

Team-teaching in Japanese public schools: Fissures in the ALT industry

公立学校のチームティーチング：ALT 業界の亀裂

MARTIN Ron

MARTIN Ron



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Abstract

Team-teaching in Japan is commonly defined as a licensed Japanese teacher teaching with a native-English speaking individual who is usually referred to as an Assistant Language Teacher (ALT). The merit of an ALT, as defined by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), is that the ALT offers native-language exposure to Japanese teachers and students (1994). However, the ALT industry has changed since its inception, and now there are greater demands and expectations upon the ALT system. Due to budgetary constraints use of the Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme is declining while cheaper private companies are thriving. This privatization is creating competition, which is increasing educational expectations while at the same time lowering costs. Such tension in the ALT industry has created low-paying, unstable positions right at the time of an increased need in the number of ALTs to cover public junior high schools classes and the rise in elementary school class hours.

1. Introduction

Team-teaching, commonly defined as a licensed Japanese teacher teaching with a native-English speaking individual who is usually referred to as an Assistant Language Teacher (ALT), occurs from kindergarten through high school. The most well-known team-teaching program in Japan is the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme (see Council of Local Authorities for International Relations [CLAIR], 2009d; McConnell, 2000; Ministry of Education, Science and Culture [MEXT], 1994). However, since the implementation of the JET Programme, a number of companies have begun to offer ALTs through private contracts with boards of education. This paper provides an overview of the team-teaching industry, focusing on Japanese compulsory education.

2. 1. The Origins of Team-teaching in Japan

The foundation of the modern-day team-teaching situation in Japan began in 1977 with a Japanese government program called the Monbusho English Fellows Program that had young Americans assisting at prefectural boards of education (MEXT, 1994). The British English Teachers Scheme started the following year and team-teaching was introduced at junior and senior high schools (MEXT, 1994). The JET Programme was created in 1987 by combining these two programs (MEXT, 1994).

2. 2. The JET Programme

The JET Programme was and is not a teaching program; it is an exchange program. The purpose of the JET Programme is to promote “grass-roots international exchange between Japan and other nations” by “inviting young overseas graduates” in order to “foster ties between Japanese citizens (mainly youth) and JET participants” (CLAIR, 2009b, ¶1).

A large part of this effort has JET participants taking part in foreign language education of the citizens of the areas in which they are stationed. JET Programme participants are contracted annually and start in either the summer following the end of the western academic calendar or in April for participants from China, Korea, Brazil or Peru (CLAIR, 2009d). JET participants who teach at public schools as ALTs receive 300,000 yen a month after taxes, paid flights to Japan and to their home country after completing the annual contract and may re-contract up to four times (CLAIR, 2009d).

Though the JET Programme lists 17 requirements for potential JET participants, the base requirements for a person to represent their home country and native language are: have a four-year college degree, have an interest in Japan, be less than 40 years old, possess “standard language skills”, have not lived in Japan for at least three years prior to

application, and be interested in the Japanese educational system and its way of teaching foreign languages (CLAIR, 2009c).

Though the JET Programme has grown and diversified since its inception by including participants from a total of 55 different countries, developing new positions such as the Sports Exchange Adviser in 1994, and by expanding ALT positions in 2002 to cover elementary schools, the annual participant numbers have been declining. In comparison to the peak of 6,273 in 2002, there were 4,436 JET participants in Japan as of 2009, only nine of which were JET ALTs stationed in Tokyo (CLAIR, 2009a, 2009c). The decline in JET participants is not a signal of the decline of team-teaching. It is a sign of a paradigm shift.

2. 3. The Change to Private ALT Companies

In a conversation with a board of education official who oversaw JET ALTs and was phasing the program out in order to hire ALTs through a private company, two reasons were cited for the change. First, the official mentioned that he was taking teachers to the hospital, picking them up at their apartments and showing them around town. This board of education official was taking care of people living in a foreign country rather than managing teachers. Yet the primary reason he gave was cost. Boards of education are responsible for the wages of JET participants, and he said the city's financial department was pushing to reduce the ALT budget. A number of companies now exist to fill this ALT demand.

2. 4. The Bidding System

When choosing ALTs through private companies, boards of education decide in one of two ways: bidding or proposal. For the bidding process, a board of education sends specifications out to ALT companies stating the number of schools involved, the number of grade levels, the number of total classes and the total number of class hours that are to be met. On the day of bidding, all companies either meet at the same location to provide their bid or supply their bid via the Internet by an appointed time. Under either scenario, the company that submits the lowest bid wins the contract.

Table 1 shows estimations for what it would cost for one ALT per hour, per day, and per year for a 7-hour workday based upon bids made for a 2005–2006 Tokyo-area board of education ALT contract.

All of the amounts in Table 1 are before taxes and before the company's portion. Company E, the contract winner, bid that the annual cost to the board of education for one ALT would be 2,737,332 yen. After taxes, not to mention company costs, it would be understandable to project that the ALT herself would receive around 2,000,000 yen for the

Table 1. Bidding System Estimations for One ALT

Company	Yen/Hour	Yen/Day	Yen/Year
A	3,300	23,098	3,454,706
B	3,055	21,387	3,208,059
C	3,019	21,131	3,169,676
D	2,986	20,902	3,135,294
E	2,607	18,249	2,737,332

Note: This data comes from the personal experience of the author.

year as a full-time ALT. As stated previously, the JET participant receives 300,000 yen per month or 3,600,000 yen per year after taxes. The difference between the teacher in the winning bid example from Table 1 and the JET participant is over 1.5 million yen for the year; however, the base requirements for both teachers are the same. The bidding process often takes less than five minutes. However, as a result of the bidding process an increase in ALT turn-over and lack of ALT teaching experience occurred. Subsequently, a proposal process was established to reduce these risk management issues.

2. 5. The Proposal Process

The proposal process keeps a proposed budget as part of its requirement, but the proposal process also requires companies to provide information about the company's history in the ALT business, the turn-over of the company's ALT staff, and the training of its ALT staff as well as the company's ability to deal with risk management issues, e.g., to offer same-day substitutes. There is also a clear expectation that companies are to provide lesson plans and teaching materials to their ALTs, and in many cases, provide an entire elementary school English education curriculum for all schools and teacher-training workshops for Japanese teachers.

In addition to submitting verification of such requirements, company representatives appear before a panel of school district officials and educators. This face-to-face hearing is often kept to less than 30 minutes, during which company representatives promote themselves and answer questions posed by panel members. The decision of which company is chosen is made in about one week's time, yet the evaluation and reasoning behind the decision is not publicized.

2. 6. The Emergence of Competition

The proposal process highlights a clear change from the ALT selection through the JET Programme or the bidding process. The expectations of teacher-training, risk management capabilities, curriculum development and Japanese teacher workshops push

companies to employ people in the areas of teacher-training and personnel, which drive up company costs. On the other hand, however, boards of education have created competition among companies to keep costs down.

Further causing some confusion in the proposal process is that boards of education commonly have companies give only one number, a total proposed budgetary figure that is based upon the daily amount of one ALT. In other words, the budget proposals made by companies include these increased expectations within the ALT daily amount, i.e., companies are often not required to show a budgetary breakdown of costs.

Flynn (2009) showed that boards of education paid varying amounts for ALT contracts, and such budgetary issues are commonly believed to be the fault of ALT companies, sometimes referred to as the “middleman”. Flynn (2009) contends that ALTs should be treated and paid as educators. It is beyond the scope of this paper to address the issue of whether an ALT is an educator. However, in addition to greater expectations of ALT companies, there has also been a shift in the expected roles of ALTs, and this change is discussed in the next section.

3. 1. Expectations of ALTs

While boards of education utilize competition among private entities to keep costs down, greater expectations of ALTs are being assumed and requested. Boards of education expect to receive *teachers* not just people to provide cultural exchange. In my personal experience, I have met board of education officials who lament *new* ALTs and often cite teaching experience, e.g., in South Korea, as *not* experience with Japanese students.

Crooks (2001) and Mahoney (2004) both offer insights into teacher roles and expectations with regard to JET ALTs. Table 2 shows a summary of what the expectations are of company ALTs by Japanese junior high school teachers. In short, since the inception of team-teaching, the basic requirement for an ALT has been a four-year college degree, and this has not changed. However, now during the hiring and employment process, a company ALT is expected to be, first and foremost, an experienced teacher, especially with Japanese children, while in comparison the expectations of the JET ALT have not changed since 1987. Yet, as has been shown, the base pay between a company ALT and a JET ALT is drastically different.

Though the results of Table 2 do not differ from Mahoney (2004), the primary difference is of expectation. If company ALTs do not meet these expectations, there is a greater likelihood of not being hired in the first place or receiving a number of extra teacher-training hours or losing one’s job altogether. School teachers, administrators and board of education officials approach the role of company ALTs as a service rendered and

Table 2. Japanese English Teachers' Expectations of Company ALTs

What do you expect of the ALT?
Model pronunciation
Model reading
Interact with students in and outside of class
Do model dialog with the Japanese teacher
Correct English vocabulary and grammar mistakes made by students and Japanese teachers
Give a natural situation example for English expressions
Provide natural English responses to the students
Create a friendly atmosphere
Introduce own culture through English
Be a lesson advisor by suggesting better teaching material
Teach through using English
Bring better communication activities
Understand own role in each class
Help evaluate students' achievement and provide feedback to students
Do as told

Note: Compiled from oral presentations by Martin (2001, 2006a, 2006b)

believe the contractual agreement provides due recourse.

3. 2. Greater Demand for ALTs

The public education system is now facing a greater demand for ALTs. Junior high schools in at least the Tokyo Metropolitan area have introduced small class sizes for English education by, for example, splitting two regular classes into three smaller classes. Such a change increases the number of English class hours per school, and thus, increases the overall demand of ALTs.

Moreover, MEXT announced the new course of study for the elementary school level which will see English language activities increase to once a week for the fifth and sixth grades from 2011 (MEXT, 2008). The Japanese public academic year consists of 35 weeks, so the 2011 mandate means 35 class hours of English activity lessons per year for each 5th and 6th grade class across the country. This increase in hours will mean a substantial increase in the number of ALTs needed at elementary schools nationwide. In preparation of this new course of study, a number of school districts in the Tokyo Metropolitan area began to increase the number of foreign language lessons from the 2009 academic year.

In 2007, 97.1% of all public elementary schools in Japan offered English language activity classes (MEXT, 2007). Table 3 shows the national average of the number of class hours given at the elementary school level by grade in 2007. It also shows the total class hours and percentage of class hours that incorporated an ALT.

The percent of public schools that provided 23 to 35 hours of English per year in

Table 3. English Activity Hours at Public Elementary Schools in 2007

Grade	Average number of class hours	ALT (JET) total hours / (%)	ALT (non-JET) total hours / (%)	ALT (total) total hours / (%)
1	8.8	46,957 / (30.3%)	68,928 / (44.4%)	115,885 / (74.7%)
2	9.0	48,059 / (30.1%)	71,524 / (44.8%)	119,583 / (74.9%)
3	13.9	64,890 / (23.4%)	112,784 / (40.6%)	177,674 / (63.9%)
4	14.2	66,815 / (23.4%)	116,892 / (40.9%)	183,707 / (64.3%)
5	15.6	71,309 / (22.5%)	137,817 / (43.4%)	209,126 / (65.9%)
6	15.9	72,481 / (22.0%)	143,290 / (43.4%)	215,771 / (65.4%)

Note: From Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology. (2007, April). 小学校英語活動実施状況調査結果概要（平成19年度） [Elementary school English activities implementation findings: A summary of 2007].

2007 for 5th and 6th-grade students were 18.8% and 18.9%, respectively. Less than 5% of public schools offered either grade more than 36 hours of English in 2007 (MEXT, 2007).

Thus, increasing the number of English activity hours even for *only* the 5th and 6th grade students to 35 classes per year from 2011 would greatly increase the need for the number of ALTs, perhaps as much as twofold. This situation has pushed boards of education to begin planning to have Japanese elementary school teachers teach by themselves. Just how much these new hours from 2011 will or will not be team-teaching hours is uncertain, but some Tokyo Metropolitan area boards of education are considering anywhere from 10% to 20% to be non-team teaching class hours. Even so, the Japanese public education system will require an influx of ALTs to meet this demand.

4. Conclusion

Since the establishment 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. Japan is now looking to increase the number of team-teaching hours, and thus, increase the number of ALTs nationwide. The next few years will lay bare the issues of budget, the number of available personnel and the qualifications of ALTs.

Perhaps instead of using public funds to employ thousands more native English speaking college graduates, the Japanese public education system should focus on the quality of teacher candidates and the quality of the organizations that provide such candidates. It is also important to ascertain if there is a difference between the number of contact hours with an unqualified ALT versus a qualified ALT. It is conceivable that fewer class hours with a more qualified and committed ALT could produce similar, if not better,

educational experiences for both Japanese students and Japanese teachers. Under such a situation, budgets would need to reflect qualified candidates and quality education.

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