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A Survey of ALTs and JTEs

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ABSTRACT

The goal of this paper was to examine the relationship between ALTs and their Japanese counterparts. With the JET program, the Japanese government set out to transform English education in Japan. It attempted to increase the English speaking ability of the Japanese population. However, its ambitious plan needed to overcome several obstacles when bringing native English speakers into Japanese classrooms, including cultural barriers, language barriers and differing goals between the foreign and Japanese teachers.

1. Introduction

A survey by the author of foreign assistant language teachers (ALTs) and Japanese English teachers who team teach in Tokushima schools shows that the relationships between these teachers is generally positive. This is impressive when one considers the inherent obstacles to effective team teaching, and the Japanese Exchange Teacher (JET) program in general, that exist. The JET program was a risky and ambitious plan to transform English education in Japan by bringing young native English speakers into Japanese schools to promote communicative English and global understanding. When one considers the language and cultural barriers, the reluctance of many teachers to team teach, and the differences in teaching philosophy between the ALTs and their Japanese counterparts, the positive relationships that have developed between these groups can be seen as a major accomplishment. Over the 25-year history of the JET program, a great number of inherent problems have been overcome, and if our survey is any indication, the system appears to be functioning quite well now.

The Survey

A self-developed questionnaire was written to study the relationship between foreign ALTs and their Japanese counterparts in elementary schools (ESTs), junior high schools (JHTs) and high school teachers (HSTs). The questions were divided into six themes: language, communication, relationship, teaching context, educational effects and working conditions. The questionnaire was first written in English and then translated into Japanese for the benefit of the Japanese teachers. The translation was checked by a JHT and a member of the board of education. The survey used a four-point Lickert scale, which puts all answers into either a positive or negative direction. The educational effects section was bi-nominal with a neutral slot marked “slightly”. The questionnaire was sent out to all 52 ALTs in Tokushima, to 102 elementary school teachers who teach English, to 38 JHT and to 45 HSTs. The questionnaires were sent out in November 2011 and responses were received in December 2011. Responses were received from 50 ALTs, 100 elementary school teachers, 35 junior high school teachers and 40 high school teachers. After data-cleansing, the responses from 42 ALTs, 98 ESTs, 38 JHTs and 40 HSTs were used for the study. To confirm the results, one ALT and one JHT who

participated in the study provided us with their opinions on our conclusions as a member-check for the credibility of our results.

Background

In the early 1980s, the government of Japan saw what it believed to be a flaw in its renowned education system: young Japanese were studying English for years, but very few were becoming fluent speakers. The government devised a highly ambitious solution: It would bring native English speakers from around the world into classrooms to teach young Japanese to speak English.

The JET program started in 1987 as a concerted effort by local-level authorities, the internal affairs ministry and the education ministry to enhance mutual understanding between Japanese and foreign nationals. Its primary role is to internationalize regional communities by helping improve English education and promote international exchanges. (Japan Times. “JET Alumni: Advocates for Japan” Ayako, Miye. 9. 4. 2013)

The Japanese Exchange Teacher (JET) program began in 1987 with several goals. The program sought to bring foreign university graduates to Japanese junior and senior high schools to assist in the teaching of English. It was also meant to increase understanding of Japan around the world by bringing young people to Japan for short periods who would then return to their home countries with positive impressions of Japan. Finally, at a time when Japan’s economic power within the world was being viewed with alarm, it was meant to pacify foreign countries by providing employment in Japan for foreign youth.

The Ministry of Education (MEXT) believed that

bringing young native English speakers to Japanese classrooms would make Japanese classrooms more communicative. Fear among Japanese Teachers of English (JTEs) that foreign English teachers would threaten their jobs meant that the foreign English teachers would come only in the roles of assistants.

(McConnell, 2000, p 45) ALTs were brought over on one-year contracts that were extendable to three. Most were placed in town or city offices and visited schools on a rotating basis.

Inherent Problems

Few of the university graduates that have come to Japan since the inception of the JET program have been trained teachers. This was a matter of policy on the part of the government. As McConnell explains, “[The government] felt that experienced teachers were too set in their own teaching strategies to adapt effectively to Japanese schools.”

(McConnell, 2000, p 76) However, bringing untrained teachers to teach English has at times led to a confused sense of purpose. As Davis points out: “The central problem is that rather than promoting internationalization and mutual understanding through language education, the JET program is providing a simple low stress job to university graduates who want to be tourists in Japan for a year or two.” (Davis, 2004, p 94) Of course, many of the thousands of JET participants over the past quarter century have been motivated as teachers, but the contractual structure of the system and the lack of professional training has meant that teaching in Japan could not be seen as a career and that the professional goals of the participants were limited as a result.

This does not mean that ALTs do not want to be treated as professionals. One point of contention between the ALTs and their hosts is the notion of

being treated as guests rather than as teachers. Many of the foreign participants do treat their stay in Japan as more than a working holiday, seeing an opportunity to bring communicative English to classrooms where lessons typically begin and end with grammatical explanations in Japanese. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that, although some ALTs are based in schools, most are based at town or city offices and visit multiple schools. The amount of time an ALT spends in a particular school can be minimal. This can increase the feeling among ALTs that they are only guests, and can sometimes even lead some to believe that they are merely entertainers. As Rosati writes, "JTEs may see the AET as essentially entertainers, providing at best little more than light relief for the over-worked students, but also wasting valuable time in so doing." (Rosati, 2005. p 111) For ALTs who do take the work seriously, there is an issue of pride involved.

McConnell writes that treating ALTs as guests is a conscious means of avoiding conflict between Japanese teachers and foreigners who have differing views of education. "The high level of sympathy among Japanese teachers for the general slogan of "internationalization" and the cultural tendency to treat foreigners as guests have been crucial in partially neutralizing the disruptive potential of the educational imports." (McConnell, 2000. p 227) Foreigners often have different experiences concerning education, and thus different ideas about how education should proceed. By treating ALTs only as guests, Japanese teachers can minimize the potential conflicts.

Language barriers were and continue to be an issue. Most ALTs, upon arriving in Japan, speak little Japanese. Because few Japanese are fluent in English, the possibility of independence and integra-

tion within Japan are limited. As Otani and Van Loh explain, "Thus it is clear that the vast majority of ALTs cannot communicate effectively in Japanese, which leaves them largely dependent upon an English speaking Japanese." (Otani and Van Loh, 1998. p 24) The language barrier, combined with the short length of the ALT's stay in Japan, often means that they do not become well integrated in the school culture or society at large. The ALT's effectiveness within the classroom can suffer because of this lack of integration. "The integration of ALTs into the collegial atmosphere of a Japanese high school is limited. If one cannot successfully integrate, the chances for success rapidly decrease." (Davis, 2004. p 94) The language barrier creates problems in everything from understanding a school's class schedule to perceiving what is expected of them.

Because most ALTs cannot speak Japanese, it is difficult for them to function in Japan in even the most basic sense, which means that they require an English speaking Japanese to look after them. Beyond the cultural and pedagogical differences between ALTs and JTEs, this means that the arrival of an ALT at a school creates a considerable amount of extra work for Japanese teachers, which can negatively affect the team teaching relationship.

Beyond the burden that ALTs create for Japanese schools is the differences between the teaching goals of the foreign and Japanese teachers. The conflict between the ALTs' official job description and the reality of Japanese classrooms is at the heart of this problem. The Ministry of Education, in an effort to increase the English speaking ability of the Japanese population, instructs ALTs in their training seminars that their goal is to increase communicative English. However, entrance exams for high schools and universities do not have speaking

components, which means that speaking practice is often seen as a waste of time by teachers trying to prepare students for exams that will have a tremendous effect on their futures. As Davis writes, “In ALT training orientations and professional development, active learning and a strictly communicative approach are explicitly stressed. Conversely, the dominant ideology of Japanese high school teachers stresses the importance of preparing students for entrance exams.” (Davis, 2004, p 97) Aihara makes the same point. “[JTEs] will have exams constantly in mind, will be working from textbooks which often militate against communicative teaching, particularly oral skills, will be aware that employers and universities are rarely interested in spoken English ability, and will want to avoid being criticized by parents, Principals and supervisors for devoting time to something which is not tested.”

(Aihara, 2007, p 112) In a sense, ALTs are caught in the middle between the stated goals of MEXT and the realities of the Japanese educational system. Aihara writes that this can lead to resentment of the ALT by Japanese teachers. “The JTE may resent any methodological suggestions from a young, ignorant foreigner, regarding them as unsuitable for the Japanese classroom, and also, perhaps, as incompatible with the aims of Japanese education.” (Aihara, 2007, p 111)

The introduction of ALTs into Japanese education system has meant the adoption of team teaching. However, by nature, teachers are autonomous actors, creating lesson plans, teaching lessons and grading tests by themselves. As Davis writes, “As a starting point, teachers are unaccustomed to the idea of sharing a classroom.” (Davis, 2004, p 96) Team teaching among teachers of the same culture and teaching philosophy is a difficult proposition, but combined with the cultural barriers and differing goals, effective team teaching between ALTs

and JTEs is truly a formidable task.

Effective team teaching requires careful planning, a coordinated effort during the lesson, discussion of the lesson when it is finished, and finally, a good relationship between the two teachers. As Davis writes, “Team teaching can only be successful if two conditions exist: the team teaching pair is comfortable teaching together and issues related to pedagogy and methodology have been thoroughly discussed.” (Davis, 2004, p 96). The discussion of teaching plans can often be hindered by the inability of the Japanese English teacher to communicate well in English. Many Japanese teachers are embarrassed by their poor English communication skills, fear a loss of face, and avoid the communication necessary to make team teaching work. In some cases, the JTE either gives the class over completely to the ALT or teaches classes as normal but uses the ALT only to provide native pronunciation of English, in effect as a human tape recorder.

Cultural differences between ALTs and JTEs can also hinder the effectiveness of team teaching. Methods of discussing problems differ between Westerners, who value debate, and Japanese, who tend to defer to authority. McConnell also explains that Japanese teachers find criticizing foreign assistants difficult. “Truly cooperating on a lesson plan and its implementation requires a willingness to engage in a give-and-take of mutual criticism, and most JTLs found it difficult to convey what they really thought about the ALTs’ ideas under these circumstances— particularly in light of the widespread tendency to refrain from criticizing foreigners.” (McConnell, 2000, p 211)

Cultural barriers, language barriers and differing goals created significant obstacles to the success of the JET program. However, our survey generally

shows that the relationships between ALTs and their Japanese counterparts are positive. The survey also shows that the JET program has had a positive effect on English education in general and the communicative aspects of English in particular. The situation is not perfect, of course, and the survey showed that there are several areas where improvement is necessary.

Survey

Question L1 dealt with language use in the classroom; it asked ALTs how much they used Japanese in the classroom, but more importantly, how much Japanese teachers used English. Ninety-two percent of ALTs used little or no Japanese in class, which is not surprising as few ALTs are fluent in Japanese. In addition, their job is to speak English. (In a different survey (Luxton, 2013) it was found that native English speaking university English teachers, who have generally spent a much longer time in Japan and are therefore more fluent in Japanese, tend to use far more Japanese in class.) Over half of the Japanese elementary school teachers, who are not trained English teachers, responded that they infrequently use English in class. However, 64 percent of junior high school teachers and 53 percent of high school teachers responded that they mostly use English in class. While these numbers may appear low, it must be kept in mind that grammatical explanations in Japanese are the norm for many teachers. It is possible that the JET program has had a positive influence on the communicativeness of English lessons in Japan.

The positive influence of the JET program was also revealed by question L2, which asked ALTs and Japanese teachers how often they converse with each other in English. Eighty-two percent of

ALTs said mostly or always. The elementary school teachers frequently conversed in Japanese with their assistants, but 85 percent of junior high school teachers and 100 percent of high school teachers always spoke English with their assistants. Many Japanese people are reluctant to actually use English communicatively, but as this survey question shows, most are speaking exclusively in English with their assistants, which is a very positive development. Because few ALTs are conversant in Japanese, the JTE/ALT relationship in effect forces the Japanese teachers to speak English.

Question L3 asked both ALTs and JTEs how much they challenge students to use English outside of the classroom, and here too, the results were quite positive. Seventy-five percent of ALTs responded always or mostly, and 75 percent of elementary school teachers, 82 percent of junior high school teachers and 84 percent of high school teachers responded that they often or always challenge their students to speak English outside of class. Again, we believe, this shows that the JET program has had a positive effect on English use in Japanese schools in that it is helping to fulfill the Ministry of Education's goal that schools become more communicative in English.

Question L5 asked ALTs whether their Japanese counterpart's English had improved during their tenure and asked the Japanese teachers whether their own English had improved as a result of working with ALTs. Although over half of ALTs wrote that there was only marginal improvement, the Japanese teachers were far more positive. Sixty-nine percent of elementary school teachers, 94 percent of junior high school teachers, and 91 percent of high school teachers reported that their English ability had improved somewhat or a lot. Japanese English teachers, prior to the JET program, had

few opportunities to converse with native English speakers. Many have strong foundations in English grammar, but having ALTs to communicate with means that they are actually putting their knowledge to use and improving their English.

The next set of questions dealt with the relationship between Japanese teachers and their assistants. As discussed earlier, this is a critical issue, as some Japanese teachers resent having to share their classrooms and others believe that the communicative teaching that ALTs provide is poor use of time. As well, supporting a non-Japanese speaking ALT in their daily lives requires considerable effort on the part of Japanese teachers. However, the responses to our survey were overwhelmingly positive. The vast majority of all parties concerned answered that the relationship was either good or very good. As a good relationship is the foundation of effective team teaching, these results are very encouraging.

Class preparation is also a key element of team teaching. Our survey results pertaining to this showed somewhat mixed results. Nearly half of the ALT respondents reported that they never or seldom prepare for classes with their counterparts. The results for elementary school teachers was even worse, with 75 percent reporting never or seldom. On the other hand, junior high school and high school teachers mostly reported that they usually or always do. The disparity between the ALT responses and the junior high and high school teachers can perhaps be explained by differing opinions of what constitutes “planning”. While Japanese teachers may be satisfied with a brief discussion on the way to the classroom, it would appear that the ALTs desire a more thorough effort. That the elementary school teachers reported little planning can be explained, though not excused, by

the fact that ALTs make only short visits to elementary schools which perhaps does not leave enough time for extensive coordination. At least from the perspective of ALTs, a greater amount of planning would be beneficial.

Question R3 dealt with a somewhat contentious issue. It asked the ALTs if they felt they were treated as guests. Many ALTs have complained that they are not taken seriously, that their opinions are disregarded. Some resent that they are not treated as professionals and partners in the classroom. The inherent problem is that, in effect, they are guests; ALTs are short-term, essentially untrained as teachers, and, being new to Japan and generally unable to speak Japanese, in need of a great deal of support. However, our survey indicates that this is no longer the issue that it once may have been. The responses showed that 84 percent of ALTs never or seldom felt treated like guests, and that the majority of elementary, junior high and high school teachers believed that they seldom or never treated ALTs as guests. Our survey showed that ALTs and Japanese English teachers have somehow achieved an understanding in which ALTs no longer feel that they are treated as guests. This bodes well for team teaching and shows that a once serious threat to the success of the system has largely been overcome.

Question C1 asked ALTs whether they are told about the schedule at their schools. This question was a way of judging how much support from Japanese teachers and staff the ALTs receive at their schools. In the worst case scenario, ALTs have arrived at schools without any Japanese staff taking direct responsibility for them or acting as a mentor. In some cases, this is because nobody on the staff felt comfortable enough speaking English or because nobody was willing to take on the extra bur-

den, which as explained before, can be substantial. There was a disparity between the answers provided by the ALTs and the Japanese teachers. While understanding the school schedule is obviously essential to working effectively at a school, only 22 percent of ALTs reported that they were always shown the schedule. One would expect this to be closer to 100 percent. Forty-one percent of ALTs reported that they were seldom or never shown the schedule. The disparity lies in the fact that 88 percent of junior high school teachers and 100 percent of high school teachers reported that they usually or always inform their ALTs about the schedule. There is clearly a misunderstanding between ALTs and Japanese teachers about what constitutes a proper school briefing, a problem that may be exacerbated by language barriers.

The next question, C2, asked about the frequency of attending social events together. After-work socializing is a crucial part of the bonding process in Japan and has an effect on the ability of teachers to team teach together effectively. There was some disparity in the responses to this question as well. Sixty-five percent of ALTs reported that they seldom or never socialized with their Japanese counterparts. Seventy-one percent of elementary school teachers reported seldom or never as well. It is understandable that elementary school teachers do not socialize with ALTs that often because ALTs are not based in elementary schools and meet ALTs infrequently. The junior high school teachers' answers were divided almost evenly between never, sometimes, often and frequently. It was the high school teachers' answers that showed a disparity. Seventy percent of high school teachers reported that they often or frequently socialized with their ALT counterparts. It is possible that ALTs and high school teachers have a different conception of what constitutes socializing. Socializing

after hours is an important factor in teachers getting to know each other on a personal level, and if we take the ALTs' responses correct, it shows that more effort is required.

Questions C4 and C5 asked about the frequency of pre-and post-lesson meetings. Clearly, proper coordination between teachers is crucial for effective team teaching. In regard to pre-class meetings, 49 percent of ALTs reported that they seldom or never had them. Only 31 percent of ALTs reported that they always had pre-class meetings. About half of elementary school teachers reported that they seldom or never had pre-class meetings and about half reported that they frequently or always had pre-class meetings. Ninety-seven percent of junior high school teachers and 98 percent of high school teachers reported that they frequently or always had pre-class meetings. As for post-lesson meetings, 74 percent of ALTs reported that they seldom or never take place. The answers from elementary school teachers reflected about the same numbers. Fifty-eight percent of junior high school teachers said that they infrequently have post-lesson meetings, while 81 percent of high school teachers reported that they frequently or always do. The disparity in the numbers may reflect a difference in opinion as to what can be considered a meeting. What is clear, however, is that ALTs feel that the present situation could use improvement. Japanese teachers are often extremely busy not only with classes but with other student support activities as well. Making time to plan lessons with ALTs can be difficult. However, proper coordination between team teaching partners is essential and our survey has shown that it is an area that needs some improvement.

The next question, TC1, asked for an overall assessment of how well classes are proceeding. The

answers indicated that ALTs are less satisfied overall than their Japanese counterparts. Unlike the other questions in the survey, which have four-part answers, this question was bi-nominal, asking for either a positive or negative assessment. Only 54 percent of ALTs responded positively, while 69 percent of elementary school teachers, 79 percent of junior high school teachers and 72 percent of high school teachers responded positively. The responses may show that ALTs come to Japan with high expectations that are sometimes unmet, while Japanese teachers, with much longer experience, have come to understand that progress occurs slowly. The goal of the JET program is, essentially, to get Japanese students to speak English. ALTs, as shown in this question, are somewhat disappointed in the progress that the students are making.

Question TC4 asked teachers whether ALTs are asked to lead classes. While the goal is team teaching, it is not unheard of for Japanese teachers to simply hand over the class to their foreign counterpart and ask him or her to teach the lesson. In some cases, Japanese teachers are embarrassed by their poor spoken English and avoid the issue by asking ALTs to take over. However, our survey showed that this is not taking place as much as it once may have. Seventy-one percent of ALTs reported that they are seldom or never asked to do so, while only 14 percent said that they were always asked to do so. These numbers show that a considerable amount of team teaching is occurring.

The next set of questions dealt with whether or not the ALT had a positive effect on the teaching environment with the school. The question asked the participants to answer “yes”, “no” or “slightly”. The most encouraging aspect of the responses was that very few people answered “no” to any of the questions. On the other hand, for all five questions,

“slightly” was by far the most frequent answer. Question ET 1 asked the respondents whether they thought their team teaching had improved over time. Forty-six percent of ALTs answered “yes”, while only 26 percent of elementary school teachers, 33 percent of junior high school teachers and 14 percent of high school teachers also answered “yes”. In all cases the number of teachers who answered “no” was in the low single digits. That the ALTs had the most positive responses may be due to the fact that, for the most part, they have no prior experience, and the improvement may therefore be part of a natural learning curve. The Japanese teachers, in contrast, have for the most part been working with ALTs for many years and therefore see less short-term improvement. Perhaps the most disappointing response was for question EF2, which asked if the ALTs had a positive effect on the students’ attitude toward English. Only 8 percent of ALTs responded with a “yes”. The numbers were slightly better for the Japanese teachers with 7 percent of elementary school teachers, 21 percent of junior high school teachers, and 19 percent of high school teachers answering “yes.” Here again, very few answered negatively, but one would have hoped, as one of the main goals of the JET program is attitudinal, that ALTs in particular would have found attitudes towards English improving. The numbers reveal a sense of disappointment, we believe, on the part of the ALTs. It may also show that ALTs arrive in Japan with unrealistic goals, believing that they will have a great effect on student attitudes. Roughly a quarter of all respondents answered with a “yes” to question EF3, which asked whether they thought students could communicate more effectively in English as a result of the ALTs’ presence. Here again, one might have hoped for an even more positive response, but then again, very few people answered negatively. Overall, this section of questions revealed that all participants believe

that the ALTs are somewhat effective.

Question WC1 asked whether ALTs helped their Japanese counterparts in marking tests and homework. Although 90 percent of elementary school teachers answered “no”, this is to be expected as ALTs make only short visits to elementary schools. Thirty-six percent of junior high school teachers also answered “no”. However, the majority of ALTs, junior high school teachers and high school teachers answered that ALTs frequently help mark homework. Our survey shows that cooperation among foreign and Japanese teachers in marking, while not universal, is widespread.

The most positive answers in the entire survey related to question WC3, which asked the participants whether they enjoyed team teaching. Ninety-six percent of ALTs, 84 percent of elementary school teachers, 85 percent of junior high school teachers and 92 percent of high school teachers answered that they mostly or always enjoyed team teaching. This is obviously a very good sign. It shows that ALTs and their Japanese partners enjoy working together very much. Clearly, a cooperative, friendly environment is crucial to effective team teaching, and this appears to exist in Tokushima.

Question WC4 asked the participants if having an ALT in the classroom was a burden for the Japanese teacher. As mentioned earlier, having responsibility for an inexperienced foreign assistant can create extra work. Additionally, teachers are often highly independent in their classrooms, unused to other adults in the room vying for attention. Our survey results showed that ALTs believed themselves to be a burden more than the Japanese teachers did. While the majority of ALTs believed they were never or sometimes a burden, 41 percent answered that they were often a burden. However,

a large majority of the Japanese teachers felt that ALTs were never or only sometimes a burden. The large number of ALTs who believed that they were often a burden is somewhat troubling, but may simply reflect a lack of self-confidence, of ALTs not realizing their own usefulness. That so few Japanese teachers believed that ALTs were a burden is perhaps the more important factor, as they are the ones who are potentially burdened. The survey showed that this is really not a serious issue.

Conclusion

With the JET program, the Japanese government set out to transform English education in Japan. It attempted to increase the English speaking ability of the Japanese population. However, its ambitious plan needed to overcome several obstacles when bringing native English speakers into Japanese classrooms, including cultural barriers, language barriers and differing goals between the foreign and Japanese teachers. The goal of this paper was to examine the relationship between ALTs and their Japanese counterparts. The survey uncovered some problems, such as a need for more thorough class planning (at least according to the ALTs). However, it also showed that the relationships between ALTs and Japanese teachers are healthy and that both sides believe that team teaching is progressing well. On the other hand, the survey also showed that many believe Japanese students are still not as fluent in English conversation as they should be. This paper did not study the conversational ability of Japanese students, but it is possible that ALTs and their Japanese counterparts may be expressing overly optimistic expectations and that student conversational ability most likely has improved over the years.

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