

Assistant Language Teachers in Japan: Roles, Teaching Practices, and Classroom Collaboration with Japanese Teachers of English

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Abstract

Given the increasing importance of English proficiency in Japan's educational landscape, it is crucial to better understand the dynamics between ALTs and JTEs, particularly the nature of their collaboration in the classroom. While research has examined ALTs in Japan, few studies have focused on their roles across various educational levels and the practical realities of ALT-JTE collaboration. The purpose of this paper therefore is to look into the expected and actual roles of an ALT in Japanese public schools from early childhood to secondary education. More importantly, it details the language teaching practices of ALTs vis-a-vis their JTEs, or the dynamics of English language classroom instruction between them. It also discusses key issues, talks about their implications, and gives recommendations on how to further improve this teaching dynamic.

Keywords: Japanese English education, assistant language teachers, Japanese teachers of English, team-teaching

Introduction

English plays a pivotal role as the lingua franca of international communication, trade, and diplomacy, especially in a globalized society. However, Japan consistently ranks lower than many other countries in terms of English proficiency (Nutall, 2019). Therefore, to address this pressing issue, the Japanese government, through the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), introduced the Rainbow Plan in 2001 to help bolster the proficiency level of students and, in turn, maintain the global competitiveness of the country.

One of the main goals of the Rainbow Plan was to foster a learning environment which aimed to improve the English proficiency of Japanese students within a span of 5 years. Another target of said plan was to help said learners have a much better understanding of the international community. To achieve these, MEXT required all Japanese elementary schools to include English education in their respective curricula which was implemented nationwide in 2011. However, the reality was that the vast majority of primary education teachers were ill-prepared to teach the language, mainly due to lack of training and proficiency (Ohtani, 2010). That is why it was decided that these educators will be helped by assistant language teachers (ALTs) in the classroom when teaching English.

ALTs, together with Coordinators for International Relations (CIRs) and Sports Exchange Advisors (SEAs), were first introduced in Japan through the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program which was established by MEXT in 1987. At first, this position was offered only to selected individuals from the United States, but over time, it expanded to include participants from various countries. Due to its success, the abovementioned ministry decided

to widen the scope of the program by allocating ALTs not only in secondary education, but also to all public schools nationwide. This expansion was aimed at accelerating the improvement of English proficiency among Japanese students (MEXT, n.d.).

Unfortunately, however, the program heads quickly found a variety of issues right after its implementation. First of all, the JET program itself has been riddled with inconsistencies with regard to the Japanese and English-translated documents. Secondly, the expected duties and actual roles of an ALT in the classroom were quite ambiguous and were open to a plethora of interpretations (Ohtani, 2010). Third, most Japanese teachers, especially primary school teachers, have inadequate training when it comes to teaching English, which often resulted in their lack of confidence in teaching the subject matter (Hiratsuka, 2023). Lastly, many ALTs have no teaching qualifications and could not teach the subject effectively which troubled a lot of Japanese teachers (Chindemi, 2021).

Given the increasing importance of English proficiency in Japan's educational landscape, it is crucial to better understand the dynamics between ALTs and JTEs, particularly the nature of their collaboration in the classroom. While research has examined ALTs in Japan, few studies have focused on their roles across various educational levels and the practical realities of ALT-JTE collaboration. The purpose of this paper therefore is to look into the expected and actual roles of an ALT in Japanese public schools from early childhood to secondary education. More importantly, it details the language teaching practices of ALTs vis-a-vis their JTEs, or the dynamics of English language classroom instruction between them. It also discusses key issues, talks about their implications, and gives recommendations on how to further improve this teaching dynamic.

The Mission and Expected Roles of an ALT in the Classroom

The information below is taken from the MEXT website (n.d.), which stated the mission and expected roles of an ALT not only in the classroom, but also in school and his or her community. However, keep in mind that the information found below is targeted specifically for ALTs which were hired through the JET program. Of course, ALTs that were hired via private companies are also required to strictly comply with these expectations.

Mission of an ALT

ALTs are responsible for assisting the Japanese Teacher of English (JTE) and making the lessons fun for the students. Aside from this, however, they also have to be a good role model to motivate and inspire learners to further improve their English skills. They can further share their respective language and culture in class so that students can be more tolerant and appreciative toward the socio-cultural backgrounds of those from outside the country.

More importantly, ALTs have a mission to spread international awareness not only in the classroom, but also in the local community he or she presides in. They should strive to be model citizens as they are the representatives of their respective home countries. This is especially true in the eyes of the local populace who have never seen nor talked to foreigners in person.

Moreover, ALTs can use this opportunity to mingle with the locals and know more about the unique language, cultures and traditions of Japan. Additionally, they can better understand the Japanese mindset and way of living. This way, he or she may be able to bring these experiences back home and share them to his family and friends.

Roles of an ALT

The main role of an ALT in class is to assist the JTE as he or she gives his or her lessons. Both parties need to collaborate when teaching the lesson, or also known as team-teaching. The Japanese and migrant teachers can plan the lesson together and strategize in such a way that students will be able to enjoy and, at the same time, have fun when learning English.

Naturally, ALTs need to use fluent English in the classroom and refrain from speaking in Japanese as only JTEs can use the local language in class. This is because the students will talk to the former in Japanese once they know they can understand said language. Also, by using English only in class, the ALT can serve as the model for learners to learn from.

Another responsibility of an ALT is to make use of English to explain the lessons in an easy-to-understand manner. This means that they will only utilize simple words and avoid using complex ones so that students can easily comprehend the topic at hand. Additionally, ALTs need to employ a strategy known as scaffolding or a step-by-step process on explaining the subject matter. This is so that students will have a clear understanding about what is being taught in class.

Finally, ALTs can use English to give good feedback such as encouraging and praising the students for their hard work. Positive reinforcements from the migrant teacher are necessary to boost the self-esteem of Japanese learners as many of them lack self-confidence when it comes to their English skills. Simple motivational speeches can go a long way to bolster their morals.

Methodology

This section first talks about the participants. In particular, ALTs were chosen for the present study as they are the ones who could give invaluable insights as to the real situation in the classroom. The second section provides a deeper understanding of their work assignments and schedule. The third part expounds on the data gathering technique which was utilized for information collection. The last section writes on the ethical considerations which were done to safeguard the identities of these individuals.

Participants

A total of 50 participants (18 male, 32 female) had shared their narratives for this study. This included five (5) pre-school (2 male, 2 female), 20 elementary school (5 male, 10 female), 15 junior high school (7 male, 8 female), and 10 high school ALTs (4 male, 6 female) who worked in Okayama, Kanagawa, and Tokyo Prefectures. They came from different parts of the world, including the Philippines, United Kingdom, United States of America, Jamaica, Kenya, Laos, and Vietnam. Their job experiences ranged from zero (0) to more than twenty (20) years. The majority of the participants were under the ‘haken’ contract which required them to work five days a week while some were under the ‘gyomu-itaku’ contract where they got only paid based on the total number of hours they taught in schools per week.

‘Haken’ or a temporary [regular] staff agreement is a type of contract that refers to the three-way written agreement among the BOE, dispatch company, and the ALT. First, the BOE and the dispatch company will have signed a contract to send ALTs to the schools under the jurisdiction of the BOE. After that, said private company will likewise issue employment contracts to individuals it deems fit to do the job as an ALT. The ALT will then be sent to these schools where they will be mingling with both the teachers and students of the school assigned to them. The performance of the ALT will then be assessed by the school and then report it back to the BOE. The contract is usually only good for one year, but can be renewed indefinitely based on the discretion of the dispatch company and the capabilities of the ALT.

‘Gyomu-itaku’ or independent contractor agreement, on the other hand, is a type of contract where the BOE obligates the dispatch company to outsource ALTs where they get paid by the hour. It works the same way as freelancing. However, unlike ‘haken’, this type of contract is considered to be an agreement between two independent organizations. This means ‘gyomu-itaku’ cannot be regarded as an employment contract. Thus, ALTs under this agreement typically have less employment rights, job security and access to benefits and welfare. Similarly, the contract renewal is contingent on the capabilities of the dispatch company to secure the contract with the BOE.

Work Assignments and Schedule

All nursery and kindergarten ALTs in this study were primarily assigned to elementary schools to fulfill their five-day work week schedule based on their ‘haken’ contracts. They normally visited their designated schools once a week, once every two weeks, or once a month, depending on the arrangements made by the BOEs and schools. Additionally, they generally stayed at each school for no more than half a day before returning to their primary assignments.

Next, the school assignments for elementary school ALTs depended on the prefecture and BOE. For instance, in Okayama Prefecture, most BOEs assigned one ALT per school due to smaller number of schools and students, while in larger areas like Tokyo and Kanagawa, ALTs were usually assigned to two or three schools. They often taught four to six classes per day at each school and generally stayed at one school per day, unless otherwise specified in their work schedule. Like preschool ALTs, they followed a fixed schedule based on their contracts.

Similarly, the school assignments of junior high school ALTs varied depending on the arrangements made by the dispatch company. Some were assigned to a single school, while others worked at two to three schools per week. In addition, some ALTs taught both elementary and junior high school classes. Furthermore, they taught around three to five classes per day. And much like the first two, they had to strictly adhere to the schedule due to the nature of their contracts.

In contrast to the previous levels, senior high school ALT positions were generally part-time or semi-full-time due to lower demand largely because the national government controls the allocation of ALTs to most public high schools. As a result, high school ALTs were typically under the ‘gyomu-itaku’ contract, working two to four days a week. They were assigned to two to three schools and generally taught three to five classes per day at each school.

Data Gathering Technique

Narrative inquiry was the main data gathering technique used in this study as it provides a deep insight into the perspectives of ALTs through their lived experiences. Put simply, it refers to the understanding of human experiences through personal and second-hand storytelling. It highlights the importance of stories and lived experiences of different individuals and how they make meaning out of them (Clandinin & Caine, 2013).

The stories and experiences of the ALTs were collected in an eight-year span, dating from August 2016 to August 2024. The data mainly consisted of the personal narratives of participants through individual and group discussions in different settings (i.e. ALTs’ apartments) and events (i.e. group outing) about the realities of being an ALT in Japan. The key aspects of the stories were then collected through the use of field notes as “they aid in constructing thick, rich descriptions of the study context, encounter, interview, focus group, and document’s valuable contextual data” (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018, p. 381).

These field notes were reorganized and categorized into separate themes and patterns based on their repetitiveness in the stories of ALTs. Afterwards, the intended meanings were analyzed and decoded from said themes and patterns. The data were further examined for their narrative significance to provide a much better understanding as to the highs and lows of ALTs through their real-life experiences.

Ethical Considerations

The present study obtained verbal consent from all participants to share their stories, with the understanding that their identities would remain confidential to protect them from potential legal repercussions. Therefore, this paper ensured anonymity by not disclosing their actual names or the name of the dispatch company they worked for. Furthermore, specific details of their experiences were omitted to ensure that the excerpts could not be traced back to them.

Actual Teaching Practices of ALTs in Japanese Public Schools

It is important to note that there is a plethora of ALT dispatch companies in Japan. These are businesses which have signed contracts with different boards of education (BOEs) all over the country. Instead of embassies, these companies are chiefly responsible for screening and hiring qualified individuals for the job at hand, provide adequate training to make sure that they understand all the rules and regulations, and then send these migrant teachers to schools which fall under the jurisdiction of each and every BOE. Therefore, although ideally all ALTs should adhere to the same expectations, it would be quite difficult to do so in practice as their starting points are dissimilar. This part, in particular, talks about the actual roles of ALTs in early childhood, primary and secondary education in Japan.

Teaching in Nursery / Kindergarten

Though quite uncommon, some BOEs, especially in rural areas, send ALTs to nursery and kindergarten schools. Migrant teachers go to such schools mainly to play and interact with the children so as to expose them early to different people from other countries. ALTs do fun activities with the kids such as playing hide and seek and ‘catch-me-if-you-can’ in the playground, as seen in excerpt 1.

[Excerpt 1] Whenever I go to [pre-]school, the teachers want me to play with the kids in the playground. I usually play [the games] ‘catch-me-if-you-can’ and ‘hide-and-seek’ with them. I also push some of them in the swing and they love it.

They also do role-playing games such as playing the role of Santa Claus during Christmas and handing out presents to children, as shown in excerpts 2 below.

[Excerpt 2] I had fun dressing up as Santa Claus during a Christmas event in school. I had to enter the room through the window and was greeted by children [together with their parents] who were very excited to see me. They came to me one by one as I gave them presents prepared by the Japanese teachers beforehand to the kids. It was a lot of fun. I want to do it again.

[Excerpt 3] They [the children] easily get distracted, so I have to be extra energetic when teaching them the alphabet. They repeat after me energetically as well, but some just want to go to my lap and play with me.

On the other hand, teaching English is quite simple as ALTs only need to teach them how to say the alphabets and even say the names of some animals. In addition, all teaching materials are already available for the ALT to use, so preparation time can be skipped. More importantly,

they need to be more energetic than usual when teaching to get the attention of the kids. Excerpt 3 indicates that the teachers have to be animated and happy all the time so that the students can enjoy their time. English sessions only last for a short while before the children either take a nap, play in the playground, or eat lunch.

Teaching in Elementary Schools

As mentioned earlier, most Japanese elementary school teachers lack training regarding how to teach English. And since ALTs were assumed to be given proper training on how to conduct English classes, they are the ones responsible for handling the entire classes while the JTE assists him or her. As such, ALTs are recognized as ‘Teacher One’ (T1) or the lead teacher and the JTEs as ‘Teacher Two’ (T2) or assistant teacher. Before that, though, they often talk to the JTE about the lesson plan so that the latter is aware of the overall flow of the lesson at hand. Some JTEs even share their ideas on how to make their lessons better, as evident in excerpt 4.

[Excerpt 4] I make sure to talk to my JTEs [before classes start] about the lessons of the day so that they also know what is going on. It helps that they sometimes have interesting suggestions to share which improve the lessons I prepared.

Inside the classroom, the ALTs act as the T1 for the entire English class. They usually start with the greetings followed by warm-up questions. Afterwards, they either introduce a new lesson or continue with the last one. And then, they play games with the students to engage them in the learning process. Finally, they end the class with a five-minute summary of the lesson. As for the teaching style, ALTs need to be energetic when teaching the lessons so as to get the attention of the students, which is quite similar to pre-school teaching. The key difference between the two is that ALTs need to maintain this level of energy throughout the day in elementary school, which can be quite exhausting as excerpt 5 reveals.

[Excerpt 5] I love teaching in elementary schools, but it is very exhausting. I have to teach four to six classes most of the time, and I have to remain energetic all day. I am usually super tired after each [working] day.

[Excerpt 6] My school actually allowed me to use a small, vacant classroom when I asked [the vice-principal and the head teacher] if I could use one bulletin board for English. [That is why] I often spend my free time either creating teaching materials or decorating the room.

Moreover, as mentioned in excerpt 6, many schools give ALTs the freedom to be more creative, like letting them have their own “English Corner”, “English Bulletin Board” or even an “English Classroom” where they can design it as they see fit. This is especially true if only one ALT is assigned to a particular school for the school year. ALTs can also make use of different school equipment such as laminators and printers to create both teaching and bulletin board materials. Naturally, they need to get permission from the principal, vice-principal or head teacher before they can use any of this equipment.

Furthermore, in some schools, the teachers request for the ALTs to play with the students during their recess time as it establishes rapport between the foreign teachers and their students. Excerpt 7, in particular, suggests that ALTs not only have fun with the kids, but they also help them clean the school during cleaning time which happens right after lunch break.

[Excerpt 7] I usually go outside and play with the students in the field during their break times. We play many different games like frisbee, basketball and ‘catch-me-if-you-can’. I also help them [students] clean the school premises like mopping the floor, wiping the chairs and desks, and even taking out weeds in the field.

[Excerpt 8] I substituted in a couple of [elementary] schools where they have a [specially-appointed] JTE who handled most of the lessons. I just did my role as the energetic ALT and played some games with them.

More recently, however, as can be seen from excerpt 8, many BOEs in Tokyo and Kanagawa Prefectures have designated a JTE solely responsible for teaching English with the ALT mainly assisting him or her. In this case, the roles are reversed as the JTE becomes the T1 and the ALT turns into T2. The Japanese teacher informs the migrant teacher about his or her lesson plan. ALTs usually just need to follow the plan and let the JTE handle most of the class, which is quite similar to teaching junior and senior high schools.

Teaching in Junior and Senior High Schools

This is where teachers start to specialize in particular subject matters such as English, Social Studies, Science, Mathematics, Physical Education, and so on. Therefore, unlike elementary school teachers, the JTEs in secondary education are better equipped with teaching techniques and strategies on how to teach English. Furthermore, depending on their BOEs, they are required to attend regular teacher training sessions to improve their team-teaching skills, thus making them more informed and trained about how to teach the class with the ALTs. That said, synergy is important in team-teaching, and this requires both JTEs and ALTs to be on the same page.

In the classroom, the JTEs normally teach the classroom by themselves and mainly require their ALTs to stand in the corner and pronounce vocabulary words when called upon. As many ALTs call it, their jobs in the classroom are basically to serve as a “walking tape recorder” or a “portable dictionary”, as shown in excerpt 9.

[Excerpt 9] I do the same thing every class. I just stand at the back of the classroom and wait for my JTE to tell me to pronounce vocabulary words and any English word that she wants the students to practice [pronouncing]. Other than that, I just wait for the class to end and repeat the cycle all over again.

This kind of situation often occurs when the JTE has already prepared the entire lesson beforehand. They have a brief meeting with the ALT simply to tell him/her about what he/she is expected to do during the lesson. On the other hand, excerpt 10 shows that many JTEs are more open-minded and are able to think of multiple ways to include the ALTs in the actual lessons.

[Excerpt 10] My JTE always involves me in his lessons. He sometimes asks questions about my country’s culture and tradition in front of the class. Other times he lets me practice English conversations and even role-play with the students.

[Excerpt 11] The new JTE asks me about my opinion on how to improve her lesson plans and actually implements it. It makes me feel appreciated.

Excerpt 11 shows that younger Japanese teachers, in particular, are more proactive in asking for the opinions of their assistant teachers on how to make the classes better. Some JTEs even ask their ALTs to create fun activities or tasks which they can use in the classroom. In these cases, ALTs are often tasked to do the greetings, ask some warm-up questions, practice English conversations with the students, and provide some feedback.

As for what ALTs do outside the classroom, many JTEs ask them to create worksheets for the students to answer. Naturally, the JTE needs to double-check and approve the activities before

being used in class. It depends on the lesson though, as there are some days where the ALT is on standby in the faculty room for his or her next task, as stated in excerpt 12.

[Excerpt 12] She [The JTE] often lets me create worksheets which we can use in class. Sometimes, I have to redo some parts because she wanted me to change them. [Other times,] I just stay in the faculty room and review my lesson materials while waiting for her to give me some tasks to do. [This is because] I did not want to bother her too much since she is always busy.

Issues Concerning the Roles of ALTs and JTEs

The disparity between the expected roles and actual practices in the classroom of ALTs could be attributed to a variety of factors. These migrant teachers were specifically incorporated in most, if not all, Japanese public schools by the BOEs in order to teach the subject matter at hand and to share their culture and traditions to students (Sifakis, 2006; Shibata, 2010). And given the opportunity, many ALTs would be more than happy to talk about their unique socio-cultural experiences in the classroom.

That being said, with the current teaching practices across the majority of Japanese public schools, but most especially in both the junior and senior high school levels, it would be quite difficult for said foreign teachers to fulfill the duties that were expected of them. In fact, only about half of ALTs believe that they have played a significant role in the classroom, which was already higher than expected (Turnbull, 2018).

The same could be said for JTEs as team-teaching is quite difficult to do as it mostly depends on the relationship and synergy between the two parties involved. That is why other ALTs may have different experiences with their JTEs. This is because the latter were able to more effectively incorporate the former in the lessons due to both sides having better overall communication (Smith, 2021; Takeda, 2017).

Issues with Assistant Language Teachers

One of the most noticeable issues as to why ALTs have a more limited role than expected in the classroom is mainly due to their teaching qualifications, or lack thereof. MEXT has adopted the eligibility criteria set forth by the JET program when hiring individuals for the position, and that is a bachelor's degree in any field. A degree related to English or education is only optional. As a result, most freshly-hired ALTs have little to no teaching background. This makes it quite inconvenient for JTEs to explain in detail their lesson plans to them and thus, make team-teaching a challenging endeavor (Hasegawa, 2008; Chindemi, 2021).

[Excerpt 13] I was lucky to have been assigned to a school with a kind and understanding JTE as he taught me many things about being an ALT. I was not confident in the classroom cause I felt that I was not yet ready for the role.

Excerpt 13 shows that the ALT was well-aware of her lack of experience and expertise at the beginning when it came to the job at hand, and thus had to rely on the JTE to assist her as she slowly got used to the role. Now while many Japanese teachers are friendly and accommodating like the one above, a few of them are not so forgiving as some of them simply refuse to consider ALTs as an equal in terms of classroom teaching (Shiobara, 2018). Such a situation is revealed in excerpt 14.

[Excerpt 14] I had a JTE in the past [when I was new] who did not communicate with me at all about her lessons after I was not able to follow the instructions she gave me last time. Instead, she just wanted me to pronounce vocabulary words and that is it.

In relation to the issue presented earlier, many ALTs are also aware about their lack of preparedness when it comes to teaching in the classroom (Smith, 2021). This is particularly true for new teachers who often have grievances about the fact that their training period was insufficient to prepare them for the actual task at hand, as portrayed in excerpt 15. JTEs easily recognize this, and while many do their best to help ALTs, some of them just choose to bear with it and give them minimal tasks in order to prevent any disruptions or conflicts in school.

[Excerpt 15] I don't think I am ready to teach [in elementary school] yet. I feel like the training period was not enough to prepare me for this [job]. I need more practice.

Additionally, many JTEs often complain about the lack of professionalism of some ALTs. Since the latter has little to no idea with regard to how to properly conduct themselves as teachers in Japan, the former are oftentimes upset with the way they act in school (Hiratsuka, 2023). Some of the unprofessional behaviors demonstrated by some ALTs include always being late to school, never calling in sick to the school or dispatch company and just suddenly being absent, being inattentive in class, and being unresponsive to the meeting with their JTEs, as shown in excerpts 16 and 17.

[Excerpt 16] One ALT got in trouble as he was always late in [arriving to] school, and when he was in school, he usually did not talk to anyone. The teachers were reportedly unhappy with this and decided to contact the BOE to complain about his behavior.

[Excerpt 17] I know this ALT who got a warning from the company because the school complained that he was absent at least three times without telling anyone and this caused so many [scheduling] problems for the teachers.

Another key issue is that many ALTs are oftentimes culturally insensitive which annoys many Japanese teachers in general, not just the JTE. By and large, Japanese people are uncomfortable in sharing information about their private life with others easily, especially in the workplace (Komisarof, 2010). However, some ALTs cross that line mainly due to their personality and cultural background. This then strains the relationship between both parties, which makes it difficult to do team-teaching, as can be observed in excerpt 18.

[Excerpt 18] I remember that was one time where I asked my JTE how his family was and he visibly got offended and he refused to talk to me for half a day. I was just trying to make small talk with him, that was why I was surprised about his reaction.

[Excerpt 19] My JTE was very friendly and we got along quite well, but I could sometimes feel her frustrations whenever she could not express herself in English. One time, she just outright told me if it was okay for her to speak [or explain her lesson plan] in Japanese.

Finally, one minor issue which JTEs have with regard to their ALTs is their lack of Japanese proficiency. One such scenario is shown in excerpt 19, that while the JTE was accommodating, the lack of the aforementioned language proficiency of the ALT made the conversation quite difficult for her. This corroborates with the fact that JTEs prefer ALTs to have some level of Japanese ability (Olson, 2019). Actually, even many ALTs themselves believe that having the ability to communicate in said language is essential for smooth communication (Aswe, De Castro, & Cainglet, 2023).

Issues with Japanese Teachers of English

Aside from the glaring problems stated earlier with regard to ALTs, one particular issue that could be attributed to JTEs is that some of them are still befuddled about the actual roles of their foreign counterparts in the classroom (Miyazato, 2009). Despite this confusion, Japanese teachers have to think of multiple ways to include the ALTs in his or her lessons. Unfortunately, some JTEs found it difficult or sometimes even troublesome to do so. Instead, they have opted to limit the role of the ALT to just pronounce vocabulary words so as to not disrupt their teaching strategies too much. Such practices, in turn, demotivates migrant teachers from doing their work effectively as some might feel they are being disrespected, most especially if they are qualified educators (Higgins & Gulliford, 2014). This negative consequence has clearly been exhibited in excerpt 20.

[Excerpt 20] I used to be a [high school] teacher back in my country. I wanted to be involved in classroom activities with my JTE, but he just lets me stand in the corner all the time. I feel like I am just wasting my time. [That is why] I want to go back to being an elementary school ALT because at least there, I can be the T1, even though it is tiring.

Perhaps another possible explanation as to why many JTEs do not involve their ALTs too much in both the planning and execution phases of their lessons is that they are simply unsure on how to best incorporate their foreign teaching partners. Although JTEs receive monthly training in terms of collaborative or team-teaching with ALTs, many still find it quite difficult to consistently include their partners in the actual classroom teaching. This could mainly be attributed to their concerns regarding how to effectively teach different content material together with difficulties in using the appropriate teaching and evaluation methods (Inoue, 2014). One such difficulty can be seen in excerpt 21.

[Excerpt 21] My [relatively new] JTE told me that it is very difficult for her to balance between teaching the content of the lesson and doing activities with ALTs as they have to strictly follow the school curriculum.

The bias of a few Japanese teachers toward non-native speakers of English in particular is another factor that could hinder the relationship between them and their ALTs. The notion that the majority of JTEs, most especially at the high school level, prefer to have native speakers as their assistant teachers rather than their non-native counterparts is already an undeniable truth (Shibata, 2010; Chindemi, 2021). One such situation is portrayed in excerpt 22.

[Excerpt 22] I had a JTE that really wanted to have a native speaker as an ALT. He was friendly and did not openly suggest that he wanted to replace me, but when he heard that I was leaving my position, the first question he asked was if my replacement was a native speaker.

Due to this, many of them are inwardly discontented and disappointed whenever they are assigned to work with a non-native ALT. However, the majority of these migrant teachers are not from western countries, so this situation is quite difficult to deal with.

Implications and recommendations

The teaching dynamic between JTEs and ALTs plays a significant role in student learning, especially in terms of raising international awareness as being exposed to the latter introduces different cultures and perspectives to them. That is why it is paramount for both sides to make consistent effort in maintaining a professional, if not friendly, relationship. However, while this

dynamic has improved over the years (Hiratsuka, 2023), the issues which were discussed above still often occur.

Team-Teaching

In team-teaching, establishing rapport between the ALT and JTE is a crucial aspect that should be given more emphasis as this relationship dynamic significantly affects their collaboration inside the classroom. In fact, if both parties have high morale and are in-sync with one another, students would have a more positive learning environment as two teachers would be helping them learn in class (Baeten & Simons, 2014; Goldstein, 2015). For this reason, it is crucial for ALTs and JTEs to establish and maintain a healthy relationship, and this starts outside the classroom. It also helps if the ALT knows how to speak Japanese or is willing to learn it, as this could facilitate more natural interactions with the JTE, thus fostering a better connection and understanding between them (Escarda, 2024; Marasigan, 2024).

Another factor that was highlighted earlier was that many ALTs were only given a minor part in the lessons, most especially in the secondary education level. And for the vast majority of them, especially for those who have prior teaching experiences, being able to make a positive impact with regard to student learning keeps them motivated and driven to do more for the students (Meerman, 2003). Inversely, ALTs having a limited role often results in their disengagement and loss of self-confidence in the workplace. This, in turn, negatively affects their motivation which is vital to the success of language teaching, learning and communication (Ebata, 2008).

In light of this, it is necessary to provide more opportunities for ALTs to interact with the students, especially at the junior and senior high school level, since they can help not only in terms of language teaching, but also as cultural informants (Walter & Sponseller, 2020; Pearce, 2021). It therefore puts the onus on JTEs to be more creative in including their ALTs in their lessons. And this could be done through teacher training aimed at implementing teaching strategies that could better incorporate ALTs in the lessons. In truth, most ALTs prefer to be fully involved in the lessons as it keeps them engaged and motivated. Above all, it gives them the opportunity to constantly share their thoughts and experiences with the students.

A practical and effective way for JTEs to involve ALTs is to utilize the sequential teaching model as it ensures both teachers are given an equal amount of opportunity to teach and be responsible for their lessons (Carpenter, Crawford, & Walden, 2007; Dugan & Letterman, 2008). To implement this model, JTEs should dedicate at least half of one class each week for speaking activities wherein ALTs would be in charge of conducting the lesson at hand. This setup gives ALTs ample chances to engage with the students and be able to impart his or her knowledge to them through conversation practices and cultural exchanges. Additionally, it demonstrates the confidence of the JTE in the teaching abilities of his or her partner.

Teacher Training

As for teacher training, ALTs, most especially new ones, should be given ample time and practice so that they could be more prepared to teach in the classroom. In fact, research shows that having longer teacher training programs often result in the development of more effective teaching techniques (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009). This also enables them to better understand their duties and responsibilities so they could have a harmonious relationship with their JTEs. Most importantly, they would be able to build their confidence to do their tasks which, in turn, enhances their teaching performances (Giallo & Little, 2003). Currently, ALTs typically receive only one week of preparation before beginning their duties. To improve their readiness, it is recommended that this preparation period be extended into at least two weeks

or more, if necessary. Through this, they would be given more time to practice different teaching strategies in a controlled or simulated environment so that they can experience it firsthand themselves. This way, they would be able to develop more teaching skills so that they would be ready for the job.

Alternatively, to reduce financial costs, dispatch companies could require newly hired ALTs to watch videos outlining their roles, duties, and responsibilities in both the school and the community before they participate in the training program. Afterward, they should take a test to confirm their understanding of the video content. The test results would serve as a diagnostic tool as it would highlight areas where ALTs are struggling, enabling the companies to tailor their training programs to address the specific needs of their employees. Additionally, daily assessments should be done as these help trainers monitor the progress of ALTs. Moreover, they should be required to pass another test at the end of the training period. The test could include teaching strategies and practices covered in the program. These assessments and evaluations are essential to maximize the benefits of training (Kirkpatrick, 2007; Shenge, 2014).

Finally, many of the aforementioned issues stem from the fact that the MEXT was quite ambiguous with regard to the roles of both JTEs and ALTs in the classroom (Ohtani, 2010). This led to both sides having differing interpretations as to their duties and responsibilities. Thus, to address this situation, it is crucial for said government ministry to collaborate with both boards of education and dispatch companies and provide more detailed and specific information as to the roles of both JTEs and ALTs. This way, all parties involved would have a much clearer understanding about their respective job roles. These organizations could then incorporate this information into their teacher training programs, ensuring that all teachers are fully aware of their roles in the classroom. If done properly, this would lead to a more productive teacher collaboration which would then result in a more improved student outcomes in the classroom (Friend & Cook, 2010; Vangrieken et al., 2015).

Conclusion

Despite the above-mentioned issues, it is evident that all parties involved including the government ministries, boards of education, schools, Japanese teachers of English and assistant language teachers are gradually moving toward the right direction. Having said that, most people are still adjusting to the roles that they have to do to make this reform a success. That is why it is paramount to continue improving to ensure that the plan would result in the betterment of students.

Teachers should always strive toward making sure that students learn as much as possible in the classroom. To make this a reality, both ALTs and JTEs need to consistently do their respective parts with regard to team-teaching. Such a situation could only happen through fostering good communication and relationships as well as strictly following the duties and responsibilities between two sides.

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