

# Assistant Language Teachers in Japanese Public Secondary Schools: Maximizing Effectiveness

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## Abstract

This paper will examine two areas that must be improved in order to increase the overall effectiveness of assistant language teachers at the senior high school level. An investigation into the social integration of assistant language teachers (ALTs) with specific attention to developing integrative strategies is explored. Team teaching pedagogy and difficulties surrounding the development of an effective method is also investigated. Through an examination of these two neglected areas, improved methods to utilize ALTs are suggested. If social integration and the science of teaching are thoroughly developed, students will benefit from fully integrated and effective ALTs.

公立高校におけるALTの状況について：効果的なALT活用法

## 概要

本稿では高等学校におけるALT活用の効率を上げるために必要とされる2つの分野について考察することを目的とする。1つは統合的なストラテジーを向上させることに特に焦点を当てたALTの地域社会との統合活動であり、もう1つは効果的なチーム・ティーチング教授法の開発に関わる問題点についてである。これらのあまり触れられてこなかった2つの分野の検証を通して、ALTを活用するための改善策を提唱する。地域社会との統合活動と教授法の研究が余すことなく開発されれば、学生はALT教員からより多くの恩恵を受けることができるであろう。

## Introduction

The Japanese Exchange Teaching program (JET) is a nationally funded program that employs native English speakers to teach English in the Japanese public education system. Approximately 90% of the 6100 JET program participants are classified as assistant language teachers (McConnell, 2000). In the past seventeen years, assistant language teachers have flooded Japanese public high schools in an attempt to improve communicative abilities and internationalize Japanese students. In my analysis, JET program participants will be henceforth referred to as ALTs. Japanese teachers of English will be referred to as JTEs. ALTs teach with JTEs using a team teaching methodology. Today, approximately 50% of students and teachers in public high schools have learned or taught in a team teaching environment (Gorsuch, 2000). At the Japanese senior high school level, ALTs must be utilized more effectively. As a former ALT, I have informally interviewed hundreds of ALTs from all over Japan. The one unifying

theme I encountered was low job expectations and a minimal workload, especially among senior high school ALTs. Unfortunately, there is limited academic literature that explicitly presents such an argument. However, many papers allude to the infrequency of ALT classroom visits and the difficulty gaining data regarding ALT team taught classes (Taguchi, 2002 & Murphy & Sasaki, 1998). This omission and lack of information supports the argument that ALTs are not correctly integrated and team teaching pedagogy is not sufficiently examined. In order for this to occur, changes to social integration of ALT's and team teaching pedagogy and methodology must be implemented. The national government invests significant resources into this program. These funds and human resources are a valuable commodity, which must be utilized. Educators at all levels must recognize the importance of these two areas and develop new ways to maximize the effectiveness of the ALTs within the team teaching model and as part of the larger school environment. If these integration and team teaching pedagogy issues are not sufficiently attended to, the effectiveness of team teaching and the overall effectiveness of ALTs will continually diminish.

### **Background information**

The JET program is nationally funded. However, ALTs are directly employed by prefectural and municipally based school boards. In the secondary school model, ALTs most often teach the first year oral communication course with JTEs using a team teaching approach (Taguchi, 2002). Team teaching involves two teachers, one JTE and one ALT. Ideally, the teaching pair works together to create a dynamic learning environment where students can improve their communicative abilities and gain insight into various cultures. Interestingly, there is not a set pattern or structure to team teaching. In recent years the model has changed slightly. According to Miyazato, "...team teaching has been ALT centered and JTEs have tended to take a more passive role as an 'interpreter' (2001)." The model and method varies based on the team teaching pair.

To fully appreciate the complexity of the ALT situation, one must consider the vast array of vested interests involved in the promotion of team teaching at the public secondary school level. At the national level, three ministries compete for the control of the program (Reesor, 2002). The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology, The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and The Ministry of Home Affairs each have a role in the development and implementation of the program (McConnell, 2002). At the prefectural level, bureaucrats are more than willing to accept the free human resources that ALTs represent (McConnell, 2002) The Prefectural Board of Education officials in turn assign fresh faced ALTs to local high schools. According to McConnell's (2002) analysis, the decision to request ALTs at local high school is made at the

prefectural level and further teachers often resent having ALTs in the school because it represents an extra stress and workload. On the arrival of a new ALT, English departments and teachers must endeavor to find a niche for their new colleague. Given the nature of the Japanese education system and the background of the ALT, this presents a significant challenge. It is difficult to integrate a new colleague, who in most cases, can speak very little Japanese and needs help opening a bank account and registering at the local city hall. Also, providing an orientation regarding the basic functions of the school is time consuming. By the time JTEs attend to curricular and pedagogical concerns, the ALT is overloaded with information and the JTE has spent an enormous amount of time teaching the ALT how to be functional. Therefore, team teaching and other important teaching related considerations are often ineffectively covered. To gain a greater understanding of the current situation, a brief historical examination of the JET program is important.

### **Overview of the JET Program**

The JET program was instituted in 1987 as a concession to the US government during the Japan US trade wars of the 1980's (McConnell, 2000). It was presented as a gift to the American delegation at a summit between Ronald Reagan and Yasuhiro Nakasone (McConnell, 2000). In 1987, 813 university graduates from the United States, the UK, Australia, and New Zealand came to Japan with the goal "...of fostering to foster international perspectives by promoting international exchange at local levels as well as intensifying foreign language education (McConnell, 2000)." Currently, the program is endowed and an annual budget of close to half a billion dollars (McConnell, 2000). The JET program recruits people from mainly English speaking countries and employs them as ALTs in the Japanese education system. There was little examination into the pedagogy and methodology of the team teaching model before its inception (McConnell, 2000). This fundamental omission has proven dire for the programs overall effectiveness in developing language proficiency of Japanese high school students. To grasp the complexities of the situation, we must investigate the underlying motives of the JET program.

### **Internationalization and the JET Program: A working holiday?**

Team teaching and the presence of ALTs in schools is a great advertisement for Japan's internationalization. Ressor (2002) asserts "...that over the past twenty years there has been an increasingly important movement surrounding the discourse of *kokusaika* (internationalization)." Japanese officials have stated "The JET program is the greatest initiative undertaken since World War II related to the field of human and cultural relations (McConnell, 2000)." 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. The author has come to this conclusion during two years as a JET program participant. Additionally, during informal interviews with dozens of JTEs, their perceptions were much the same. The general position of JTEs can be summed up as follows: ALTs serve a useful function, yet they are underutilized in an undemanding position. Career teachers recognize that ALTs are temporary and transient and therefore do not invest time or effort into developing their ALTs. This tepid response at the local level is detrimental to the overall effectiveness of foreign language teachers in Japan at all levels. ALTs often fail to fully integrate into the education system. Team teaching as a methodology is applied in a haphazard manner. Further, professional development opportunities are limited. The JET program has become, in the eyes of many ALTs and Japanese educators, a working holiday.

### **Powerful potential**

The Jet program is not a failure. Its longevity and magnitude are significant and worth commendation (Carless, 2004). Due to its longevity, the program name is internationally recognized. It is widely considered to be one of the best options for teaching English as a foreign language in Asia. McConnell consistently praises the Jet program. He notes that: "ALTs have been placed in nearly one half of the nations 16 000 plus public secondary schools and have visited every school on at least a semi regular basis (2002)." Many students enjoy the social aspect of interacting with ALTs outside of the classroom and often gain intrinsic motivation to study English through team taught classes (Murphy and Sasaki, 1998).

As Gorsuch (2001) noted: "The JET Program offers powerful potential for institutional change." This statement is important with regards to JTEs as emerging bilinguals. An overt function of the JET program is JTE professional development (Gorsuch, 2003). By having ALTs in the school environment, JTEs have changed intrinsically (Gorsuch, 2003). Their knowledge and use of English for communicative purposes is continually improving due to the presence of ALTs (Gorsuch, 2003). This trend will provide the impetus for change and reform in Japanese English language instruction (Gorsuch 2003).

### **Current difficulties**

Using the previous analysis as a backdrop, one can surmise that friction and barriers have developed. The lack of ALT social integration into the Japanese high school social structure has serious implications for the overall effectiveness of the ALT. The current integration patterns will be discussed within the framework of Japanese

group membership norms. A poor implementation of pedagogical standards and objectives regarding team teaching stymies any professional development for ALTs and JTEs. In reference to these problems, an application of the current literature regarding inductive learning communities and constructing meaning in learning environments is examined.

### **Learning communities**

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. In Japanese society a person is defined by their membership in specific groups (Benedict, 1946). According to Feiler, (1993) during his year teaching as an ALT in a Japanese middle school, he often felt as though he was "...waiting in the doorway to be invited into the club." Feiler's experience is not uncommon and this statement speaks volumes about Japanese society. However, this is a generalization, it is possible for a non Japanese person to be integrated into a Japanese group. However, it takes more time, effort, and consideration than the same process in other cultures. In Japan, the child who plays alone is a greater concern than the child who is overly aggressive (Benedict, 1946). Once a person is characterized as an outsider in Japanese society, it is difficult to transcend that label. An ALT who is seen as an outsider will have little social contact with the school *community*. One may be perceived as an outsider for a wide variety of reasons. This will minimize the potential for effective utilization of the ALT. But through proper integrative strategies, this issue can be resolved.

It is difficult to integrate oneself into the infinite number of complex social groupings that exist at a school. If one cannot integrate them even marginally, the chances for success in the team teaching context are minimal. In this way, team teaching is not limited to the relationship with one's team teaching partner. It extends to all members of the learning community: students, teachers, administration and the support staff. Therefore, the ALT must make a concerted effort to understand the power and social structures that exist within a school. Similarly, the JTE must attempt to bridge the cultural gap between the ALT and the rest of the school.

Japanese hosts have few expectations that an ALT will join the group (McConnell, 2000). Low expectations to become involved in the learning community will undermine effective job performance. It is possible for ALTs to get involved, but a conscious effort on both sides must occur. Certainly, many ALTs don't accept Japanese group membership norms. However, as any first year teacher in Japan can attest, putting in time and committing oneself to the group is the only way to achieve a good working relationship one's colleagues. Students are extremely perceptive and interested in the social relations of their teachers. If a member of the school group is implicitly labeled as

an outsider, students may also adapt this policy. Therefore, it is vital all members of the learning community do their utmost to accept differences and integrate new members into the larger school community. This will involve a shifting of attitudes for both ALTs and all members of the learning community.

### **Apprenticeship based integrative strategies**

An important change that must occur revolves around the ALT and their relationship with their Japanese teachers of English. The ALT needs a sponsor or master teacher to confer legitimacy of the ALT to the larger school community. A veteran English teacher or the ALT supervisor is ideal for this role. As Lave and Wenger (1999) noted "...this issue of conferring legitimacy is more important than providing teaching. This change could aid greatly in the integration of ALT's into the collegial atmosphere of the teachers office. Most ALTs do not have any experience teaching in the Japanese public education system prior to their inception. Further, approximately 90% of ALTs do not hold a degree in education (McConnell, 2000). Therefore, an apprenticeship program between ALTs and JTEs must be instituted. By apprenticeship, I am not advocating a intensive training program, but a less formal sponsorship that would be beneficial to both parties. Lave and Wenger (1999) discussed the importance of the apprenticeship model. They noted that "Master tailors must sponsor apprentices before the latter can have legitimate access to participation in the communities productive activities." In the same way, veteran English teachers must make a concerted effort to teach ALTs about the social organization of the school. In this way, ALTs could become informed members of the learning community. "Legitimate participation comes diffusely though membership in the family and community (Lave and Wenger, 1999)

### **Pedagogical and methodological barriers**

As a starting point, teachers are unaccustomed to the idea of sharing a classroom. Teaching is a personal profession (Benoit & Haugh, 2001). All aspects of your personality are in essence on stage. Teaching students and effectively interacting with your team teaching partner is a very difficult balancing act. As a result, the science of teaching becomes infinitely more challenging in a team teaching situation. 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. As Benoit and Haugh (2001) note: "Never take anything for granted, explicitly discuss everything." Therefore, the two areas of focus for this paper, integration and team teaching pedagogy, are directly responsible for success in the classroom. Moreover, "Dissociating learning from pedagogical intentions opens the possibility of mismatch or conflict among practitioners' viewpoints in situations where

learning is going on (Lave and Wenger, 1999).” The practitioners involved in this equation are the JTE’s and the ALTs. Each comes to the preparation table with different expectations and ideas of what constitutes a good learning environment. 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 English teachers stresses the importance of preparing students for entrance exams (Taguchi, 2002). Given the educational system and the educational goals of the students, this is a practical approach. Therefore, ALTs must be given advance notice of this fact prior to the onset of their employment. This way, they can adjust their schema and expectations so they can empathize and understand their JTEs teaching situation. Conversely, JTEs must recognize the importance of oral communication classes and challenge themselves to improve their spoken competency by through a close working relationship with their ALT.

A significant knowledge gap exists with reference to team teaching practice and methodology. The majority of Japanese teachers have little or no training in how to effectively conduct team teaching lessons. (Benoit and Haugh, 2001). Pre-service training programs lack effective and innovative presentations of teaching methodology (Gorsuch, 2001). In-service training programs also lack in quality and duration (Gorsuch, 2001). The government mandates in-service teacher education for first year teachers (Gorsuch 2001). But, experienced teachers receive minimal professional development opportunities (Gorsuch, 2001). In reference to team teaching, the limited training accrued involves viewing team teaching demonstration lessons. These demonstrations are often held in large gymnasiums with hundreds of JTEs and ALT’s in attendance. As a prefectural ALT, I attended these types of demonstration lessons. These lessons, although well intended, were not by experts but teachers who were mandated to perform them because their school was responsible for hosting a Prefectural conference. Viewing these lessons was a passive process that did not constitute effective professional development. It was apparent that the teachers involved were not experts, but regular hard working teachers. Gorsuch (2001) asserts that high school EFL teachers at times question the quality of board education sponsored professional development. Overall, the lessons were adequate but artificial. In a sense, this type of professional development constitutes sharing ignorance. A regular English teacher at a Japanese high school does not have the time, energy, or resources to effectively examine team teaching. Team teaching specialists from education centers should perform these duties. Under the current conditions, the blind are leading the blind. This lack of training creates ambiguity between the team. Since the implementation of team teaching is flawed and lacking an agreed upon pedagogical basis, a laissez faire approach becomes the norm. This is harmful for students because it limits the possibilities for continuity and constructing meaningful learning experiences, which is

vital for language learning (Bruner, 1999).

Theoretically, team teaching with an ALT has many educational benefits. It lowers the student to teacher ratio, culture is demonstrated through language, L1 and L2 each have a native speaker or true expert, and classroom management becomes easier. Team teaching allows students to hear authentic conversation and it provides a variation from traditional teacher centered grammar translation methods (Carless, 2004). But significant research on this topic is lacking. There are two possible reasons. Team teaching English as a foreign language is a relatively new teaching methodology. Secondly, many educational theorists have not experienced team teaching and it is difficult to evaluate an oral communication class as ready made tools are not widely available (Taguchi, 2001)

### **Maximizing effectiveness — changing the system from the local level**

The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, and Sports, Science, and Technology implements policy from the top down. Each year, teachers at the local level must accept educational policy and implement it to the best of their ability. However, small changes at the local level, if realistic and grounded, can make their way up to the national level through careful and concerted consultation, a concept so important in Japanese society. Several of the following structural reforms should be tabled and presented to the appropriate agents. Other improvements and policies can be slowly implemented at the local level. Through their success, national implementation is possible.

### **Increase the minimum and maximum contract periods**

To combat the guest mentality, the JET Program should institute a two year minimum contract. Further, the maximum stay should be extended to five years. Currently, exceptional ALTs are permitted to extend their stay to five years by teaching at elementary schools after their first three years are completed. This would force teachers at the local level to invest more into the integration of ALTs and curriculum development. ALTs coming to Japan would have to carefully consider their choice and few would come as tourists if the minimum contract was two years.

### **Changing titles and gaining certification**

Currently, the JTE who is responsible for the ALT is called the supervisor. The Japanese work environment places great importance on titles (Feiler, 1993). The title supervisor should be changed to mentor or advisor. The role of the mentor should be two fold: first, as a bridge between the ALT and the school. Second, as an educational advisor with whom the ALT can consult about lesson plans and the basic functioning of the school. ALTs who possess a degree in education must be encouraged to obtain their

Japanese teaching license. Once officially certified, ALTs could teach classes individually or within the team teaching model. “The 2003 National Action Plan to Cultivate Japanese with English Abilities” suggests hiring ALTs with advanced abilities as full time teachers (Tanabe, 2004.) The goal is to appoint 300 ALTs as full time junior high school teachers over the next three years with a future goal of appointing 1000 (Tanabe, 2004). This in essence would reward ALTs who greatly contributed to the development of the students, an important consideration.

### **Teaching in other subject areas and SELHi**

The 2003 National Action Plan outlines several innovative strategies that are being considered for implementation (Tanabe 2004). Included in these suggestions was a call for ALTs to teach in other subject areas (Tanabe, 2004). Many ALTs have specializations in other subject areas. This type of expertise must be utilized. An ALT teaching a physical education class the basic rules and of a novel sport such as ultimate frisbee would be a wonderful learning experience. Similarly, a Canadian history major could enlighten students on the struggle of the Quebecois in Canada and their fight to maintain their culture and language. These types of learning environments are bound with intellectual tension and promote English as a tool to develop a greater understanding of variant global cultures. They are opportunities for students to construct meaning synergistically and develop their language proficiency. The Super English Language High School initiative (SELHi) in Japanese public high schools is serving as a vehicle for implementing innovative English teaching strategies. ALT's who work in these schools must be ready to offer extra assistance to help develop and promote these programs.

### **Cultural events**

JTEs ALT's must work together to develop extracurricular school events. These events are important and effective ways to increase student motivation. The promotion of English related cultural events such as international days, panel discussions, and English camps will help to maximize ALT effectiveness. These events put students in direct contact with native English speakers from a variety of cultural backgrounds. These types of activities truly promote the mission statement of the JET program with regards to promoting mutual understanding.

### **Conclusion**

Bruner (1999) asserted: “...learning and thinking are always situated in a cultural setting and always dependant on the utilization of cultural resources. (1999).” An ALT in Japan represents a true cultural resource that must be utilized. But, ALTs, team

teaching, and language education in Japan are broad and complex issues. It was difficult to narrow the topic on this issue as it has so many angles and perspectives. The history of the JET program, educational policies, culture, and vested interests blur the issue. But, the utilization of ALTs at senior high schools is an important issue that needs attention. Through careful analysis, several themes were discernible. Social integration inadequacies could be improved by instituting a more effective induction process. A “meeting of the minds,” (Bruner, 1999) with regards to team teaching pedagogy, must occur between JTEs and ALTs. Further, quality in-service teacher education must be developed by team teaching specialists and applied in a uniform way so it does not vary based on the prefecture (Gorsuch, 2001). In summary, the effective utilization of ALTs will rejuvenate English language education at the high school level. This will have a trickle down effect to other areas of English education in Japan. Students, teachers, ALT’s and the general public will see a tangible reward. If students have more interaction with ALTs, their motivation to study English will increase (Carless, 2004). JTEs will continue to develop their English proficiency as emerging bilinguals and thus provide an impetus for change in English language education in Japan (Gorsuch, 2003). ALTs will feel a sense of accomplishment and pride as true member of a learning community. And finally, the Japanese taxpayer will feel secure that they are paying for a program that is effectively utilizing it’s resources. It is culture that provides the tools for organizing and understanding our worlds in communicable ways (Bruner, 1993)” This statement is expansive, yet it speaks volumes about the potential effect ALTs may have on English language education in Japan.

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