

Problems in the Assistant Language Teacher System and English Activity at Japanese Public Elementary Schools

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In 2001, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) released the “Rainbow Plan” as the educational reform plan for the twenty-first century. As part of the plan, MEXT will make English education activities compulsory at Japanese public elementary schools beginning in 2011. In preparation, many Japanese schools have been working hard since 2002 to establish new systems, develop curricula, and acquire human resources to accommodate the educational reform plan. In addition, some schools are designated to research and develop curriculum.

The purpose of the Rainbow Plan is to establish a system to foster a school environment in which Japanese students can become functional in English within a five-year period. The goal is to promote international understanding through these English programs. MEXT’s hope is that the students will then carry what they learned in school to their adult lives thereby benefiting Japan as a whole. Thus, one of MEXT’s recommended goals is that one-third of all English activity conducted in the classroom should utilize either Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs), fluent English speakers, or junior high school English teachers.

Because so many Japanese elementary school teachers never experienced English instruction when they were elementary school children, the Rainbow Plan is intended to address these deficiencies. Furthermore, curriculum for pre-service teachers has not been fully developed to prepare elementary school teachers to teach English. Thus, many in-service teachers conduct English activities through trial and error. More than 97 percent of public elementary schools have already started English activities through the integrated study class *Sougouteki-na Gakusyu-no-jikan* in 2007. Consequently, approximately 70 percent of English activity periods at elementary schools use ALTs (MEXT, 2008).

However, the Rainbow Plan failed to address the impact of ALTs on English activities because there is no discourse regarding the quality of ALTs, nor does it address the issue of communication between ALTs and Japanese teachers (Kushima, 2007). Indeed, despite the fact that ALTs are val-

ued as integral to MEXT’s educational reform, many ALTs report that they have been isolated or excluded from lesson planning because of poor communication and a lack of input from Japanese teachers. Many Japanese teachers have found problems team teaching with ALTs because they feel that some ALTs are not really interested in teaching.

ALT issues are often addressed in English education research and in team teaching studies. However, such studies have not fully examined the nature of the system or the program’s implementation. This study focuses on the ALT system and current practices in using ALT teachers at Japanese elementary schools. In particular, it focuses on the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) program because it established the original ALT system, and the JET program dispatches many ALTs to Japanese schools each year. In concrete terms, this study examines systemic problems in the JET program, identifies the problems that arise between Japanese teachers and ALTs, and critically analyzes English activities at elementary schools from an international perspective.

Data for this study were based on in-depth interviews, e-mail exchanges, and secondary surveys of ALT teachers (both JET program and non-JET program teachers) between January and March of 2009.

The JET Program

The JET program was established in 1987 by local authorities in cooperation with three governmental ministries and the council of local authorities for international relations.¹ The majority of participants in the JET program work for one year as either ALTs, Coordinators for International Relations (CIRs), or Sports Exchange Advisors (SEAs).² In 2002, the JET program was extended to provide an elementary school ALT program to meet the recommendations of the Rainbow Plan. Eighty percent of JET participants, including CIR coordinators and SEA advisors, are dispatched to public schools. It has been a huge national program over the past twenty years and the often attributes its success to

the cumulative effects of the large number of participants.³ However, it is more important to assess the quality of the program by qualitative surveys and other forms of research than by gauging the number of participants. Also, given the short contract period, there is a need to examine the JET program eligibility criteria and its training system.

The data gathered in this study reveals major problems with statements in the official JET documentation, such as the JET Handbook, regarding the nature of the program and its impact in the schools. First, the organization and structure of the Japanese and English versions of the documents are quite different. Secondly, some statements in the English document are not directly translated from the Japanese and the translations are inaccurate in numerous places. These problems appear to stem from the political intention of the authors especially in the vagueness about eligibility requirements for candidates to the JET program.

Political Objectives

The JET program is a product of political and economic factors. The official purpose of the JET program is to promote international exchange and language education between Japan and other nations. However, this program was not purely implemented for educational purposes. It was implemented to improve the Japan-US economic imbalance in the 1980's (McConnell, 2000).

As a result, the JET program is fraught with inadequacies. Browne (2008), for example, points out that the poor eligibility criteria were intentionally set. Browne describes the percentage of ALT teachers with a qualified background in education or pedagogy as under 15 percent. In addition, Browne, one of the first JET participants and the first chairperson of the nation-wide JET organization, retrospectively describes the eligibility criteria as follows:

During the beginning of the JET Program, the administration office intentionally adopted the term 'Assistant Language Teacher' instead of 'Teacher,' and ALT teachers with educational experience were set at under 10 percent of the total ALT workforce. This was done out of consideration for Japanese English teachers, who are not confident in their English communication skills as procedural knowledge, or in teaching English, in order to prevent native English speakers from becoming threats to Japanese English teachers (Browne, 2008, p.21–24).

In fact, twenty years later, such quotas still determine today's ALT eligibility.

Poor Eligibility Criteria

As the JET program is a product of the political and economic relationships between the US and Japan, the JET program requires only a bachelor's degree in any field, and requires neither a degree in education, nor a degree in English, nor a formal course of study (major) at a university or college. Teaching qualifications are treated as optional. Consequently, most ALT teachers do not have sufficient educational experience or content background to become teachers.

In addition, most ALTs are recent graduates, and applicants receive official acceptance only two months before their departure. This means that preparation for ALT candidates is insufficient (Kushima, 2007).

In addition to the poorly written eligibility criteria, some statements in the general handbook (2008) require some background in education in order to fully understand the teaching guidelines. For example:

- ❖ Consider an alternative, forming a 'student-centered' lesson.
- ❖ You might want to make a standardized lesson plan form to plan each lesson. Using a standard form makes it much easier to create an organized lesson.
- ❖ The most important part is that the students can understand and apply language principles....

Teachers with a limited educational background may have trouble interpreting such words and phrases as "student-centered lesson," "standardized lesson plan," and "language principles."

Inconsistencies and Mistranslations

Within the JET program, there are many inconsistencies between the English and Japanese versions of the documents given to ALT teachers, thus, contributing to some of the systemic problems in the program. For example, the Japanese official site does not make any distinction among CIRs, ALTs, and SEAs because there is only one "eligibility criteria" section for all three positions. However, the US official web site has a "Types of Positions and Duties" section and defines the different eligibility criteria for each CIRs, ALTs, and SEAs.

When looking closely at eligibility criteria on both the US and Japan sites, the organization of each is different. For example, in the Japan site eligibility criteria numbers twelve through fifteen are described in the “Duties” section, but as ‘j’ to ‘m’ in the US official site. Eligibility criterion 16 in the Japanese official site appears in the general statements section of the US official site.

Although eligibility criterion numeral fifteen in the Japanese official site and “m” in the US official site describe the same eligibility criterion, they use two different phrases such as “to take part in” and “to learn about.” Obviously, these verbs imply different levels of action, the former implying more active participation than the later.

Be qualified as a language teacher or be strongly motivated to take part in the teaching of foreign languages (Japan site, Eligibility criteria No. 15).

Already have qualifications as language teachers or be motivated to learn about the teaching of foreign languages (US site, Eligibility criteria ‘m’).

A most interesting inconsistency is the following:

Have finished any periods of probation and/or paid any fines by the application deadline if a jail term was suspended (US site, Eligibility criteria ‘e’).

Eligibility criterion ‘e’ in the U.S. official site does not appear on the Japanese site.⁴

A critical mistranslation was also found in the official document in the JET general handbook because it is intentionally vague about whether ALTs are to be regarded as teachers or teaching assistants.

It is difficult to generalize about your position (JET general handbook).

A more accurate translation would be the following:

It is difficult to generalize about your duties because they depend on each school site needs.

Inadequate Training

There is no systematic training in the JET program. The only official preparation and training arranged for new ALTs consists of one post-arrival orientation, one mid-year training seminar, and one conference for returning JET teachers. Lesson-related training is only provided at the mid-year training seminar sometime between October and

January after ALT teachers have been dispatched to schools in September. This training occurs in the middle of the Japanese school calendar which runs from April to March.

The mid-year seminar focuses on team-teaching, but it generally lasts for two or three days, and the content is decided at the prefectural level. Due to the poor eligibility criteria, and the fact that many CIRs are dispatched to schools as ALTs, many CIRs express concern with the discrepancy between their current situation and what had been advertised to them by the JET program. The Association for Japan Exchange and Teaching (AJET) survey conducted in 2005 highlighted these observations by disillusioned CIRs. (Huang and Swallow, 2005).

“CIR coordinators aren’t hired as teachers and thus lack both the desire and qualifications to teach” (CIR coordinator, AJET, 2005).

“It is clear that my job is to be an elementary school ALT. I feel that I was misled by the JET program” (CIR coordinator, AJET, 2005).

In the same study, only 11 percent of elementary and junior high school ALT teachers stated that their expectations of the program were met. Kushima & Nishihori (2006) point out that few ALT teachers come to Japan to teach English, and their personal job related preparation is insufficient. Respondents in this study also pointed out the lack of training teachers receive.

“The training is adequate if working in conjunction with teachers was possible, but it is not a reality” (ALT teacher, AJET, 2005).

“The training is too late, and based off an ideal situation that does not exist between Japanese teachers and ALTs” (ALT teacher, AJET, 2005).

“ALTs expect to have the time to plan a lesson together with their teachers, but we don’t get too much time for that because Japanese teachers have a lot of other responsibilities that are outside of teaching” (ALT in this study).

These comments imply the reality that many ALTs have insufficient education and pedagogic background, and that they are thrown into the Japanese educational system without adequate training and preparation.

Many new ALTs experience anxiety in their teaching. Their contract lasts only one year and most school sites do

not have extra training time in the middle of school year for them. After one year, most ALTs have to leave school because of their one-year-contract and the school will have to hire another ALT. As a result, the school receives another new and potentially inadequately trained ALT; thus continuing the cycle of inexperience and ineffective training. There is no overlap and therefore no chance to hand over the teaching resources and school information from one ALT to the next one.

The AJET study (Huang and Swallow, 2005) stated that 88.9 percent of four hundred and twenty-five elementary and junior high school ALTs felt unprepared or unqualified for teaching in the style that the JET program demands.

“Perhaps the best option would be to hire native English speakers who are not ALT teachers, but primary English teachers at schools” (ALT teacher, AJET, 2005).

“I think private companies should do the job of educating elementary children because they already have a pre-set curriculum in place for all ALT’s to use, along with resources. Also most private companies hire ALTs who speak Japanese for elementary schools. This enables clear communication with the staff” (ALT teacher, AJET, 2005).

“If you cut the JET program in half, and took the money and sent Japanese English teachers to English speaking countries to do work-study, teaching English, perhaps that would be better use of funding” (ALT teacher, AJET, 2005).

These comments indicate that there are serious systemic problems in the ways that ALTs are trained and recruited.

Ambiguities between Expected Duties and Actual Role

Ambiguous phrasing creates confusion among ALTs about their role. The phrase “team-teaching partner” and the term “assistant,” implying very different roles, frequently appeared in the “Work Duties and Workplace” section in the General Information Handbook (2008, p.91). Sometimes the idea of a teaching partner is emphasized

“ALTs participate in team-teaching.”

“ALTs are involved with planning lessons in cooperation with Japanese foreign language teachers, interacting jointly with the Japanese

teacher in the classroom and evaluating the effectiveness of the lessons.”⁵

On other occasions the role of assistant is given prominence.

“Please bear in mind that the ALT is an assistant to the Japanese teacher in the classroom. The ALT should not, therefore, be expected to conduct classes alone, nor be the main teacher.”

Contrary to these statements in the JET handbook, comments from many ALT teachers reveal that, in practice, they are left to conduct classes alone and there is little or no team-teaching done (Huang and Swallow, 2005).

“I teach on my own ALL THE TIME... I’m an ASSISTANT language teacher but I do the job of a teacher” (ALT teacher, AJET, 2005).

“I never teach on my own in the sense that there is always a Japanese teacher in the room, however, it is very seldom that they speak or take part in the class. So, in a way, you could say that I teach on my own” (ALT teacher, AJET, 2005).

“Just because there is a Japanese teacher in the class does not always mean that they take an active, joint role in the lesson” (ALT teacher, AJET, 2005).

Another problem is that a few statements seem to encourage ALT teachers to take the initiative (JET handbook, 2008, p.36).

“For a lesson, first determine the aims and objectives. Your first move might be to talk with the Japanese teachers to find out exactly what the students have studied and are studying at present.”

“Consider an alternative, forming a ‘student-centered’ lesson.”

“Work together and see what you are both willing to give in the lesson.”

In addition, some statements refer to junior high school teachers and are irrelevant for elementary school teachers. But no distinction is made in the JET handbook between English lessons at junior high schools and English activities at elementary schools. Furthermore, some statements project negative and unprofessional images of Japanese teachers. In fact, 63.4 percent of ALT teachers harbor negative

impressions of their team-teaching experiences (Huang and Swallow, 2005). ALTs sampled in this study report similar problems to those described in the AJET survey (2005).

Consider the following examples of negative stereotypes:

“Their (Japanese teachers’) underlying concern may be whether or not it prepares the students for the entrance examination” (JET handbook, 2008, p.36).

“In some cases, Japanese teachers may limit the ALT’s role to ‘letting the students enjoy speaking with a foreigner’, model reading, and pronunciation” (JET handbook, 2008, p.36).

“Japanese teachers might be skeptical about their students’ ability to understand successfully and perform activities that you suggest” (JET handbook, 2008, p.36).

“Not all teachers in Japan prepare lesson plans as you might expect” (JET handbook, 2008, p.36).

The handbook’s lack of information on the Japanese educational system and its schools, without a clear distinction between elementary school settings and junior high school settings, may create an impression of distrust toward Japanese teachers. Furthermore, such statements run counter to the overall goal of fostering international understanding.

Problems at the School Site

Up until now I have focused attention on the problems in the JET program as it is represented in its documentation. In this next section, I wish to focus on problems at school sites, especially with regard to issues of international understanding.

A major problem at school sites is the language barrier between Japanese teachers and ALT teachers. This results in a lack of communication that impedes the quality and quantity of information and the preparation of lessons. A lack of communication makes ALTs feel a sense of isolation that is contradictory to the goals of the program. It is ironic when the goal of the program is to foster international understanding that those involved in teaching the program fail to achieve international understanding among themselves. If teachers cannot practice mutual understanding by looking at things from the point of view of their ALT, the question

remains as to whether such teachers can effectively guide children toward international understanding.

A Lack of Information and a Sense of Isolation

Many Japanese teachers expect quality in teaching from the ALT (Kushima, 2007), and they also would like ALTs to obtain information on areas such as the Japanese school management system and the daily routine of Japanese students (Kushima and Nishihori, 2006, p.229). However, 70 percent of Japanese teachers do not fully understand the ALT recruitment system (Elliot, & Tsuji, 2005) and such school-based information is not adequately explained to ALTs. In addition, teachers regard it as “a great burden” (Kushima and Nishihori, 2006, p. 229) to have to explain such topics as the management system to their ALT.

Many Japanese teachers whom I met through this study felt that it was unreasonable to place English or ALT subject matter on the shoulders of the teacher who is in charge of English Activity. Teachers are simply unwilling to talk to ALTs because they cannot fully communicate in English; nor ALTs, in Japanese. Consequently, it takes a lot of time and energy to exchange ideas and information, and this is the reason that planning a lesson is such a ball and chain for Japanese teachers.

Thus, information regarding student demographics is also inadequate. Looking at the statistics, approximately 46,000 children with a foreign nationality go to public schools (MEXT, 2008). Over 60 percent of schools have minority students whose native language is neither Japanese nor English. However, there is no statement or discussion about these diverse minority children in the JET handbook. All respondents in this study reported that they have never received any information on minority students. And one respondent in this study commented: “Encouraging them (minority students) to interact with other students is not a responsibility my teachers, nor the other teachers, should be given.”

The AJET survey of 2005 and the in-depth interviews in this study cite that a lack of information is a major problem for ALT teachers. It took a long time for some of ALT teachers to solve the problems through experience.

“ALT teachers cannot understand the Japanese educational system. It is a very different system than we come from; explanation of these differences

would be extremely useful. Perhaps this is the biggest problem for the English in Japan” (ALT teacher, this study sample).

“Now that I’m in my 3rd year, I finally understand some of the earlier mysteries. Perhaps with additional training early on, these mysteries could be cleared up” (ALT, AJET, 2005).

“There are so many aspects to the education system that knowing/understanding would have helped me tremendously in my first few months” (ALT, AJET, 2005).

It should be noted that Japanese teachers are not to blame for this problem. Japanese teachers have a high workload because of the high social expectations regarding their role and Japanese work culture and do not have much extra time to engage in communication or lesson planning with their ALT. ALTs do acknowledge this fact:

“We are placed in schools among teachers who work far too hard while we’re given little direction or responsibility. The result is a lot of resentment from Japanese teachers who now, on top of all of their other responsibilities, have to figure out what to do with an entire extra person” (ALT, AJET, 2005).

Japanese teachers do not intentionally exclude ALTs. Their high workload and the language barrier result in simple or minimal communication with ALTs. The effect of this situation is a sense of alienation and misunderstanding among ALTs.

“Most people don’t talk to me unless they have to, or they want me to do something” (ALT, AJET, 2005).

“I still feel quite lost in the daily shuffle of events and I always feel under-informed about things that the rest of the teachers discuss” (ALT, AJET, 2005).

Establishing good relationships with ALTs and providing sufficient information for them to conduct their duties effectively is a necessary condition for promoting the stated goals of enhancing international understanding at school.

Lack of Preparation for Teaching English Lessons

Insufficient communication between ALTs and Japanese teachers impacts the teaching of lessons. Many ALTs report that they do not get information regarding their

school mission, lesson planning, and curriculum from their schoolteachers (Hoogenboom & Uehara, 2006). Many of the subjects interviewed in the AJET 2005 survey and all the respondents in this study agreed that there was a lack of preparation for lessons.

“Lesson planning occurs five minutes before class, if at all, and many times I am unsure of what is expected of me in the classroom” (ALT, AJET, 2005).

“There is an huge disconnect between both Japanese teachers and ALT teachers. This stems largely because ALT teachers expect to have the time to plan a lesson together with their teachers” (ALT, AJET, 2005).

“Elementary English activities have become a source of major frustration for me. It is not education, and ALTs have absolutely not been consulted about the upcoming curriculum, and that is a major disappointment, and a big opportunity missed by Japan. ALT teachers have a lot of great things to contribute, but our exclusion from the process has left many of us frustrated” (ALT in this study).

These comments indicate that highly motivated ALTs are troubled at not being involved in lesson planning. Insufficient lesson planning has unfortunate consequences as it negatively affects the quality of instruction our children receive at school.

Many ALTs confront hurdles due to their lack of educational qualifications and experience. They are insufficiently prepared for the task of teaching Japanese students and partnering with Japanese teachers. In addition, the ambiguities and inconsistencies in the JET documents and inadequate information regarding the Japanese school system create confusion and unrealistic expectations. Consequently, many ALT teachers experience confusion between their expectations and the reality of their experiences at schools.

As a result, many ALTs feel a sense of alienation when Japanese teachers unintentionally exclude ALTs from lesson planning because of the language barrier. This is further compounded by the fact that Japanese teachers already encounter a high workload.

Recommendations

Regarding the JET Program, the ALT eligibility requirements need to require a higher standard in the

educational and pedagogic background of the candidates. For example, the Cambridge ESOL qualification Certificate in English Language Teaching to Young Learners (CELTYL) is a worldwide qualification for teaching young learners English. Some US states also issue teaching qualification for diverse learners, such as Cross-cultural Language, and Academic Development (CLAD) and Bilingual Cross-cultural Language, and Academic Development (BCLAD) in California. If these certificates were highly recommended for candidates to the JET program, the proportion of high quality ALTs would increase.

In addition to the eligibility criteria, the JET program needs to provide more teacher training for ALTs who have less teaching experience or educational background. Furthermore, the expected role of ALT teachers should be described clearly, and such information should be shared with the schools. The JET program also needs to reconsider the program schedule in order to fit more conveniently with the Japanese school calendar. Furthermore, the JET program needs to include information on minority children at public schools in its handbook.

Regarding school sites, Japanese teachers need to improve their basic English communication skills. International understanding should be fostered first among teachers as good role models in order to provide ALTs with opportunities to share cultural knowledge. In addition, efforts should be made to prepare elementary school teachers to function as team teachers in English lessons. Teacher education also needs to prepare teachers who can facilitate communication among diverse children to develop international understanding.

Lastly, as more non-JET ALTs are hired at public schools, local government needs to establish non-JET ALT eligibility criteria. The number of the non-JET ALTs now exceeds that of the JET ALTs because local government and boards of education can easily hire native English speakers with a longer contract period and at less cost. However, the eligibility criteria usually depend on the contracting organization (private English schools).

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Three governmental ministries are Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications; the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; and the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology.
- ² The official document uses CIR for Coordinator for International Relations and SEA for Sports Exchange Advisor. However, for the purpose of this paper, this paper uses CIR coordinator and SEA advisor in order to distinguish their types of works.
- ³ In the JET official web site, reports, and articles for the special edition for the 20th celebration, the cumulative numbers of teachers (CIR coordinator, SEA advisors, and ALT teachers) always appears to emphasize the huge number as a great success.
- ⁴ This refers to the on-line documentation only. The eligibility criterion (e) appears in the JET pamphlet for 2009, however, it does not appear in the Japanese official web site.
- ⁵ In the JET official handbook and documents, JLT is used for Japanese Language Teacher. However, “Japanese teacher(s)” is used in this paper because regular teachers conduct English activities (with ALT teachers) at elementary schools.
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