
Research Digest

What Do We Know About Team Teaching Problems Affecting ALTs Ability to Teach?

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Team-taught classes are becoming increasingly commonplace in a variety of formal learning environments throughout Japan. In fact, as of 2018, Japanese schools retained as many as 23,857 Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) to deliver English as a foreign language (EFL) content, with this number set to increase as English has become an official subject for fifth- and sixth-grade elementary school students as of April 2020. It is thus paramount that both effective and ineffective team-teaching dynamics are comprehended in order to facilitate successful language acquisition at all educational levels. It is for this reason that a comprehensive review of the literature on the current situation of team teaching in Japan was carried out.

チームティーチングによる授業は、日本中で一般的になりつつあります。2018年度のMEXT(文部科学省)のデータによると、日本の学校において、外国語としての英語(EFL)を教える23,857人のALT(アシスタントランゲージティーチャー)が雇用されています。英語が小学5、6年生の 必須科目となる2020年には、ALTの人数がさらに増えます。以上のことから、効果的な語学習得と非効果的な語学習得の両方を理解し言語習得を推進していくことが重要となります。そこで、日本におけるチームティーチングの現状について包括的な調査を実施しました。

Team teaching plays an important role in Japanese English education (Shiobara & Sakui, 2019), and it is a practice that can impact English education overall, Japanese society as a whole, and internalization of the country (Mahoney, 2004). Although team teaching is primarily carried out from elementary school through high school levels, the practice of team teaching at the university level is being discussed in a growing number of research papers** (Lock et al., 2017; Mohamed

et al., 2012; Winn & Messenbeimer-Young, 1995). According to current research, there are several major issues affecting assistant language teachers (ALTs) in Japan. However, a great deal of this research presents these issues independently of each other, with little to no cohesion between the myriad problems ALTs face on a daily basis. This disparity across research may lead to certain research biases that present an inaccurate view of the current state of team teaching in Japan. This paper, therefore, will attempt to reevaluate what we know about reported team teaching problems affecting ALTs' ability to teach.

The Team-Teaching Situation for ALTs

According to data provided by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c), 23,857 ALTs (also often referred to as AETs, or assistant English teachers, and NETs, or native-speaking English teachers) were practicing in schools throughout Japan in 2018, with this number set to increase dramatically after English has become an official subject for fifth- and sixth-grade elementary school students in 2020. Further, according to the data provided by MEXT (2018a, 2018b, 2018c), of this number, 28.8 percent (6,877) were employed by the Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme (JET), making JET one of the largest employers of ALTs in Japan. Since the scheme's inception in 1987, the number of ALTs employed by JET has risen exponentially, from 848 in 1987 to 5,761 in 2019 (JET, n.d.). In total, since JET's inception, over 70,000 people from 75 countries have participated in the program (JET, n.d.). While the number of JET programme participants shown in the introduction section of the JET programme's homepage (5,528) and those provided by MEXT (6,877 in 2018) differ slightly, the point remains that many foreign teachers are employed by JET.

The JET programme is by no means the only employer of ALTs in Japan, with companies such as Altia Central, Borderlink, and Interac also hiring ALTs in various cities, as well as local boards of education also directly hiring ALTs. Yet, JET's substantial market share and large number of participants have arguably resulted in JET playing a significant role in creating the current team-teaching culture in Japan. With regards to this team teaching culture, McCrostie

(2017) stated that “In theory, Japanese teachers work in tandem with foreign assistants to create and teach useful and engaging communicative lessons” (para. 18). He went on to suggest that “In reality, overworked teachers often don’t have the time required to properly co-plan a team-teaching lesson—especially when dealing with an inexperienced ALT fresh off the plane” (para. 18). This reality has resulted in a dynamic which many team teachers—both native-speaking and Japanese alike—view in a negative light (Tonks, n.d.).

Despite the programme’s use of the term *teacher*, JET’s primary focus is the promotion of “grass-roots internationalisation at the local level” ** (JET, n.d., para 2). As a result, “ALTs typically do not receive training in team-teaching prior to their arrival in Japan” (Sponseller, 2017, p. 124). Hence, from the program’s inception, The Council of Local Authorities for International Relations (CLAIR), the governing body overseeing JET, has viewed JET not in terms of educational outcome, but as a means of sustaining Japan’s political objectives and continued internationalization (Sponseller, 2017). In this regard, JET could be said to have been a success, creating a degree of exposure to foreign culture “that few countries can match” (Roloff-Rothman, 2012, p. 2). However, as a result of primarily focusing on simply bringing foreign teachers to Japan, an overwhelming majority of JET ALTs receive little formal teacher training, yet all are required to team-teach classes alongside a Japanese teacher of English (JTE).

Additionally, there appears to be confusion regarding the pedagogical roles that JETs are expected to play in the classroom. A contributing factor to this confusion could be the use of ambiguous phrasing with regard to official JET policy on team teaching, described in the program’s official handbook, which “creates confusion among ALTs about their role” (Ohtani, 2010, p. 41). According to Sponseller (2017), the guide stresses that “JTEs and ALTs should work cooperatively, while at other times it reminds readers ALTs are assistants, and still other times it advises ALTs to take a great deal of initiative” (p. 124). Confusion regarding the role of ALTs in the classroom often leads to clashes between the JTEs and the ALTs; in fact, it has been claimed that weaknesses in each other’s L2 and differences in teaching styles were causes of frustration between the two (Moote, 2003). Mahoney (2004) clarified that some of this

friction between teaching partners is caused by confusion or clashes over which role is more important for the ALT to play in the classroom, that of the assistant teacher, or that of the cultural ambassador.

Furthermore, Martin (2010) stated that CLAIR aimed to increase the “number of team-teaching hours, and thus, increase the number of ALTs nationwide” (p. 151). Despite this comment dating back more than 10 years now, and considering that, as of April 2020, English has become an official subject for elementary school fifth- and sixth-grade students, it would be natural for CLAIR to continue to increase the number of ALTs for a number of years to come in order to meet the demand for ALTs in elementary schools. Martin (2010) also posited that:

“Since the establishment of the JET Programme 22 years ago, there has been a shift away from the JET ALT to the less expensive company ALT. There has also been a shift in expectations away from cultural exchange to teaching responsibilities and *company involvement in curriculum and teacher training*” (p. 151; italics added).

This shift suggests that an increasing number of company ALTs may begin to receive formal teacher training prior to entering the classroom. In response to this shift in expectations, it is important to review the current state of team teaching in Japan, seeking to draw attention to potential barriers that may impede its effective implementation. The sheer number of practicing ALTs throughout Japan (MEXT 2018a, 2018b, 2018c), working at levels ranging from elementary to higher education, suggests that team teaching with ALTs still plays a key factor in Japan’s bid to become more internationalized and to improve students’ English communication abilities. This situation may be of concern to college and university education because team teaching is so ingrained into the Japanese educational system at all levels and continues to be an area of interest for researchers of the Japanese educational system. This paper will endeavor to address any bias or inaccurate information that may exist by comparing and contrasting various existing studies in order to consolidate our current understanding and suggest possible new avenues for future research.

Summary of Research on ALTs So Far

Sutherland (2014) presented an investigation into identifying four barriers to native English-speaking assistant teachers' ability to model native English in Japanese classrooms. Specifically, the inquiry was concerned with AETs' classroom practices, and the efficacy of their roles as models of native English. Sutherland (2014) hypothesized that these barriers are an over-reliance on in-class translation, the assistants' use of simplified English and "foreigner speech," the use of scripted dialogue, and limited Japanese language proficiency amongst AETs. The author concluded that, while there are certainly benefits to having AETs in classrooms, their ability to model native level English is routinely impeded by the barriers identified above.

Sutherland interviewed only JTEs, and did not include any perspectives of AETs in his research. This naturally resulted in potentially skewed responses, wherein JTEs could be interpreted as suggesting that AETs are primarily responsible for creating barriers in team teaching situations. Moreover, these results contrast with previous research conducted independently by Carless (2006), Igawa (2009), Mahoney (2004), Martin (2010), Moote (2003), Reed (2016), Shiobara & Sakui (2019), Sponseller (2017), and Turnbull (2018).

Moote (2003) attempted to determine the manner by which JTEs and NETs perceive their roles in the classroom, as well as those of their teaching partner(s). This study questioned five JTEs and five NETs. Although the sample size was smaller than that of Sutherland's (2014) research, by interviewing both JTEs and NETs it provided a more authentically representative sample, and therefore a better-balanced perspective. In doing so, Moote's (2003) inquiry directly challenged several of Sutherland's conclusions regarding team-teaching barriers in the Japanese context. For instance, Moote observed differences in pedagogic styles and an absence of communication between teaching partners to be the two most common problems for NETs. They indicated that JTEs were not provided with adequate time to meet to discuss classes or, in some instances, were hindered from cooperatively organizing classes due to linguistic barriers. During the course of their research, Shibara and Sakui (2019) also found that there would be issues of miscommunication when there was not enough time to

talk about the lesson in advance. They noted that this “lack of communication causes stress inside and outside of the classroom for ALTs and hinders building a positive relationship between teachers” (p. 112).

These findings can be expanded upon by examining Carless (2006) and Igawa (2009). Carless (2006) posits “JTEs disliked the extra effort involved in planning team-taught lessons, particularly in cases where a co-planning period was not built into school administrative structures” (p. 6). In 2009 Igawa conducted a study into EFL teachers’ views on team teaching. The sample consisted of 105 teachers currently practicing at Japanese secondary schools. Of the 105 participants, 74 were JTEs and 31 were ALTs. Igawa found that 51.4% of JTEs and 45.2% of ALTs cited planning as a “significant factor” (p. 163) of successful team teaching.

Therefore, when discussing team teaching issues, lack of communication between JTEs and ALTs and inadequate time for co-planning are arguably most prominent. Kano, Sonoda, Schultz, Usukura, Suga, and Yasu (2016) carried out a survey consisting of 1,545 ALTs employed by both the JET programme and private dispatch companies, with 655 of them mainly teaching in elementary school and 890 in junior high school. The results suggested that, in the case of JHS teachers, “barriers derived more from lack of in-class utilization of ALTs’ expertise and insufficient communication” (p.78). Kano et al. (2016) further clarified that some JTEs do not encourage verbal communication with students in their classes, creating a reduced role for the ALT and “leaving the ALTs unable to understand their roles in the classroom” (p.78).

As noted above, the absence of clearly defined roles within the classroom was another issue that featured prominently in various studies. McConnell (2000, cited in Turnbull, 2018) posited that ALTs on the JET Programme work within a complex system that requires them to teach English conversation, focus on written examinations, and all the while “speaking of internationalization whilst practicing it only at a distance” (p. 86). Reed (2016) further adds that this mixture of vaguely defined roles and limited training practices results in ALTs not knowing what to do when they enter the classroom, which ultimately may be seen to restrict ALTs ability to deliver communicative classes. Additionally,

vaguely defined ALT roles may not only limit effective teaching but also hinder the development of professional relationships. This potentially exacerbates situations in which ALTs and JTEs do not communicate or plan classes together, leading to barriers that result in ALTs being under-utilized and therefore limiting their ability to effectively employ their team-teaching potentials. These factors can certainly be seen to “negatively impact learner outcomes” (Reed, 2016, p. 85).

When considering what can be done in order to tackle some of these issues, Roloff-Rothman (2012) noted that improved communication would certainly lead to better working relationships, potentially resulting in a situation where ALTs are better utilized. However, Reed (2016) suggested that the blame doesn’t lie solely with the ALTs or the JTEs; rather, institutional constraints create a situation in which there is inadequate time to discuss or reflect on lessons, therefore obstructing potential peer support. The author continued, “Instead of seeing these institutional and sociocultural forces as barriers to teaching, it is more productive to see them as considerations to be used as a framework for teacher training” (p. 86). Turnbull (2018) supported this claim in stating:

“this is, most certainly, a mutual lack of understanding between the ALT and JTE regarding how best to interact and cooperate with one another effectively, and training is needed on both sides as a result if positive change is to be seen” (p. 101).

Indeed, according to data from observations of two classrooms and teacher interviews at two junior high schools in Japan, Fujimoto-Adamson (2010) observed two different examples of team teaching which exemplified good results depended on ALT training or experience. During a lesson consisting of an experienced ALT and a Japanese teacher with a postgraduate degree in ELT, she observed “smooth collaboration” (p. 204) between the JTE and ALT. Whereas in the case of an ALT who did not have a teaching qualification or experience, and a Japanese teacher whose specialty was not language education, she observed cases of “ineffective team-teaching practice” (p. 203).

Reed (2016) suggested mutual training is “desirable for promoting professional development” (p. 85). Alternatively, Turnbull (2018) recommended that the ALT and JTE undertake in-service training together, suggesting that

this kind of *team-learning* can help to “develop their awareness, respect and appreciation for one another in the classroom” (p. 105). Although this idea of team-learning would be highly beneficial, restrictions of time and teachers’ busy schedules make this proposal somewhat unrealistic. Therefore, Shiobara and Sakui (2019) suggested that instead of formal meetings, teachers could attempt to find impromptu opportunities in school or at social events to communicate with their teaching partners. Regardless, both Reed’s (2016) suggestion of mutual training, and Turnbull’s (2018) concept of team-learning possess the potential to enhance communication, engender more successful lesson planning and, as a result, facilitate organizational structure and a more appropriate utilization of the ALTs strengths, thereby creating the opportunity for more effective team teaching in Japanese classrooms.

Furthermore, Aline and Hosoda (2006) argued that both JTEs and ALTs should be made aware of the interactional patterns they use in the classroom. Through observation of team teaching classes at six elementary schools throughout Japan, they identified four participation patterns (e.g., roles) Japanese homeroom teachers utilized in classes with ALTs; “a bystander, a translator, a co-learner of English, or a co-teacher” (p. 8). Aline and Hosoda (2006) suggested that teachers should be made aware of the implications, both positive and negative, that their own participation patterns have on the class. They posit that through analysis of recorded classes, teachers may be able to evaluate their classroom behavior and make decisions that facilitate more effective team teaching on a moment-by-moment basis.

The data presented in the studies detailed here demonstrate the potential for a multitude of factors to be complicit in the generation of such barriers. These include administrative barriers created by the schools, JET, and private companies, as well as both JTEs and ALTs themselves.

One more caveat worthy of note is that while Moote (2003) draws attention to the limited English ability of the JTEs, it is always important to consider that ALTs may also have limited proficiency in the L1 of the local community, in this instance, Japanese. The ability to communicate with the local community in the L1 is one of the critical components of an effective language teacher, as

noted by Knagg (2016), who suggests that the modern model of the ALT “is not monolingual and unqualified but increasingly multilingual, multicultural and expert” (p. 3). It is therefore imperative that the responsibility of successful communication should be recognized to fall on both the JTE and the ALT.

Suggestions for Future Research on ALTs

The research discussed within this paper provides compelling insights into the difficulties currently facing JTEs and ALTs in Japan. However, in order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the issues, further research is needed. It is crucial that follow-up studies include large samples, consisting of JTEs and both JET and non-JET ALTs alike in order to provide a representative analysis of the factors contributing to effective and ineffective team-teaching practices.

Research into the effectiveness of the training available to privately employed ALTs, board of education ALTs, and JETs, may yield interesting results. Specifically, an investigation into handbooks and training guides may help to illuminate why issues relating to confusion in roles and communication continue to affect so many ALTs. Finally, as McCrostie (2017) noted, ALTs are often required to rotate around different schools throughout the week or month, which is yet another issue that can make planning classes difficult. Shiobara and Sakui (2019) expanded on this point by concluding that “most of the ALTs thought that an important factor in building relationships between ALTs and HRTs [homeroom teachers] is how often the teachers meet” (p. 111). Therefore, an investigation into the number of hours ALTs spend at each of their schools in relation to how effectively each school’s JTEs and ALTs feel they can communicate with each other may be beneficial in helping to create a more complete picture of issues relating to ineffective communication.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Joe Falout for all of his hard work with editing this paper.

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Received: June 3, 2019

Accepted: May 6, 2020