

# The State of the JET Programme, Team Teaching and English Education in Japan.

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## 1. Introduction

The Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme began modestly in 1987 and has grown consistently. Today it is one of the largest exchange programmes in the world. In July of 1994 there were 5567 participants in the roles of ALT or CIR. The vast majority of participants are Native English speakers working in public schools as ALTs. CIR participants work for local governments as 国際交流院. This paper will discuss some of the roles of Japanese Teachers of English (JTEs) and Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) which have been realized in the classroom. Challenges, successes and short comings of the programme will be discussed and several suggestions that have been echoed in research on the JET programme will be presented.

Several definitions should first be clarified. Native speaker teaching assistants on the JET programme have been referred to as Assistant English Teachers (AETs), (Wada and Cumminos, Eds. 1994) but they are increasingly referred to as Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) and this is the term used in this paper, except when quoting other sources. The term ALT is specific to the JET programme and is not applicable to situations in other countries, nor is the term used consistently in private Junior or Senior High Schools. Native English Speaking Teachers (NEST) is the more accurate and applicable term. Non-NEST or NNEST refers to teachers of English, whose native language is not English. Within this paper, the terms ALT and NEST are both used, depending on the context and the specific references being cited. Some generalizations should also be pointed out to provide context. Most JET Programme ALTs are hired directly in their home countries and are recent University graduates with no teacher training and little knowledge about the educa-

tion system in Japan or Japanese language (CLAIR, 2005 ; Gillis-Furutaka, 1994). Presumably this is due to the size of the programme and the difficulty in recruiting such as large number of qualified instructors.

## 2. Justification for team teaching

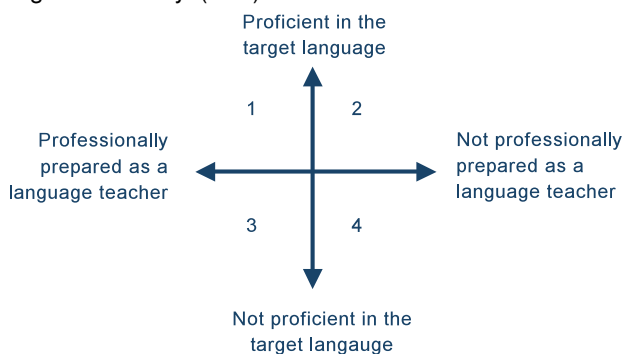
Bailey 2002, (cited in Murahata, 2004) suggests how the success of a teacher can be plotted graphically, illustrated in figure 1. We can assume that ALTs have high proficiency in English, as native speakers of the language, though they may know little about teaching or Japanese Education. JTEs on the other hand are qualified as teachers but their proficiency in the target language may pose a weakness in many cases. Where both an ALT and a JTE are present in class however, the two complement each other's strengths and weaknesses so that the teachers as a team, function high in the first quadrant. Considering the strengths and weaknesses of ALTs and JTEs, Gillis-Furutaka (1994) summarizes that the role of the ALT is to "engage actively in communication and interaction with Japanese students" (p.13). About the role of JTE's, she states :

JTEs are expected to explain facts about English language and answer learners' questions. However they are also expected to communicate and interact actively with their students, just like AETs. In fact, their active participation in communicative activities is far more important than their analysis and explanation of English language. (p.13).

These roles are very broad and specifically how teachers fulfill these roles is still a matter of discussion and sometimes, controversy. Herein, I will de-

scribe what the literature says about roles for ALTs and JTEs and then we'll see what common patterns emerge.

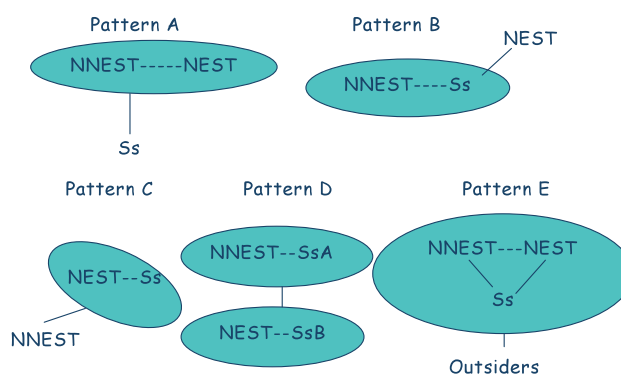
Figure 1 : Bailey (2002)



### 3. More Specific Roles for ALTs and JTEs in the classroom

Tajino and Tajino (2000) showed enthusiasm for team teaching. Reviewing 10 years of practice in Japan, they discussed the various roles that NESTs and nonNESTs could play. Consistent with modern views, they suggest teachers should de-centralize the classroom, proposing the term “team learning” rather than “teach teaching”. They propose several patterns indicated in figure 1. Pattern A represents a traditional role where the class is teacher fronted and the teachers pass knowledge to the students. In pattern B however, the students play an active role teaching the native speaker. We see an alliance between the NNEST (JTE) and the students such that the Japanese teacher may help or facilitate the students, in teaching the JTE. The students may for example, wish to teach the NEST something about Japanese culture, or perhaps more interestingly, about their favourite TV programme, etc. Pattern C has the NEST working with the students, perhaps to teach the NEST something, or to translate what the NNEST is saying in Japanese. In pattern D half of the students work with the NEST and the other half work with the NNEST. Finally in pattern E, all of the participants work together toward one common goal. This pattern might be practical for group projects such as correspondence with a sister school in an English speaking country or introducing students’ hometown in English. As Tajino and Tajino suggest, these patterns are not exhaustive.

Figure 2: Tajino and Tajino (2001)



Among the limited amount of literature dealing with team teaching and the JET Programme, *Studies in Team Teaching* (2004, Wada and Cumino, Eds.), provokes constructive discussion, presenting a variety of sometimes contradicting views as to what role ALTs and JTEs should assume. Many suggest that the ALTs role should be restricted to stimulating communicative competencies such as speaking and listening. (Browne, C. and Evans, B. 1994 ; Garant, M. 1994). Browne, C. and Evans, B. (1994) cast the ALT in the narrow role of cultural informant to stimulate conversation. Their argument is based on linguistic research into communicative competence and assumes that students have little opportunity to communicate with JTEs. Others however, suggest that ALTs can and should be able to assist the JTE with reading and grammar classes. Law (1994) for example discusses the impact, or *washback* effect of entrance exams on team teaching and although reluctant to criticize the exams, he states :

If the role of the AET in team teaching is conceived simply as that of improving listening and speaking skills, the above may merely serve to confirm that college entrance exams are an insurmountable obstacle to reform. I wish to argue here that this represents a historically and theoretically inappropriate view of team teaching, and instead advocate an active role for the AET in encouraging fluency reading within an integrated curriculum.

There is a clear indication that the role of the ALT is influenced by the washback effect of University entrance exams. Yukawa suggests that given the priority that reading competence takes, ALTs should

be able to assist with reading classes. She found however, that when reading passages became progressively more difficult, the JTE found it difficult to incorporate ALTs into the lesson, resorting to Japanese translation to ensure that students understood the content of reading passages. She also suggests that in exam track high schools, JTEs prefer not bring ALTs into the classroom because time spent on 'chatting' is not efficient for preparing for exams.

Leaving the issue of entrance exams aside for the moment, a pattern emerges regarding the role of ALTs and JTEs, namely that there is no clear consensus. Given their relative strengths one would expect that JTEs would focus on grammar and ALTs on communication but the roles have not been clearly defined. Though the ideas put forth are sometimes conflicting, the prevailing pattern is that in the absence of concrete guidelines about how to teach, every case is different. For teachers looking for answers to the questions; "What should I do with my ALT?" this might not seem to be a satisfactory answer but is not necessarily a bad situation. JTEs and ALTs all have different styles and in most cases they have been able to adapt and settle into a variety of roles, sometimes through compromise, depending on the circumstances. Student needs and external constraints such as entrance exams are other variables which influence classroom practice. Therefore it is probably not appropriate for 'Monkasho' to define ideal roles and then tell teachers that *this is the way they should all teach*. Research concurs that the JET programme and team teaching has been relatively successful in the absence of more concrete guidelines, or perhaps *due to* the absence of guidelines. (Gillis-Furutaka, 1994 ; Hogan, 2004 ; Smith, 1994 ;)

#### 4. Challenges for the JET Programme

Given the vast scale of the programme and the nature of the participants, one would expect numerous problems to arise and countless anecdotes about cultural and professional clashes. Voci-Reed (1994) provides an accurate summary of stress factors which ALTs and JTEs have voiced, indicating that ALTs have experienced problems relating to :

1. uncertain or differing role expectations between school staff members and the ALT

2. poor communication
3. the ALT's limited sphere of influence, often including limited interpersonal relations.

As a former JET programme participant working at three different junior high schools from 1998 to 2001, the author can comment on these points drawing on personal recollection and journal entries. The first issue is certainly one of the salient aspects of the ALTs position. It was not a stress factor per se for the author in most cases, but it was certainly a challenge and a learning experience. Poor communication and limited interpersonal relations, however was frustrating at times. In many cases, particularly when ALTs work at more than one school, they tend to be treated as a special guest. While advantageous at times, consistently being treated as an outsider in one's place of work is certainly a stress factor.

Voci-Reed (1994) goes on to describe stress factors for JTEs :

1. Teachers are under constant pressure from external sources such as parents and other school staff to ensure successful performance on University Entrance Exams.
2. Cultural differences
3. Lack of support for creativity in class.

It is significant to note that two of these 'stress factors' are external to the relationship between ALTs and JTEs. Again we see the impact of entrance exams playing a role. Lack of support for creativity in the class refers not only to other aspects of the curriculum such as textbooks and material, but also to the culture of education and prevailing views about education in Japan held by parents, co-workers and other interested parties. That is not to shift the blame from the ALTs however. One might speculate that cultural differences between ALTs and JTEs are the prime stress factor for JTEs in some situations.

#### 5. Challenges for English Education in Japan

In 1989 the Ministry of Education introduced Oral Communication A (OCA) and Oral Communication B (OCB), in attempt to improve students' communicative competence. (Taguchi,2005). Taguchi (2005) however, cites a wealth of research that indicates that these courses have not produced their intended results : Brown and Wada, 1998 ; Gorsuch, 2000, 2001 ; LoCastro, 1996 ; Oka and Yoshida, 1997 ;

Pacek, 1996 ; Sato, 2002 ; Taguchi, 2002 ; and Wada, 2002. Taguchi (2005) in turn observed several OCA and OCB lessons and analyzed them using the Communicative Observation of Language Teaching observation scheme developed by Canal and Swain (1980). The results were not favourable. Among the most striking findings were that only 7% of teachers reported using English as an instructional medium ; that 50-90% of class time was devoted to language form, and that less than 15% of class time was used for speaking, with most speaking being choral repetition of dialogue and key words. Although teachers' limited English abilities play a role, Taguchi shows reluctance to place blame on teachers. She states :

This study revealed that teachers were in an awkward position, caught between the objectives of the national curriculum and the constraints that discourage active practice in the communicative approach. The strong constraints were largely external, coming from the educational system such as college entrance exams. (p.10).

## 6. Several suggestions for a way forward

### 6. 1 Improving teacher training

Gillis-Furutaka (1994) proposes several suggestions to improve the quality of ALTs. Primarily, ALTs should receive more teacher training. Echoed by CLAIR (2005) and consistent with the author's experience, pre-departure training of ALTs focuses heavily Japanese culture and adapting to life in Japan, with very little or no emphasis in language teaching. Gillis-Furutaka (1994) proposes that MEXT should teach ALTs about language teaching theory and methodology. Then, to capitalize on their increased investment, competent and trained ALTs should be permitted to stay longer than three years. Note that some ALTs are currently permitted to stay longer than three years but there is no systematic process in place at the moment and different prefectures seem to be pursuing different policies (CLAIR, 2005). It is also important to train JTEs. Gillis-Furutaka (1994) suggests that MEXT (formerly Monbusho) increase teacher training for JTEs in Japan within their first three years of teaching as well as sending more JTEs abroad to receive training. JTEs should also be encouraged to do classroom research

and to share their findings with other teachers. I would add that training JTE training should include SLA and Language Teaching theory and be consistent with the training that ALTs receive so as to minimize discrepancy in the classroom.

As has been well indicated, there is a tendency for Japanese teachers of English to focus on form and for NESTs to focus on conversation. As a result, Japanese English education becomes atomized to an extent, with different abilities receiving focus in isolation. While language competence appears to consist of different abilities or competencies (Backman, 1990 ; Canale and Swain, 1980), these abilities are interdependent and should develop in tandem. Language competence can also be viewed holistically, likened to the development of a bud into a flower (Corder, 1983). Therefore, it might not be appropriate or 'natural' to distinction between "Eikaiwa" classes, which tend to be taught by NESTs, and classes which address either form, or specific skills and are typically taught by Japanese teachers. Additionally, since the number of NESTs is limited in Japan, students may end up focusing almost entirely on form with little or no emphasis on output or meaningful communication in the language classroom. To correct this imbalance, *Eikaiwa* or "English conversation" should not be considered strictly the realm of Native English Speaking Teachers. NonNESTs should be able to provide communicative language lessons, with English as the main medium of communication in the classroom. To further challenge the traditional division of roles between NESTs and nonNESTs, NESTs in Japan should be able to address form as well as specific skills in the language classroom. The reality is that many NESTs in Japan are not adequately trained and can't speak Japanese but those who are capable, should not be confined to the role of an "eikaiwa" teacher or "ALT".

### 6. 2 Lessons from private schools.

It would also be appropriate for the public sector to examine practices in private institutions. Not bound by MEXT policies, public schools have pursued a wider range of avenues and perhaps been more pragmatic about English Education. Odette, Tuitama-Robers and Iwamoto (2003) for example report on the decision making process of how to use NESTs most effectively at a private high school in

Okayama prefecture. Rather than pairing a NEST with a nonNEST as team teachers, it was decided that they would teach a unified curriculum separately. That is, the class would receive lessons from NESTs and nonNESTs separately. This was deemed the most efficient way to use teachers. It is notable that the NESTs at this school were qualified teachers with Japanese Language ability. In public schools, where ALTs are less qualified, alternative approaches such as this might not be possible. This however, would only seem to strengthen the argument that ALTs should receive more training, and that qualified trained ALTs should be encouraged to stay beyond three years with higher status and influence than ‘Assistant Language Teacher’ affords.

Private ‘Conversation’ Schools also have explored different ways of team teaching, recruiting NESTs, and using NESTs and nonNESTs in the classroom effectively. Though schools such as GEOS and AEON are ultimately motivated by profit (as critics are quick to point out), as a former employee of GEOS from 1995 to 1997, I maintain that they have well developed recruiting procedures and communicative teaching methods. If one of the primary goals of Japanese education is “cultivating students’ basic and practical communication abilities” (MEXT, 2003), then one would expect the public sector to feel obliged to thoroughly investigate private sector approaches toward the same goal.

## 7. Evaluation and washback

Entrance exams and *washback* effect are not the focus of this paper, but in any serious discussion of Japanese English Education the topic of entrance exams is bound to arise again and again. *Washback* effect is the influence that tests have on pedagogy and other aspects of the curriculum and it has been well studied and documented in other context (Alderson and Hamp-Lyons, 1996 ; Hughes, 1989). In review of the literature herein, it becomes clear that the high stakes University entrance exams have a considerable impact on English teaching in Japanese schools. Above, suggestions about how to improve the JET programme and team teaching have been presented. However, if entrance exams are shown to be the main obstacle to improving education in Japan, then any discussion about how to improve the

quality of ALTs becomes futile. To the contrary, if ALTs are taught about Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) or Second Language Acquisition (SLA), this could even aggravate ALT stress factors, if this training contradicts what they see in the classroom. Again, the purpose of this paper is not to examine the *washback* effect of entrance exams, but to draw attention to issues related to the JET programme, team teaching and English Education in Japan. In the future however, an *earnest, objective* and *impartial* study of the University entrance exams and their *washback* effect should be carried out towards the goal of improving English Education in Japan.

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## Abstract

Team teaching in English classrooms in Japan has now been widely practiced for over a decade in public Junior and Senior High Schools. Native speakers of English are paired with Japanese teachers so that students gain exposure to authentic English from Native speakers, and professional instruction and guidance from Japanese teachers. Although team teaching has led to some difficulties, many reviews have been favourable and it would seem to support the goal of improving students' communicative competence. Herein, the practice of team teaching will be reviewed and situated within the broad context of English language education in Japan. Though we have seen positive results there would appear to be limitations arising from other aspects of the curriculum.