



What's up, OITA!

Bringing the latest from Oita, Japan to people around the globe!

Oita Prefecture Booth At APU Global Family Day!



On December 16, 2023, the APU Alumni Association held "Global Family Day." The event is meant to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the founding of the association. 640 alumni and students from 65 different countries gathered at the event. This is the second time the event has been held, the first being for the Alumni Association's 10th anniversary in 2014.

Oita Prefecture also participated in the event, providing information about job hunting, changing jobs, and returning to Oita for jobs to any interested parties at their booth. Mejiron got in on the action as well, showing off Oita to event-goers.

What is the APU Alumni Association?

The APU Alumni Association was founded in 2003 and includes members from all over the world, including graduates, exchange students, and persons with credits at the school, but who left early. The aim of the association is to maintain and build bonds between alumni. There are chapters both in and outside of Japan that hold events such as workshops and tournaments to strengthen the connection between APU graduates.

What's Up in Oita? 国際交流員だより

◆ The True Meaning of Christmas...

American CIR Austin Vaughn



...is what exactly? Lots of movies and songs talk about how it's "about spending time with family" or "a day for giving without expecting to receive." Personally, I believe the true meaning of Christmas depends on the person, but like many others, I feel that spending time with family and loved ones is the most important part of Christmas. However, depending on the country, how you spend that time is different. Last year, I was able to go home to America and spend a traditional American Christmas with my family—watch my brother open presents from under the Christmas tree, eat Christmas ham, etc. But this year, I needed to stay behind in Oita, so instead I had a more Japanese Christmas—going to a Christmas party with my friends and eating a cake with the person most important to me. But at the same time, I was able to video call my family and enjoy a Merry American Christmas with them.



News from Bungotakada

豊後高田市からのお知らせ

豊後高田市
ホームページ



New Collaborative Tourist Destination **Matama Kaigan** **Koikana♥Sunset Terrace**

Matama Kaigan is a coast in Usuno, Bungo-Takada that gives a beautiful view of one of "Japan's Top 100 Sunsets." As the low tide coincides with the setting sun, the sun's light is reflected in the shallow pools of the tidal flats in a striped pattern, leaving a surreal image.

And now, Matama Kaigan has a new collaborative feature, the "Matama Kaigan Koikana♥Sunset Terrace."

At the "Sunset Terrace" are a restaurant and observation deck, allowing visitors to enjoy the beautiful view of the coast to their heart's content.

○Showa no Machi and Bungo-Takada Tourism Official Website
(Sunset Terrace)
(<https://www.city.bungotakada.oita.jp/site/showanomachi/15302.html>)



A Real "Theme Park" **Showa no Machi** **Bungo-Takada**



"Showa no Machi" is brings back the bustle the Showa 30s (1955-1964) to the present day, while also serving dual-duty as a normal shopping district. Every store either shows off the treasures of the era or sells top-quality products, which leads to many tourists and consumers touring the streets of the town.

One popular attraction is Showa no Machi's bonnet bus. A 1957 bonnet bus brings you on a mini, 15-minute tour through the shopping district and along the Katsura River. It operates mostly on the weekends, and there are many repeat riders, in no small part thanks to the guide's fun tidbits about the town. Showa no Machi isn't just for the nostalgic, but also for newer generations to experience the charm of an era that they never knew.

○Showa no Machi and Bungo-Takada Tourism Official Website
(6 Minute Read★Why Not Walk the Roads of Showa no Machi?)
(<https://www.city.bungotakada.oita.jp/site/showanomachi/1426.html>)



I was happy to hear...
She was sad to hear...

Find Mejiron!

ALT Interview Alex Norton

Austin Vaughn

Introduction

Hello Alex, thank you for your time today. To start off, could you give us a brief self-introduction?

Sure. My name is Alexander Norton. I usually go by Alex. I am a JET Program ALT (Assistant Language Teacher) at Oita Maizuru High School. And also, I started working since September of last year at Rougakko, which is the deaf school in Oita. I've been in Oita for about two years. I'm from Virginia, U.S.A. I am 30 years old. I enjoy sports, watching or listening to Japanese media, and I like to study Japanese.

What brings you to Japan?

I started learning Japanese in 2017. At first, I was just learning the language for fun. But slowly as I was learning and interacting with other students and Japanese exchange students at my college, and the Japanese professor, I started realizing that I really do enjoy learning this language. And with that, I started to fall in love with the country itself, learning about its history and its culture. So, that kind of gave me the drive to want to pursue a life in Japan. And when I found out about this program that lets you go to Japan and work as an ALT, an assistant language teacher, I saw that as a great opportunity for me to not only start my life in Japan, but also make a living and find my place.

What was your reaction when you first figured out that you were going to come to Japan?

It was quite funny, actually. I got the notification that I was going to Japan on April 1st, which, as you know, is April Fool's Day. So, naturally, I saw this message and was in disbelief. And I was like, wait, is this true? Are you sure? But realizing this is an official document, I was very excited. I immediately went to tell my parents. They were very excited. And I started immediately thinking, what am I going to do when I get to Japan? What's the first thing I'm going to do? I'd already started planning my life at that moment.

How are you enjoying life here?

I would say life here in Japan is really nice. I'm able to live comfortably here. And not have to worry much about any issues. I've met some really good people here, fellow ALTs, Japanese people that I've become friends with. I'm living a very happy life every day. I know I'm not going to have a very stressful day knowing that I have people to support me.

Is there anything from America that you miss?

The American food, for sure. It's what reminds me of home, like barbecue or hamburgers. I honestly do miss my family's cooking the most. My mom makes the best lasagna and recently I went back home to visit and that was one of the things she made for me and it was very delicious. And I would say also I do miss my family and friends back home too. I am able to call them in video chats every weekend, but it's not quite the same as being in the same room and talking with each other.

That was your first time back home in quite a while, right?

Yes. It had been two years since I had last been in America.

When you went back to America, did things feel "different"?

Oh, for sure. I have adjusted to life in Japan over these past two years. So, when I was first going back home, I kind of felt out of place. I'm used to the Japanese lifestyle very much. So, when I have like a dynamic change in culture and how people present themselves, it seemed almost like culture shock in my own country. So, it was very odd at first, but I've given it a few days and I was able to adjust back to my old roots.

Now that you're back, is there anything that you find difficult about living in Japan?

The language barrier is very noticeable. I have studied Japanese for maybe six years by now, but the textbook doesn't help me with a lot of the smaller, day-to-day, colloquial language. Lots of different areas in Japan speak different dialects, and Oita is not any different. So, I will have a certain script in my head of knowing what to say when people respond. But when people go off that script, then I start stumbling. But I feel like I hear something new every day, and that just gives me more motivation to want to try and understand the language more.



Has learning through immersion been fun for you, or do you find it frustrating sometimes?

I would say a little bit of both. It is fun when I hear a new word or something and I ask, oh, what does that mean? And so they give me the explanation. So now I have this new word I can use. It is also fun to, on my own time, do my studying. And if I learn something new and when I'm outside or going somewhere and I hear that word or see that word, then I can recognize it immediately. So I feel like I can advance in that way. But it is also frustrating, too, because maybe a very simple conversation that I should know how to respond to, maybe I struggle with. I know all this information in Japanese. But when I go to speak, I struggle with what to say or I stumble. I forget some words and it maybe just comes off like I'm a little nervous because I don't want to make mistakes. But that's really just a part of language and learning is to make mistakes. But I do feel a little frustrated when I do make those simple mistakes.

I think it's the same for English for a lot of people.

Yeah, and I tell my students here to try to use English as much as possible even if you're using the wrong English. Because then you know what is correct and what isn't correct. If you stay quiet the entire time, then you're never going to learn the difference. Learn from failure.

Teaching

How do you enjoy teaching English here?

It's very fun. Here at Maizuru, the students are very smart. They're dedicated to their studies. So it's easy to teach them. They are constantly asking questions. The teachers as well, they're very...

***Bell Rings* How do you like the bell? It's straight out of anime, right?**

I mean, I was humming it the first few weeks. (laughs)

So yeah, the students are very open to learn and very sweet. The teachers, I feel like are also the same. They're very cooperative. They're very friendly. I only speak to the English teachers in English. But I mainly use Japanese with the other teachers. And like I said, sometimes I may not say the correct Japanese, but that won't stop us from having a good conversation. We could talk about anything and they help and make it easier for me to understand what they're saying.



Did you ever see yourself as an English teacher?

Oh, heavens no. I did not think I would do any form of teaching in my life when I was younger. But, you know, as life goes on, it finds you new paths and new routes to take. And I think this path of being an assistance language teacher in Japan is just one of the paths I can take in life. So it's a great opportunity for me to not only learn what it means to be a teacher, but also what it means to be a teacher in Japan. How to live in Japan. And that branches off into many other paths.

So, what does a typical day look like as an English teacher?

I have different classes I go to, between the first year students and second year students and a few of the third year classes as well. I normally have maybe between 15 or 20 classes a week. I don't plan all of my lessons. I do some of them. But I will go to my classes, greet the students with the main teacher, the JTE (Japanese Teacher of English), and we will conduct the lesson and maybe have some kind of form of activity with the students so they can bolster their English more. Also, in the afternoon, twice a week, we have the English club. And there we do different activities involving English. Writing activities, listening activities, English games, anything that would give them an extra edge in their English.

So when it comes to the students, do you have any funny stories or interesting students?

There are quite a few students where when I first meet them, they're very shy. They may say hello and that's it. But as time goes on and they become more comfortable with English and see me more often, they get more comfortable. So now we're able to have improved conversations. They can tell me some weird things for sure. But I just enjoy the conversations because I can see that they are improving so much from last time I saw them. I'm trying to think of any funny or interesting moments with them...

Any weird things that they've said to you that you're willing to speak about?

Oh, on the kencho newsletter? Absolutely not. No, just I have heard some, you know, off the wall comments that made me laugh because I imagine they saw it somewhere on the Internet and they thought this would be funny to say. I can't so much dive into what those are.

Right, high schoolers are high schoolers no matter where they are.

Absolutely. They learn, you know, interesting or inappropriate vocabulary in a different language and they want to use it as much as possible. I'm no different. I was in Spanish when I was young, and I wanted to learn some funny things to say in Spanish.



They are high school students, but Maizuru specifically is a Super Science High School.

Does that have any effect on your English lessons compared to a normal high school teacher?

So, because this is a super science high school, we do have a select few classes that are very advanced in what they can offer. Math and science in those classes are very important. There are a few times where those students will come to me outside of class and they will have a science project poster that is completely written in English and they will ask me to help them write it or edit out any mistakes. I'm not an advanced level in science. So when I see these new words, I have to kind of teach myself all the science that they're putting on the sheet. But yeah, those classes, the students are very smart and I can see that in their work, in their speaking. They tend to keep a focus on English in those classes as well, so their English is very good.

Have they had any really interesting projects that stuck out to you?

I think a lot of students focus on biology. I have heard that students do research on the monkeys from Takasaki Yama so they'll frequently do visits there to study the monkeys up there.

Interesting.
Right?

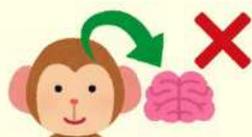
But no dissecting monkey brains?

No dissecting monkey brains. Not yet. They have to be able to take one.

I'm sure they won't miss one.
Yeah, they won't miss one.

But maybe they will. They try to avenge their fallen comrade.
You took George from us.

You took George.
How dare you.



Jokes aside, do you learn a lot from the students here, then?

Oh, for sure. These students are smarter than me. I can't stress the fact that I think all of these students are going to excel greatly in the future. They are going to be the next top scientists or mathematicians, or at the top of whatever field they want. It wouldn't be surprising if I saw their names in catalogs or articles concerning some kind of field study because they are very dedicated to what they do.

Going back to English, do you feel like you have a good rapport with your fellow English teachers when you teach?

I would say yes. The JTEs are all amazing at speaking English. They're amazing at teaching. So it's really easy for me to fit in with them because they're able to not only support the students, but support me as well. We help each other. If the teacher is looking for a good word to describe this action, I can help support that. Or if I'm having difficulty trying to say something then they can help support me by expressing it in a different way. I can always go

into class with a smile because I know it's going to be great.

Good to hear classes are going great! So, what do you usually do with your free time you have at school when you're not doing classes?

So it's a bit of a mix. I will think about and plan some lessons to use in the future with some teachers. If I'm not planning then I'm trying to study Japanese. I always try to keep myself occupied during my free time. If I'm not doing anything then I feel like something isn't getting done. I have also gone down to the library and I will look at some Japanese books to test my ability.

Does it have a good selection?

Yeah they've got a wide variety. They actually have some books that I have read in English that are in Japanese, so it was interesting to see Harry Potter or Sherlock Holmes in Japanese. I have been trying to read this one manga in there, Uchuu Kyodai, do you know it?

Oh yeah, Space Brothers.

They have the entire selection of that series so I've been slowly reading it. All in Japanese, no furigana. And because this is a very space heavy manga there's lots of words I don't understand. So, I'm constantly researching. It's very interesting to try and understand what's happening with the story.



Culture

I've also heard of ALTs that participate in the sports and clubs. Are there any club activities other than the English club that you participate in or are interested in?

There are a few that I have visited. The unique Japanese clubs like calligraphy, kendo, or tea ceremony, those are very Japanese-esque and something you may not see back in the States. I remember my first few weeks when I was in Japan I was interested in the calligraphy club, so I went. Everyone was very welcoming. They were shocked to see the ALT was in their club. And they actually invited me to write some calligraphy. I wrote on the paper "Oita" because it was very simple kanji. I had never used calligraphy ink or brushes before, so it was new to me. I didn't want to make a big mistake. But everyone was really supportive. I actually kept the calligraphy painting. I still have it in my home. It just says "Oita" but it's very nice to have.

Speaking of extracurriculars. Maizuru is famous for its rugby. I believe you have students from outside of Japan on the team as well?

This school year we got two students from Fiji. They will be here for the entire time until they are third year students. When I first met these students, they seemed a little shy. Which is understandable. They are living in a new country. They didn't know the language very much. But now when I see them, their Japanese has improved quite a lot. They are enjoying their day to day lives. They're very interesting students. Always laughing, making jokes. They are fitting in very well with their other students around them. I believe they are in some way encouraging the other students to improve their English more than I can, on a normal level.

That's nice. As friends instead of as a teacher like you would.

In a way they are better teachers for their class than I could be. They are constantly in that environment. Always trying to make me laugh. I enjoy seeing them every day and seeing what they can do in the rugby. Our rugby team is very strong. We will have a game with Tomei High School which is our big rival school. We will see how we can compete against them.

Here's hoping that you win. Wait, can I say that as a prefectural employee?

Keep it neutral.

Then may the best man win. Are there any other international students here at Maizuru?

Since I've been here, besides the two Fijian students, we've had four other students here throughout the year. In the beginning of the school year we had two students, one from Hungary and one from Italy. They were very good students. They are on the same level of the Fijian students where they didn't know a lot of Japanese coming in. They had to work their way through Japanese. They were very nice students. The classes they were in, the students did their best to improve their English so they could better be friends with them. They left school right before summer vacation but they left very happy, very excited. They said they wanted to come back again or they were inviting other students to visit them in their home country. It's very great to see everyone co-existing despite the differences in culture. This semester we had an American student and a student from Mongolia. They're the same where maybe their Japanese isn't the best but that won't stop them or the other students to converse in some way. Those students have also improved their English quite a lot being around the foreign exchange students.

The opposite way, do you have any of the students from Maizuru going to international schools like in America or Italy?

We have a few students that did leave to go to America or other parts of the world. We had a student who was gone for nine months in Finland. Before he left, I was practicing English with him during lunch time because he wanted to improve it before he left. When he came back, I could see a huge difference in his English. He was speaking very well. He always has very interesting things to say about his time there or just about anything. I was very happy to see

him come back with that level of dedication to English.

I'm glad that students here are able to have that sort of cultural exchange. As a teacher here, do you ever teach about American culture?

I will tell students when holidays are approaching in America such as the 4th of July or Halloween, Christmas, I'll tell them a little bit about what we do for those holidays. If they don't know about them, they're usually quite shocked, like, "Oh my gosh, you do this?" Or they seem to be very interested about what we do. Like, 4th of July we shoot fireworks and eat lots of hamburgers and hot dogs and celebrate independence. Christmas we have a bigger presence on family and festivities, whereas in Japan it's not as family focused. Some holidays they may not even know, like St. Patrick's Day or Groundhog Day. They seem to take a liking to knowing about different holidays in America that are not shared here.

Following on from that, have you learned anything about Oita from your students?

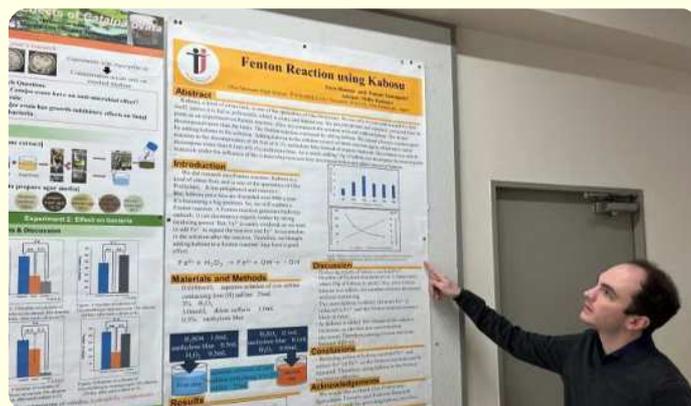
I have learned many things. For one thing, I've learned about the dialect. They've taught me a few different ways to say something in Japanese. For instance, you're familiar with the term *naosu*, which in normal Japanese means to fix. But in Oita, or maybe just this part of Kyushu, it has a second meaning, which is to clear your desk or to put things away. So when I was in class and heard *naoshite kudasai*, I was like, "Please fix?" I saw all the students taking things off their desk and I was like, "What is this? What are you doing?" And they had to tell me that *naosu* is also used for clearing your desk. But I've heard a lot of other dialect things like *yaken* (because), or *shinken*.

Yeah, shinken. Like "really."

Yeah, that. Or like *shaashii*?

"Loud," right?

Yeah, so I've learned quite a lot of words like that. But also, I have worked with some computer classes where students are doing projects based on Oita. So from that alone, I can see all the different projects that they're working on and learn about Beppu or learn about Bungo Oono. Or just a bunch of other cities and what they do. I didn't know onsen were very famous in Oita until I got here. And they would tell me, "Oh yeah, I go to the onsen every day!" or "every week." I'm like, "That's a lot!" I've learned quite a few things like kabosu, onsen, fugu, many things.



Have you been to onsen in Oita?

I've only been one time because in America, onsen are not very famous or at least, they're not as prevalent in my area. So when I learned that there's lots of onsen here, I wanted to try it out once. And it was a good experience. I felt very relaxed in there. But it was very interesting or strange for me to get into the "process" of going to an onsen. Without divulging too many details.

It is a little strange considering doing *that* is not very...American.

It's not an American thing for me to do that. But I wanted to try to experience the culture as much as possible, so I'll do that.

So, you're getting very into the culture here in Japan.

Yeah, I try to take opportunities as often as I can. So, there's a summer festival where they have a dance, called Funai Pachin. And for the past two years, I have participated in those. It's always a very fun event. I learned the dance that they do every year. It's fun to get into this culture, even though I'm not Japanese, and do the dance along the big street in front of Oita Station and see many people cheering you on. It's a very great experience

Future

By having all of these cultural experiences and doing all of these new things, do you think Japan's changed you as a person?

I would say so. I didn't really go out as much back in America. I was very much a homebody. But since I've come to Japan, I see myself going out more and experiencing things like going to onsen, dancing in front of thousands of people, exploring my home, going to different prefectures and just trying to see different opportunities or cultural differences that I would see back home. Nothing will be the same as it was the day before, because I'm always constantly learning. I'm always constantly finding new things. Every day is a new journey.



Speaking of new journeys, what do you think you'll do after this? Because your time here, unfortunately, is limited as an ALT.

What?

Yeah, I know, right? It's insane. You can't stay at Maizuru forever.

Yeah, I will, unfortunately, finish this position within the next year or two. So after my time with Maizuru and as an ALT, I'm not quite sure what I want to do yet. I could go back home and find a position that maybe involves some

Japanese, but I do enjoy living in Japan quite a lot, so I think I might continue my life in Japan a bit more, finding new opportunities in maybe different prefectures, maybe try to get into something that will improve my Japanese more, or to help people improve their English. I do have an interesting thought of doing some translating or interpretation, but in order for me to do that, I need to continue to make efforts in my Japanese.

I wish you the best of luck with your efforts in Japanese. But you've got a good base and you're studying very hard, so I think you've got a future in Japan if you want a future in Japan.

Thank you, I appreciate that. I do plan on taking the Japanese Language Proficiency Test, the JLPT, in July, and I'm hoping to go for the N4 level, but if I give myself enough time to practice and study, I could push for N3, but as of now, I just want to see if I can clear the N4 level with what I can do now.

You work at a deaf school as well, is there anything interesting about working with deaf students?

So, at the deaf school, there are maybe... 20 students? From first year of elementary, all the way to high school. The students that I teach, they can hear a little bit. Everyone wears earpieces, and I'm given a microphone that is broadcasting to them, so they can hear me a little bit better. When I go to these lessons, I am usually just contributing to the lessons that the JTE already has planned, and I usually speak English and the JTE will translate that into sign language, *shuwa*. They translate the English letters so the students know how to pronounce or enunciate those. There are a few students that can't speak any Japanese or English, but they can understand it and do their best to voice them.

So do they learn any American sign language as well, or is it just Japanese sign language?

Just Japanese sign language. And with that, because I've been working at the school, I am also learning Japanese sign language. The students and teachers are very supportive and they're teaching me new words through sign language. I've now been able to do my own name, and I can say a few different words based on just what the teachers or students have taught me. So even though I am the English teacher teaching them, they're also teaching me too.

Do the students have any clubs or extracurricular activities that they participate in?

Actually, I did recently watch the students participate in futsal recently. The high school and junior high school students came together to play futsal with somebody who used to play with the national futsal team in Japan. He came with some others to help teach the students how to play, and I got to watch that. Actually, I got to play a little bit too, because they needed one more person for team versus team, and they asked me to come join.



Are there any things at the deaf school are particularly special compared to Maizuru?

When I first originally went to this school, I was expecting a lot of difficulty just because the students are deaf, so they may not be using English at all. But when I went to the school, I was surprised to see the students are just as lively as the students at Maizuru. Nothing is really different. They all are enjoying the school life, having fun. They're very interested in talking to me or to other teachers. I would say one thing that's different is that the students all eat together. Like, by school, elementary, junior high, high school. And so I'm eating together with the students at different times. And it's kind of like you get to know them more that way. We get to interact more on a personal level. So I'll ask, "Oh, how was your day today?" or, "Oh, that looks really good. What are you eating?" It's very nice to see them a bit more tightly knit.

So at Maizuru, I'm guessing they just eat in their own classrooms.

Yes, for the most part, every student just goes back to their classroom and eats. There have been a few times where I will participate with some students in some form of activity where we all eat together. Which I do want to encourage that more is maybe have once a week or once a month or twice a month or something. Where the students who want to participate in an English lunch all come together and try to speak English with each other at the lunch table. But because of COVID, I really couldn't implement that until maybe later when everything is safer.

Speaking of, are there any other projects or things that you would like to do with the students at either your deaf school or at Maizuru?

So, I'm currently working with my English club students to make an English board. And we've made a few English boards already based on each season. But I would like to see this become more than just an English club only activity and for anyone to come enjoy. If you have anything interesting that you want to share in English or you put different holidays within a season, or food, or whatever events. They could be from around the world—they could be about Japan. Other than that, I'm trying to find new and interesting ways to teach English to get students to be more motivated and to use English outside the class as much as possible. Like, if students see me, they say hello or good afternoon, or ask questions, but for the most part, English stays in the classroom and I'd like to see it more outside

Do you see any of your students leaving Japan and do work in a different country that mainly uses English?

So I have spoken to a lot of students about what their goals are for their future. Like, what do you want to do in the future? Where do you want to go? And quite a few of them say that they do want to work outside of Japan. I read their homework as well. If they're talking about their future goals, a lot of them are like, "I want to live in America." "I want to live in Korea" or

"Germany," "Italy." And a lot of them always answer after that, "I have to improve my English." So they show that need for English or their dedication to it on paper. And hopefully that translates to them actively doing that. But I have talked to a few students who are graduating and asking like, what do you want to do? They say, "Oh, I want to work in international relations because English is very important in our world. We need to learn English to better communicate with everyone." That was very interesting for some students to say. They know the level of importance English is around the world. So in order to compete with other countries, they need to understand and speak English. Because Japanese is only in Japan. English is all over the world.

Exactly. You and your students seem to have a lot of opportunities from here on out. Not just with English, but with a bunch of other subjects as well. I'm looking forward to both what you do and what the students here do.

Thank you so much.

It's been a pleasure talking with you. And I hope that everything goes well as you continue as an English teacher here and as well as whatever else happens in your future.

I appreciate that.

Thank you so much for your time.

Thank you.



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