

JTEs and ALTs: A closer look at a partnership

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ABSTRACT

This report will look at the two main individuals responsible for the direct teaching of English to Japanese junior high school students, the JTE and the ALT. When the JET program introduced the ALT to the JTE, a multifaceted professional and personal relationship began and continues until today. The background of the partnership will first be presented and then followed up by a current perspective as investigated through a case study and questionnaire. The research question that this report attempts to answer is what type of professional relationship training the participants have been provided given that their cultures differ.

INTRODUCTION

Consciously or unconsciously, teachers make spontaneous decisions throughout the school day relying on their acquired body of knowledge gained from years of schooling. They are independent individuals who shape the minds of the students they educate and spend most of their time in their classroom concerned with the interaction taking place there. Now imagine an outsider invading their domain of the classroom and more so one that comes from a different culture. It has been described as “when east meets west” and in this case it is when the Japanese Teachers of English (hereinafter JTE) meet the Assistant Language Teachers (hereinafter ALT) in a Japanese school environment to teach English skills for Japanese students. This leads to the question: What steps have been taken to develop the professional and personal working relationships of the JTEs and the ALTs in order to help Japanese students address the English objectives established by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (hereinafter MEXT)?

BACKGROUND OF JTEs AND ALTs

In the case of the JTE and the ALT as well as the subset the Assistant English Teacher (hereinafter AET), their partnership started in earnest in 1987 when the Japan Exchange and Teaching (hereinafter JET) program was established. The Council of Local Authorities for International Relations (hereinafter CLAIR) began managing the JET program, including the recruitment and placement of ALTs in Japanese junior and senior high schools, as set forth by the Ministry of Education, Science, Sports, and Culture (MONBUSHO now known as MEXT). As noted, “the MONBUSHO wanted [Japanese] teachers of English to shift from the grammar-translation approaches ... to a more communicative-based methodology, with the AETs’ native-speaker ability being utilized to achieve this aim.” (Crooks, 2001, p. 32) As with most partnerships, the initial stages were somewhat awkward due to the unfamiliarity that the JTEs and ALTs had with each other. Part of the difficulties that were experienced in this newly formed partnership came with the lack of prior in-depth professional training for the JTEs and ALTs, cultural differences, and teaching pedagogy. In this paper, the focus will be on the initial lack of prior professional training by the JET program for the JTEs and ALTs and the consequences of such an omission. The focus will then shift to see if anything is currently being done to address the professional working relationship of the JTEs and the ALTs.

The JET program goals were well intentioned and seemed to be a step in the right direction in having Japanese students acquire English communicative and listening skills needed for future international relationships. An early oversight that surfaced was “that the JET program was introduced with only a minimum of preparation for both JTEs and AETs.” (Crooks, 2001, p. 32) Gorsuch (2002, p. 7) reiterates the fact by stating, “the potential effects of ALTs on JTEs, who are often entrusted with the supervision of ALTs and the team teaching process, do not seemed to have been explored on a large scale.”

For the JTEs, a teaching paradigm shift was taking place in having to work with another teacher, especially a foreigner. This unprecedented change, required by the MONBUSHO, caused apprehension among most JTEs because although they were qualified to teach English at Japanese junior and senior high schools, most were provided with little or no pre-teaching field practices using a team teaching methodology. In broader attempts to reach out to the JTEs, the Japan Ministry of Education later introduced a book entitled, *The Course of Study*, to allow the JTEs to study collaborative teaching methods that would allow team teaching with the ALTs and meet the goal of achieving acceptable levels of English communication skills for their students. “Explicit mention was made in *The Course of Study* that JTEs should use team teaching activities...” (Gorsuch, 2002 p. 6). Such external forces on the JTEs provided added stress

in negotiating a smooth transition when dealing with the newly appointed ALTs.

Similarly, the ALTs experienced a shift in paradigm from that of a university graduate to being the authoritative native English teacher whether or not they had any teaching experience. Crooks (2001, p. 35) declares, "CLAIR and the MONBUSHO appear to be resolute in their choice of hiring untrained individuals for the JET program, to whom they offer rudimentary grounding in teaching methodology and team teaching strategies... ." In all fairness to the ALTs, most participants went into the JET program with an open mind and a willingness to teach English and were unprepared for what would be required of them. Besides having to deal with the cultural differences and a new work environment, the ALTs now found themselves also having to learn how to be adept at being an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teacher. Limited training provided by the JET program helped introduce but not further develop the teaching methods of the ALTs, as Freeman (1997 p. 318) states, "the fact [is] that most ALTs have little or no teacher training" and that they "need to be given the tools and the know-how to be effective in second language, team taught classes." Under such circumstances, the ALTs shift into the Japanese junior and senior high schools occurred in vast numbers and awaiting there were the anxious JTEs.

As might be expected when partners are not quite prepared for each other, there were problems that arose. Given the lack of prior training provided by the JET program, many JTEs and ALTs found themselves in a situation for which they were unprepared. As noted by Reed in the ERIC Publication Number ED 406 689 (1997 p. 6), "those Japanese teachers who speak English well like having American [English] teachers. Those who do not are not so happy with the program." Placing the burden on the individual JTEs and the ALTs to somehow manage a workable solution resulted in various types of responses and a lack of uniformity in the curriculum taught to the students. With the high school and university entrance exams as well as the English textbook (required to be completed by the MONBUSHO), both which emphasized reading and writing, still being given a high priority by most JTEs in their English classes, the ALTs roles in team teaching English communicative lessons were diminished or set aside.

As Goldberg (1995, p. 11) states, "the presence of English native teachers in their classroom caused many JTEs to be concerned about their roles and competence as teachers, with tensions and pressures emerging between the two groups." When problems arise it is much easier to return to status quo than to progress into the unfamiliar territory even if there may be a chance to achieve something with a greater benefit. The communication or miscommunication that took place between the JTEs and ALTs cannot be blamed only on the participants but on the JET program itself. With such difficult underlying factors, the opportunity for developing a professional relationship and

planning a cohesive and integral English communicative lesson between the two partners seemed unlikely and in most cases it was probably true.

CURRENT PERSPECTIVE ON THE JTEs AND ALTs PROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIP

The objectives of the JET Program (The JET programme, 2006) now declares that:

The JET Program aims to promote internationalization at the local level by inviting young overseas graduates to assist in international exchange and foreign language education in local governments, boards of education and junior and senior high schools throughout Japan. It seeks to foster ties between Japanese citizens (mainly youth) and JET participants at the person to person level ... aims to promote internationalization in Japan's local communities by helping to improve foreign language education and developing international exchange at the community level.

As can be seen, the current objectives for the JET program (which is still operated by local authorities in cooperation with the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications; the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology; and the Council of Local Authorities for International Relations) are much broader but still include foreign language education. Currently, the JTEs and ALTs are still operating together in the school environment but to what extent have their professional relationship been developed compared to when the JET program was in its initial implementation. What follows is a current look at the JTEs and ALTs in the Fukuoka City junior high schools as gathered through a case study interview and a data collection questionnaire.

Case Study

In an interview conducted with a female junior high school teacher in Fukuoka City, she provided an official prefecture Japanese educational document that showed that of the 18 ALTs that were assigned to the junior high schools only five were from the JET program and the remaining had been recruited and contracted locally through several private firms. She also produced a chart that showed the ALTs were assigned to teach at three or four junior high schools with one of the schools being the “home base”. The “home base” in this case represents the school with a JTE who would be the most responsible for an individual ALT. The total number of junior high schools on the fore mentioned chart

was 69 and since there were four JTEs at her school, which represented a normal sample, it was approximated that there were 250-300 JTEs in the Fukuoka City junior high schools. With three JTEs, which had actual contact with the ALT that serviced this school once again being used as the normal sample, it was approximated that 75% or 188-225 teachers at the junior high schools had some form of direct communication with an ALT. The amount of contact time that a junior high school teacher had with an ALT varied but the schedule that was configured and maintained illustrated that the ALT would visit one school about five days in a month. The actual classroom contact time in which this particular junior high school teacher had with the ALT assigned to this school for the five days was between two to four 40 minute class periods. Obviously, this does not reflect the time spent for the initial lesson planning and any follow up discussion but it is by no means prolonged.

Later in the interview, the junior high school teacher supplied a Fukuoka Prefecture JET Programme Mid-Year Seminar booklet provided to her when she had attended the seminar on November 25th and 26th of 2004. The purpose of conducting this seminar was to bring together the ALTs and JTEs in order to share methods and experiences that would eventually lead to more student centered communicative lessons. The MEXT, Fukuoka Prefectural Board of Education and CLAIR were the main sponsors of this event. Throughout the two day seminar, five workshops were scheduled and two directly dealt with the JTE and ALT relationship. Some of the highlights from the two day seminar that focused on the JTE and ALT partnership are discussed here. First, a keynote lecture was given by an English Teacher Consultant from Japan and provided advice for ALTs in adjusting to the cultural difference, specifically in the educational domain where the ALTs were encouraged to develop a close professional relationship with the JTEs. Second, the first workshop on the opening day was titled "Towards a Better Understanding of the Host Culture" and dealt with intercultural communication for the ALT since it provided tips to smooth the transition to the host culture. Third, the fifth workshop on the second day was on "Effective Team Teaching" and was perhaps the most significant in addressing the JTE and ALT partnership. The workshop focused on the relationship between the two parties and the cultural differences that can lead to problems. Some workable solutions were also provided so that a "dynamic partnership" could be formed and would be characterized by consideration, patience, adaptability, understanding and respect. Scholefield (1996, p. 8) writes, "...in reality, successful team teaching depends to a great extent on the establishment and maintenance of a comfortable working relationship between the ALT and the JTE..." This dynamic partnership would ultimately benefit the students by providing a collaborative communicative lesson. Although the seminar appeared to be of great value for the

participants, the number of JTEs from the Fukuoka City junior high schools was limited to the 18 representatives from the “home base” schools. Besides attending this seminar, the junior high school teacher also mentioned that she had once participated in an extensive mandatory English training program required by the MEXT for all JTEs. This type of training though seems to focus on improving the JTEs English skills but the relational aspects of the partnership with the ALTs are not dealt with in any significant matter.

The following observations were made on two separate occasions where the fore-mentioned Fukuoka junior high school JTE and the ALT teamed to teach an English class. The first occasion was the teaching of English to a third grade class. The ALT was already present in the classroom prior to the JTE entering the class to begin the formal instructional time. After a brief discussion, the JTE and ALT worked cooperatively in providing a communicative lesson for the students by complementing each other's strengths. The ALT would provide the English oral language focus while the JTE would provide the Japanese translation of the goals and objectives for the lesson in order to proceed with the activity. Now and then, the JTE and ALT would code-switch to Japanese to facilitate comprehension and both seemed actively engaged in the managing of the class. On the second occasion, the teaching of English to a first grade class was observed. As before, the ALT was already in the classroom and after a brief exchange of words, both worked in unison to teach a communicative lesson to the students. The level of the class required that both code-switch to Japanese in more situations and also for greater attention to classroom management. At the end of each class, the JTE and ALT would go their separate ways with only a short debriefing of less than a minute (even though there was a 10 minute break between classes). Later when the ALT and JTE were observed together in the teacher's workroom and time constraints were not a factor, there was no further contact or exchange of information that took place to reflect upon the lesson. This may very well be due to other factors but based on these observations one could say that the relationship between the JTE and the ALT was cordial and professional though short of an affective resemblance.

Questionnaire

In an attempt to establish more relevant data from the Fukuoka prefecture junior high school JTEs and ALTs, a questionnaire (see Appendix A) was developed to find out what had been done to develop the professional and personal working relationship between the two parties and the current views on their partnership. A combination of short answers and Likert scale responses was used to gather the data. The short answer questions in the questionnaire dealt with professional development and training while

the Likert scale statements dealt with the personal relationship aspect. Based on a limited number of questionnaires being completed and returned (one reason may be due to the deadline coinciding with the end of the school year), only four questionnaires from the JTEs and four from the ALTs could be used as a measure. The survey reflects less than 2% of all JTEs in the Fukuoka junior high schools and 22.2% of the ALTs. Thus all assumptions gleaned from the survey lack a quantitative aspect and should be considered in that light.

The JTEs that participated in the survey were females whose age ranged from 33 – 52 years old and had spent at least 10 years teaching. All had received at minimum a four year university degree with the area of studies as follows: education, English literature, law, and social linguistics. Of the four JTEs, three had studied English abroad, two had traveled to English speaking countries and one had been a part of an English club at the University. The teaching methods used in their classrooms included both lecture and role playing while two included discussion and one also made use of independent projects. In response to the questions that required a short answer, the JTEs wrote the following for question one regarding the type of educational training provided by the local school board and the MEXT: “All the JTE take educational training in the first year and every five years”, “A three week intensive training program has been provided”, “Every year they [MEXT] have programs we [JTE] can freely take”, “...attended once-a-week English whole day seminar, only about less than 30 JTEs (from both junior and high schools) were able to attend at that time every year”, and “We all have to take ‘Intensive English Seminar’ once”. The next question focused specifically on whether or not any educational training had been made available for developing a professional relationship with the ALTs. Two of the four JTEs commented that they had never received any such training, one wrote “not particularly” and the one that had had only participated in the JET program mid-year seminar provided by the Fukuoka prefecture. The question that followed asked the JTEs if they would be willing to co-participate in a training to develop the professional relationship with the ALTs. The response to this question was evenly divided. The JTEs that answered “Yes” placed a condition on time being available. Of the respondents that answered “No”, one commented that “a professional relationship is not built by training but by everyday cooperation to make their team teaching successful” while the other mentioned “what was being done there [at the trainings] was almost always the same... I have enough.” The last short answer question was generally phrased and asked the JTEs what type of educational training would be useful for the teaching of English. The responses included: “To give teachers opportunities to learn current teaching methods”, “To improve the teachers’ language ability”, “focusing on practical teaching including effective pair and

group work”, “FPJP [Fukuoka Prefecture Jet Program] Mid-Year seminar type” and “Practical training and in class training”. Finally, the JTEs responded to the five point Likert scale to roughly assess the personal relationship with the ALTs. All of the JTEs indicated “agree” or “strongly agree” in that they communicated regularly with the ALTs, planned communicative lessons together and gained a better understanding of a different culture. They also indicated that working with the ALT had been helpful in improving the students’ English level. The one statement that drew “undecided” and “disagree” responses was if the ALT was often available to teach their English class.

The questionnaire in which the ALTs participated in was identical in its breadth. The ALTs were males whose age ranged from 23 to 33 years old and had spent less than 3.5 years teaching. Three of the four wrote they had a four year university degree and two stated that the area of their study was English while one had studied philosophy and comparative literature. All indicated that they had some prior experience with the Japanese culture through travel, anime, language school, martial arts and university. Three of the four used lecture and discussion in the classroom while all four had used role playing and games. Question one of the short answers regarding the type of educational training provided by the local school board and the MEXT included the following responses: “one week of training before starting ... 5 hours of training every 3 or 4 months”, “JET [has provided] during orientation: one-day of workshops with JTEs and ALTs simulating typical lesson ... throughout the year, prefecture-sponsored meetings with inter-ken ALTs giving workshops and lecture for 2 days twice a year”, “Private company [has provided] 5 day orientation with workshops and lectures concerning lesson-planning, classroom dynamics, ending with mock lesson reviewed by peers ... meeting with other ALTs three or four times a year to share lesson plans”, “My company provides all our training, which mostly involves sharing teaching activities that we have found to be useful”, and “None”. As for question two that dealt with the training being made available to develop the professional relationship with the JTEs, two ALTs’ responses mentioned advice and coping techniques had been discussed during the orientation or semi-annual meeting (i.e. FPJP) while the other two made no mention of any training taking place. All four ALTs agreed on question three that they would participate in educational training with the JTEs to develop a professional relationship. Responses included: “training together in a workshop or extended training period would increase communication and understanding ... help foster a spirit of international understanding in both”, “the best way to improve the level of the lessons would be to develop a better relationship with the JTE”, “it would be very valuable to work with JTEs on training and group development” and “because the ‘team’ part of team teaching drastically needs to be improved”. Question four, about the type of educational training

that might be useful for the teaching of English, drew responses that dealt with involving both ALTs and JTEs in some kind of training and the more pedagogical type of training (such as communicative activities). On the Likert scale section, where the ALTs personal relationship with the JTEs were assessed, the ALTs agreed that they regularly communicated with the JTEs and had gained a better understanding of the Japanese culture. Three of the four chose “disagree” or “undecided” about whether communicative lessons were planned together and if the JTEs had been helpful in letting them work with the Japanese students. The ALTs were evenly divided between “agree” and “undecided” on whether or not they often team taught with the JTEs.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Through the case study approach, the JTE and ALT professional and personal relationship could be directly observed and later reflected upon. The JTE freely communicated her professional experiences and offered literature about the partnership while the ALT appeared to be more of a reluctant participant. This may be due to the fact that the arrangements for the observation and case study had been initiated by the JTE thus causing some apprehension for the ALT. As mentioned earlier, the amount of contact time between these partners was not significant since the ALT's time was also divided among two other teachers. Besides communicating with the JTEs, the ALT was openly observed communicating with other members of the faculty in the teacher's room by code-switching to Japanese which may have indicated that the amount of time spent communicating on a social basis might have been more significant than otherwise noticed. The team teaching of the English lessons showed professionalism although the affective reaction towards each other seemed somewhat insipid. The overall “dynamic quality” desired by the MEXT appeared to be somewhat “languid” instead but nonetheless the interaction between the two allowed for the lesson to be carried out in a skilled manner. These observations are by no means exhaustive and have all the shortcomings given the limited number and the possibility of the observer's paradox.

The questionnaire revealed the JET program objective of bringing *young* overseas graduates to assist in international exchange and foreign language education had been realized when glimpsing at the age range of the ALTs. As might be expected, the JTEs had considerable more teaching experience than the ALTs since their average age was older. Both had prior experiences with either English (in the case of the JTE) or Japanese (in the case of the ALT) through some association. There appeared to be no significant difference in the teaching methodology that was practiced with the exception that the ALTs all had used role playing and games. This disparity could be somewhat expected since the one of the objectives of the MEXT foreign language curriculum is to

provide communicative activities.

In response to question one, what appeared to be evident for the JTEs was that some form of English training had been provided though the frequency and relevancy to the ALT relational aspect could not be determined (the questions that follow showed that there was scarcely any). The ALTs also had participated in educational training but it appeared to be directed mostly towards methodology and be rather insular with the exception of the FPJP seminar. The training that did take place usually occurred during the beginning of the school year and was conducted by the private company that employed the ALTs. The second question's blank responses from the JTEs seemed to indicate that professional working relationship training was either deficient or non-existent. For two of the four ALTs, this kind of null response was also replicated and the two that had answered mentioned only the FPJP seminar. This appears to be noteworthy in that the JTEs and the ALTs are mostly left on their own to develop a professional working relationship when intercultural differences such as collectivism vs. individualism exist and can influence the degree of success for this partnership (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003). Question three extracted mixed responses from the JTEs and the ALTs. Although all four ALTs indicated that they would co-participate in training to develop the professional relationship, the JTEs appeared to express some reservations. The JTEs were either concerned with time constraints or had indifferent attitudes toward this type of training. It seems that the ALTs value this type of training while for the JTEs it may be somewhat of an inconvenience. Question four drew responses that suggest most JTEs think that educational training that focuses on improving teaching pedagogy would be useful although one did mention that holding a FPJP type of training would be worthwhile. The ALTs indicated that having a collaborative training with the JTEs and the more methodological type of training focusing on the communicative aspect would be meaningful. Both agreed that having more English training would be beneficial for the teaching of English whatsoever the focus.

As for the Likert scale, the JTEs and ALTs responses showed an agreement that they had an open line of communication with each other and that they had learnt culture knowledge from each others presence. The JTEs all agreed that they had planned communicative lessons together but three of the four ALTs marked "undecided" or "disagree" contradicting this view. This difference in opinion suggests the ALTs felt that either the planning was not collaborative, the lesson was not communicative or both. The amount of teaching time that the ALTs spent in a classroom also drew divided opinions with the JTEs indicating "undecided" and "disagree" while the ALTs were split equally between "agree" and "undecided." This type of response might be expected from the JTEs since the ALTs only visited the schools for five days in a month but for the ALTs that

selected “undecided” it suggests that their time was spent doing other things. While three of the four ALTs selected “undecided” or “disagree” in that the JTEs had been helpful in letting them work with the students, the JTEs indicated that the ALTs had improved the students’ English level. It appears that although the ALTs made a positive impact on the students’ English ability, there was less flexibility from the JTEs in giving them sufficient opportunities.

CONCLUSION

As the on-going partnership between the JTEs and ALTs continues, insight and feedback have been offered to the JET program leadership committee from current and past JTEs and ALTs so that it can help develop the vision that was first realized in 1987. If breeding success is important for any program, every opportunity must be made available to ensure that the participants will be able to reach the goal. Writes Crooks (2001 p. 43), “Encouraging JTEs [and ALTs] to enhance their skills through professional development may encourage them to become authorities in their own right...” The case study and questionnaire revealed that although the JET program has undergone positive changes in the training of ALTs and JTEs, there is still room for improvement in the area of developing a professional working relationship. By relinquishing some its control of the ALTs and allowing private companies to be responsible, the JET program and the MEXT must now also ensure that these ALTs partake in appropriate training through some kind of monitoring program. When the JTEs and ALTs have been prepped to work together and are knowledgeable about what should be done to achieve their goal, the partnership can start off on the same foot and they can cooperatively and “dynamically” develop an English communicative lesson that will ultimately benefit the major stakeholder - the students.

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APPENDIX

A)

Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) Questionnaire
(for research purpose only)

Objective

The purpose of this questionnaire is to find out what has been done to develop the professional and personal working relationship of the JTEs (Japanese Teachers of English) and the ALTs (Assistant Language Teachers).

General Information

1. Age (in years) _____
2. Sex ☐ Male ☐ Female
3. Number of years teaching _____
4. School currently employed ☐ Junior High School ☐ High School
5. Degree and/or certificate earned (please check all that apply)
- a) ☐ Bachelors ☐ Masters ☐ Doctorate
- b) ☐ Teaching certificate
6. Type of university attended ☐ State/Public ☐ Private
7. Area of study at your university
- a) ☐ Education ☐ English
- b) Other (please write) _____
8. Prior experience with Japanese culture (please check all that apply)
- a) ☐ University
- b) ☐ Travel
- c) ☐ Study abroad
- d) Other (please write) _____
9. Teaching methods used in classroom (please check all that apply)
- a) Lecture, questioning, demonstration ☐
- b) Discussion, group work, peer teaching ☐
- c) Independent projects, computerized instruction ☐
- d) Laboratory, role playing, simulations/games ☐

Short Answers

1. Since becoming an ALT (Assistant Language Teacher), what kind of educational training has been provided by the local Board of Education, MEXT or JET?
2. If you are now working (once a week, daily,...) or in the past have worked with a Japanese Teacher of English (JTE), has any educational training been made available to develop your professional relationship? Please describe in brief.
3. If you are working with a JTE or were to work with a JTE, would you participate in educational training together to develop a professional relationship in the future? Why or why not?
4. What type of educational training do you think might be useful for the teaching of English?

Please check the appropriate box

1. I communicate regularly with the JTEs.
2. The JTEs and I plan English communicative lessons together.
3. I often team teach with the JTEs.
4. The JTE has been helpful in letting me work with the students to improve their English skills.
5. I have gained a better understanding of the Japanese culture by working with the JTE.

Strongly agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly disagree

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