailing all the club activities and the coaches for the different sports teams. This, too, is considered top secret so don't tell any students.

NEW STAFF ARRIVAL AND OPENING CEREMONY (始業式)



On April 1st, the new staff will arrive. It varies by school, but usually they will arrive mid-morning at a designated time, assemble in the parking area and then “arrive” at the school as a group. Usually, the whole school will be outside the entrance hall to welcome them. If your school has a brass band, they may play the school song and the head of the student body may make a short welcome speech. COVID restrictions may limit this ceremony. They will then briefly go to the principals office. The rest of the staff will gather in the staff room after which the new staff will be introduced one-by-one by the principal or deputy principal. They will probably each give a short self-introduction. Then the existing staff will introduce themselves one-by-one. All that is really needed is to give your name, say 「よろしく^{おねが}お願いします」 and bow.

After that they will go to their desks and start to move in. They may also be taken on a tour of the school by the deputy-principal. They will be quite busy, at first, as they settle in so wait for an appropriate time to chat with any of them. They, especially junior teachers in their first year, may seem a bit “stiff” and proper but this is mainly as they will be on their best behaviour, wanting to make a good impression on their new co-workers. They will usually relax over the next few days.

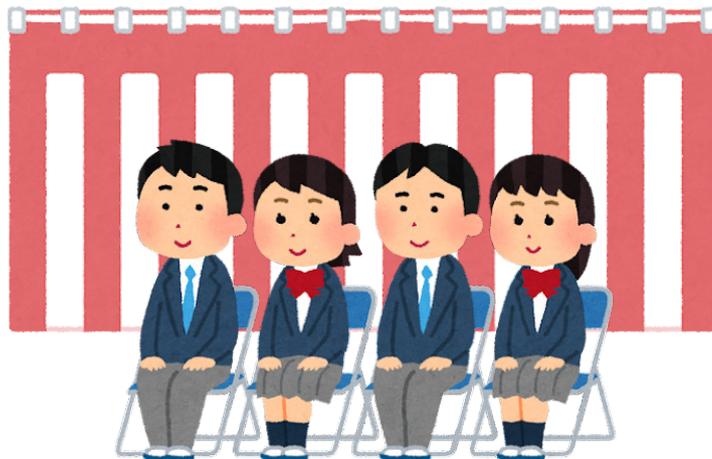


In the short time between now and the entrance ceremony, the teachers will be quite busy preparing for the new school year. They will be decorating classrooms, preparing materials and doing paperwork, especially the first-grade homeroom teachers. You may be asked (or you can volunteer) to help with moving chairs and desks around to classrooms, carrying textbooks or even helping with collating the school “Teachers’ Manual”. This is a good way to help integrate yourself into the staff as something more than just “the ALT”.



A few days later, on the first day of the first semester, they will have the opening ceremony - 始業式 - with all of the students, excluding the new first years. The new teachers will be introduced and will give short self-introductory speeches following which they will join the rest of the staff. Only at this point in time, will they announce the homeroom teachers, head teachers of each grade, and the club coaches to the students. Once the ceremony is finished, everyone will prepare for the entrance ceremony.

ENTRANCE CEREMONY にゅうがくしき (入学式)



Like the graduation ceremony this is very formal and important. Usually the principle of the junior high school in the town will be a VIP at the elementary school's entrance ceremony (the deputy-principle, too, if there are multiple feeder schools) so the elementary school ceremony is usually in the morning and the junior high school ceremony in the afternoon. Before COVID, the junior high school ALT was usually formally invited to attend as a VIP at the elementary school ceremony but this has largely been done away with due to COVID restrictions causing the VIP group size to be kept at a minimum.

Parents and VIPs will be present so make sure to look your best (formal suit). As before, you may have a role to play but probably you will just need to sit with the rest of the staff for most of the ceremony. I won't go into too much detail about the ceremony itself, but it will involve lots of speeches and bowing. Just follow the other staff's lead.

Usually, at the end of the ceremony there will be a time for the entire staff to line up in front of everyone and be introduced by the deputy-principle one-by-one. There is usually a list with the order set out in it. Ask your teacher ahead of time to show you but the ALT is usually right down near the end somewhere. When your name is called you just need to step forward, bow and say 「よろしくおねがお願いします」 – just follow the other staff's lead.

After the ceremony there will usually be a formal group photograph with the whole staff taken by a professional photographer so make sure you're around and they don't have to look for you and that you're still looking your best. This will usually be followed by a fancy bento lunch so make sure you're on the bento-buying list.

