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# *Perceptions of Value in Japanese English Education: Self-Reflections of ALTs on the JET Programme*

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*Despite a global increase in the number and importance of assistant language teachers (ALTs) in English language classrooms, very few studies have looked specifically at how ALTs view their own contribution to students' English learning. Based on the results of a questionnaire survey, this study investigates the self-reflections of 426 ALTs on the JET Programme in Japan regarding their own sense of purpose and value. A combination of quantitative statistical analysis and qualitative interpretation was used to analyse the data. The results suggest that, whilst ALTs did feel a sense of contribution, they also felt as though they lacked chances to implement communicative teaching methods over the dominant grammar-based pedagogy. This article suggests the need for team-learning between ALTs and Japanese English teachers so that ALTs may both come to have a fulfilled sense of value and contribution to the development of students' communicative skills in the Japanese English classroom.*

## Introduction

The ever-increasing role of English as the de facto international language has led to a higher demand for English education and English educators on a global scale. This demand had been particularly prominent in Asian contexts where English is learnt as a foreign language (EFL), and where programmes involving native or near-native assistant language teachers (ALTs) have been vast. The largest of these programmes are affiliated with, sponsored, or endorsed by national governments, including EPIK (English Programme in Korea) in South Korea, EPS (English Program Sichuan) in China, the NET (Native English-speaking Teacher) scheme

in Hong Kong, and the FET (Foreign English Teachers) programme in Taiwan. Perhaps one of the largest in-service programmes involving ALTs in Asian EFL education is the *JET Programme* in Japan, established in 1987 as an attempt to internationalise the country and address the relatively low levels of Japanese students' EFL abilities.

All of these programmes share similar goals and objectives: to improve the English language abilities of learners and teachers, and to promote intercultural understanding amongst participants. EPIK (n.d.) in Korea, for example, claims their overall goal to be "improving the English-speaking abilities of Korean students and teachers, developing cultural exchange between Korea and abroad, and […] introducing new teaching methods into the Korean education system" (paragraph 1). EPS (n.d.) in China states that their goal is "to promote English education in Sichuan province, develop cultural understanding and better prepare young learners in southwest China for academic and social advancement through English education" (Ref.). Similarly, JET Programme (n.d.) in Japan claims that the goal of all JET ALT participants is "to interact with local communities to promote internationalisation at the local level" (paragraph 1). Crooks (2001) adds that the programme was initiated with the aim of "helping to internationalise Japanese students through classroom activities and to build the English language skills of both students and JTEs [Japanese Teachers of English]" (p. 32).

Regardless of the context, countries all throughout Asia are actively employing ALTs in an attempt to achieve the goals of their programmes, and it is thus vital that these teachers feel comfortable in their positions as intercultural ambassadors so they may effectively contribute to the programme overall. However, some research has suggested that ALTs are often under-utilised (see for example, Aspinall, 2006; McConnell, 2000) and may thus not be engaging to their full extent with the programme overall goals, leading to dissatisfaction in their job. To address this issue, the present study investigates the self-reflections of 426 ALTs employed on the JET Programme throughout Japan regarding their own sense of purpose and value towards EFL education in Japan. The study aims to identify and confirm any of the negative attitudes often reported in the literature suffered by ALTs on the JET Programme, and to provide suggestions regarding how best to overcome these problems. Whilst this paper focuses on ALTs working specifically in the Japanese EFL education context, the findings may also be of interest to teachers, educators, and researchers in other Asian-based EFL education contexts

in which ALTs are frequently employed in native/non-native team-teaching scenarios.

## Literature Review

### ALTs in Asia

There are a number of significant ALT programmes currently in action throughout various countries in Asia. In Hong Kong, for example, the NET (native-speaking English teachers) scheme, which has been in place since 1998, allows government-funded and subsidized primary and secondary schools to hire native English-speaking assistant teachers to facilitate English education and foster cultural exchange. The NET scheme has so far hired around 800 native English speaking assistant teachers to work in school classrooms to act as language resources, to assist in teacher development, and to help create an environment in which students can practice their communicative English skills (Carless & Walker, 2006). In Korea, ALTs on the EPIK programme, launched in 1995, have been employed in 16 different provinces and cities nation-wide to improve the communicative English skills students and teachers alike, to foster cultural exchange, and to reform EFL education pedagogies (Carless, 2006). Although these two programmes are similar, the NET scheme only hires trained and experienced ALTs who are able to take on a larger, more independent role in the classroom, whereas ALTs on EPIK are generally untrained and inexperienced, requiring more hands-on work with a non-native teacher as a result (Carless, 2006).

In Japan, the largest programme through which English is taught at the school-level is the JET Programme, jointly financed by the Japanese Ministries of Internal Affairs and Communication (MIC), Foreign Affairs (MOFA), and Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). Since its introduction, JET has employed over 62,000 participants from 65 countries. In its first year, the programme employed 848 teachers from just four countries (USA, UK, Australia and New Zealand), reaching an all-time record high of 6273 participants from 40 countries in 2002. In the 2016–2017 intake round, a total of 4952 participants from 40 countries took part in the programme nationwide, nearly 92% of which were hired as native and non-native English speaking ALTs (JET Programme, 2016). The JET Programme (n.d.)

explains that "ALTs assist with classes taught by Japanese Teachers of English/Language (JTEs/JTLs) and are thus involved in the preparation of teaching materials and in extracurricular activities like English clubs or sports teams" (paragraph 2). The Japanese Government's Council of Local Authorities for International Relations (CLAIR) (2013) suggests that "ALTs can make foreign language learning more immediate and real for the students" (p. 42).

However, similar to the NET scheme and EPIK, the job of an ALT on the JET Programme is, by no means, an easy one. The system within which ALTs are required to work is complex, often advocating for the need to teach conversational English whilst maintaining a focus on written examinations, and speaking of internationalisation whilst practicing it only at a distance (McConnell, 2000). Juppe (1998) suggests that ALTs must act as ambassadors (i.e. to motivate and inform), academics (i.e. to instruct and educate), and communicators (i.e. to facilitate and model). Although there is no official definition of the ALT, CLAIR (2013) published a handbook for ALTs employed on the JET Programme in which they describe some of the roles expected of ALTs at each schooling level. They suggest that ALTs are to serve as secondary, supportive teachers to the JTE who ultimately leads the class, providing native-speaker input and creating a communicative environment for the students to practise their English skills: a cooperative pedagogy known as *team-teaching*.

## Team-Teaching

The style of teaching in which both ALTs and non-native speaking teachers (NNST) are present and active in the classroom is known as *team-teaching*: a commonly practiced and effective pedagogy in many EFL contexts. However, Shimaoka and Yashiro (1990) claim that a team-teaching approach to EFL education has "no established method nor principles which teachers need to follow" (p. 23), often leaving both ALTs and local teachers confused about their roles as a result (Tajino & Tajino, 2000). McConnell (2000) identifies two extremes of team-teaching in such contexts: "either the entire class is turned over to the foreign teacher, or the foreign teacher becomes part of the furniture of the regular class as a kind of human tape recorder" (p. 211).

A number of studies have looked at team-teaching practices in various Asian EFL contexts. In the Korean EFL context, for example,

team-teaching practices have had an overall significant effect in helping teachers and students to see the importance of developing communicative competence in programmes such as EPIK (Lee, 2015). However, it has also not been without its issues (Jeon, 2010; Yoo, 2009; Kim, 2010). Choi (2001), for example, suggests that although team-teaching was intended to be a central part of EPIK, it was not widely enforced from the outset, resulting in a lack of cooperation between Korean teachers and native ALTs. Other issues, including cultural differences between Korean teachers and ALTs (Ahn, Park, & Ono, 1998), and issues concerning ALTs' lack of teaching experience and qualifications (Kim, 2010; Yoo, 2009), have also been noted, which are said to have hindered the success of team-teaching practices in EPIK. Similar issues have also been noted with the NET scheme in Hong Kong. Storey et al. (2001), for example, reported a genuine lack of interaction between ALTs and non-native teachers on the NET scheme, to the extent that both would teach individual classes with little understanding or regard for what the other was doing. Johnson and Tang (1993) found ALTs on the NET scheme reported their inability to speak learners' first language to be a great disadvantage in the classroom, which made it particularly difficult to engage with low-level, unmotivated learners, and Boyle (1997) has reported these ALTs to be a threat to non-native teachers' self-esteem.

In the Japanese EFL context, the JET Programme has worked to engage ALTs and Japanese teachers of English (JTEs) in team-teaching practices, which has "emerged as one of the most important issues in English language education in Japan" (Tajino & Tajino, 2000, p. 4). The concept has received a lot of attention from researchers in Japan, with studies carried out at the elementary level (see Aline & Hosoda, 2006), junior high school level (see Fujimoto-Adamson, 2010), and senior high school level (see Gorsch, 2002). However, much like its neighbouring Asian nations, Japan has also faced issues regarding team-teaching practices in the EFL classroom. It has been suggested, for example, that the introduction of team-teaching in Japan has challenged JTEs' regular teaching practices, causing them to become more conscious about their own language competence and to suffer anxiety in the EFL classroom (Crooks, 2001; Tajino & Tajino, 2000). Tajino (2002) suggests there are times in which "ALTs are regarded by the JTEs as guests from abroad, rather than as teaching partners" (p. 40), and thus, it is not uncommon to hear stories in which ALTs on the JET Programme feel under-utilised in

the classroom, acting more like walking tape recorders than assistant language teachers (Tajino & Tajino, 2000). Aspinall (2006) states that at all levels of schooling in Japan, the criticism is the same: "native speaker teachers are under-used and are not allowed to make the full contribution to communicative English learning of which they are capable" (pp. 269–270). Such claims are backed up my recent statistics published by MEXT. In 2015, the 2,124 JET ALTs employed in elementary school EFL classes across Japan were utilised in class approximately 61.3% of the time (MEXT, 2016a). The 2,309 JET ALTs working in JHS classes were utilised just 25.5% of the time (MEXT, 2016b), with the 1,500 JET ALTs employed in SHS utilised the least; a mere 9.6% of the time overall (MEXT, 2016c). Findings like this suggest that ALTs may not be contributing to their full potential in the classroom, which could result in feelings of dissatisfaction in their job and position as English educators and cultural ambassadors. The aim of this study was thus to identify whether ALTs hold any negative attitudes regarding their job and sense of contribution to the students' learning, and, if so, to provide suggestions regarding how best to overcome these problems.

## The Study

### Purpose

Official documents, such as the ALT Handbooks published by CLAIR (2013) and the British Council (2013), have emphasised the ALT's role as language consultants and cultural informants in the Japanese EFL classroom. However, as Miyazato (2009) points out, and as their title suggests, ALTs are thought of purely as assistants in the language classroom, and confusion regarding the ALTs role has risen between the team-teaching practices of JTEs and ALTs on the JET Programme as a result. Some studies have looked broadly at team-teaching methodologies internationally (see Brumby & Wada, 1990; Carless, 2006). Others have focused specifically on the case of team-teaching in Japan (see Mahoney, 2004; Tajino & Tajino, 2000), with some even comparing the views of JTEs and ALTs regarding their own team-teaching practices (see Igawa, 2009; Meerman, 2003). However, a review of the literature found no studies that have looked specifically at how ALTs on the JET Programme perceive themselves and their own level of contribution through team-teaching towards students' EFL learning. This study attempts to fill

this gap in the research by investigating the self-reflections of ALTs on the JET Programme regarding their own sense of purpose and value in EFL education in Japan. To do so, four research questions were addressed:

1. What roles do ALTs preform in the EFL classroom?
2. How do ALTs perceive their level of involvement in the EFL classroom?
3. How valuable do ALTs perceive their role in the development of students' EFL abilities?
4. How accepted do ALTs feel in the EFL classroom?

## Participants

Four hundred and twenty-six full-time ALTs employed by the JET Programme throughout Japan participated in this study (8.60% of the total JET ALT population in Japan in 2017). 132 identified themselves as "male", 286 as "female," and 8 as "other." The majority of the participants (74.41%) were aged between 20–28, with 12.68% aged between 29–32, and the remaining 12.68% over 33. The vast majority of participants (264) came from the USA, with 59 from Canada, 34 from New Zealand, 29 from the UK, and 23 from Australia, rounding out the top 5 most populous nationalities, and accounting for 96.00% of the participants overall. The duration for which the participants had been employed on the JET Programme varied from as little as six months at the time of answering the survey, to the maximum period of five years, with an overall average of 2 years and 3 months. 52 participants (12.20%) claimed to only know "a few words or phrases" in Japanese. The majority (42.03%) said they could "hold a basic conversation" in Japanese, with 34.97% claiming to be "fairly confident, but still have some issues." The remaining 10.80% identified themselves as "fluent" in Japanese.

## Questionnaire

A 20-item questionnaire (see Appendix A) was devised for use in the present study by the researcher in order to answer the defined research questions. The survey was piloted with a small group of 15 ALTs currently employed on the JET Programme in order to refine it. Based

on the pilot participants' comments, changes were made to the wording of several items, some items which were determined to provide little information were deleted altogether, and several new items deemed necessary to ask in order to fulfill the research goals were added.

The survey was split into four sections, each targeting one of the four research questions. In the first section, participants were asked for their background demographic information, and details of their JET Programme experience; questions designed to investigate the type of roles that ALTs preform in the EFL classroom at each level. The second section focused on how often the participants were involved in a regular English lesson at their school(s), the extent to which they were satisfied with this to determine ALTs' perception of their own levels of involvement in the EFL classroom. The third section investigated participants' sense of value in the classroom regarding the extent to which they feel they contribute to students' EFL learning, and whether they believe they could be contributing more. The final section asked participants whether they felt both their presence and ideas were welcome, attempting to determine how accepted ALTs feel in the EFL classroom.

**Procedure and Analysis**

The questionnaire was posted on the Internet and distributed to participants via an online system. An appeal for participation in the project was made to ALTs currently employed on the JET Programme at the time of the survey through email, social networking sites, and personal connections of the researcher. At the beginning of the survey, the participants were informed that the study was completely anonymous and that they had the opportunity to withdraw at any stage. These participants were selected because of their willingness to participate in the project voluntarily, and because of their current employment status in the JET Programme. It was decided that those who had previously participated in the JET Programme would not be sought for participation in the present study because their experiences on the programme may be different to those ALTs currently in service. This was considered important so as to keep the programme requirements and job expectations a standard variable for all participants.

The data collected was analysed both quantitatively, in terms of the percentages of responses to the Likert-scale questions, and qualitatively,

for open-ended questions. Quantitative data was analysed through the SPSS 25 software. A multiple-faced analysis was carried out to determine the descriptives of the data for the responses to each question. Qualitative questions were assigned a numerical value and categorized into a set of codes according to emerging themes, and analysed through content analysis with subjective interpretation by the researcher. A combination of quantitative statistical analysis and qualitative interpretation was used because, according to Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2000), it provides the researcher with the "freedom to fuse measurement with opinion, quantity and quality" (p. 253), adding a more illustrative dimension to the overall data analysis. A reliability analysis was conducted through the SPSS software, whereby Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient was determined to be 0.813 and thus satisfactory overall.

## Findings

### Roles of ALTs

In the present study, 203 participants (47.65%) taught at the elementary school (ES) level, 244 (57.55%) at the junior high school (JHS) level, and 172 (40.57%) at the senior high school (SHS) level. 37 participants (8.73%) claimed to teach "other," including at special needs schools and infrequent visits to teach at multiple levels. Many of the ALTs in the present study taught at multiple school levels on a regular basis; the figures for which have been included in the percentages displayed above. These percentages corresponded closely with the figures reported by MEXT (2016a, 2016b, 2016c). Of the 4,786 participants reported to be employed by JET in 2015, MEXT claims that 44.38% were employed at the ES level (a difference of 3.27% from the present study), 48.24% at the JHS level (a difference of 9.31%), and 31.34% at the SHS level (a difference of 9.23%). This suggests that the participants in the present study were of a relatively broad and accurate representation of ALTs currently employed by the JET Programme, and that their perspectives of the Programme may thus provide a comprehensive scope of JET participants on the whole.

When asked what kind of tasks they were required to frequently preform in their English classroom, the ALT participants in the present study answered in the following manner:

**Table 1. Types of Tasks that JET ALTs Preform on a Regular Basis in the EFL Classroom**

| Task | (N) | Total Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Make/play games in English | 364 | 85.45% |
| 2. Read out English texts | 344 | 80.75% |
| 3. Plan lessons | 302 | 70.89% |
| 4. Mark students' work | 299 | 70.19% |
| 5. Sing songs in English | 161 | 37.79% |
| 6. Tell stories in English | 151 | 34.45% |
| 7. Make English posters | 100 | 23.47% |
| 8. Run the entire class | 14 | 3.29% |
| 9. Make English worksheets/tests | 7 | 1.64% |
| 10. Run English conversation activities | 7 | 1.64% |
| Other | 44 | 10.33% |

Table 1 displays the top 10 activities preformed by ALTs on a regular basis. The seven tasks displayed in the first section of the table were provided as pre-set options for participants to check in the survey. Options (8), (9) and (10) in the lower section were extra answers added by participants on multiple occasions. Those tasks that were not mentioned more than 5 times were grouped together in the "Other" category in the final section of the table. Options (2), (3) and (4) were identified as commonly undertaken roles by 344, 302 and 299 participants respectively, and are all roles in which little real communication in English is required. This means that it would be very difficult for ALTs to achieve their outlined goal of developing students' communicative English abilities when three out of the top five jobs they are required to frequently perform involve little to no real communicative aspect. However, four out of the top five most common roles carried out by ALTs on a regular basis were identified by more than 70% of the participants in the present study, suggesting that they are relatively conventional roles regardless of location or individual circumstances. (1) making/playing games in English (85.45%), (2) reading out English texts (80.75%), (3) planning lessons (70.89%), and (4) marking students' work (70.19%) formed the most commonly undertaken roles, with (5) singing songs in English, identified as the fifth most common role by 37.79% of the

participants. These findings are similar to the common roles suggested in the ALT handbooks issued by the British Council (2013) and CLAIR (2013), suggesting that the participants in the present study engaged often in relatively standard practices expected of ALTs on the JET Programme.

Interestingly, however, none of the participants in the present identified themselves to be a motivator in the EFL classroom; a role suggested by both the British Council and CLAIR. Mahoney's (2004) study of perceptions relating to team-teaching roles by JET Programme ALTs and their JTE colleges found that motivating and encouraging students to be the third most commonly identified ALT role by both the ALTs themselves and their JTE colleges at the junior and senior high school levels. The fact that motivating was not identified in the present study suggests that the participating ALTs may have valued more concrete, language-focused goals over affective features such as motivation and encouragement in the EFL classroom. Consequently, it is suggested that further training is needed for ALTs on the JET Programme to educate them on the important role that affective features can play in the second language classroom.

## Utilisation of ALTs

When asked how often they were involved in regular classroom practices, just over half of the participants (55.87%) claimed to be involved more than 3/4 of the time. This is in conflict with the common literature, which often claims that ALTs are rarely utilised in the EFL classroom, and instead become part of the furniture or act merely as walking tape recorders at the JTE's leisure. Remarkably, only 12.44% of the participants claimed to be involved in the class less than half of the time (see Table 2 below).

**Table 2. The Frequency in which JET ALTs are Involved in Regular Classroom Practices**

| Frequency of Utilisation | (N) | Total Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Always (91–100%) | 124 | 29.11% |
| Frequently (76–90%) | 114 | 26.76% |
| Often (51–75%) | 80 | 18.78% |
| Sometimes (26–50%) | 32 | 7.51% |
| Rarely (0–25%) | 21 | 4.93% |
| Other | 55 | 12.91% |

The "Other" category in Table 2, accounting for 12.91% of the participants, exhibited some interesting findings whereby participants claimed that their utilisation varied depending on either (1) the type of class being taught, (2) the schooling level at which they were involved, and/or (3) the specific school at which they were placed. Firstly, participants made a distinction between "ALT classes" in which the ALT has time to engage in communicative tasks, and "regular classes" in which grammar is taught by the JTE in Japanese. The participants claimed a frequent involvement in ALT classes, but a rare involvement in the regular class, as was expressed through comments such as:

> I'm involved 100% in the ALT class, but rarely in the students' regular class grammar lessons. (JHS)

> 0% in a normal class. 100% in all the classes I teach where I made the lesson plan for, at least ten times a week. (SHS)

Other participants claimed that their level of involvement varied depending on the school level at which they were teaching:

> At primary school, I am always utilised or involved. At junior high school, I am rarely utilized. (ES, JHS)

> Always in elementary, sometimes/rarely/almost never at JHS, depending on JTE. (ES, JHS)

Some participants also suggested that their in-class participation varied depending on the specific school at which they were working:

> I teach in a couple of different schools and it varies from "frequently" to "almost never" depending on the school. (ES, JHS)

> At some schools, I'm utilised up to 50%. In other schools, they don't think they need me, so I'm used about 10%. (SHS)

When asked how they felt about their general level of involvement in the English classroom, 39.51% of the participants considered it to be "just right." Slightly less (30.98%) felt like they were "under-utilised" in the classroom, with only 9.02% feeling "over-utilised." 20.49% of the participants registered as "Other," suggesting mixed opinions towards their level of involvement based on the above mentioned factors such as the school at which they were teaching, and the class type and level:

> At the elementary school where I am expected to be the main teacher, I feel like I am over-used and it is a bit overwhelming. At junior high school, I feel that I'm under-used. (ES, JHS)

> In my team-teaching lessons, I am used sufficiently, but I feel teachers could make better use of me for other aspects of the English curriculum. (SHS)

> A mix. Sometimes I think teachers are over-reliant on ALTs and not clear in what they want. Other times I feel under-utilised. I visit 10 schools so some variation is going to happen. (ES, JHS, SHS)

Furthermore, 44.42% of the participants claimed that they would like to be utilised more in the classroom, with only 16.75% claiming they would not. The remaining 38.83% of participants expressed that they "do not mind," suggesting a relative lack of motivation or interest in their involvement, which may be due to their lack of official training as EFL teachers, or to a general lack of knowledge regarding what is expected of them as ALTs.

40.39% of the participants stated that, ideally, they would like to be involved in classroom practices "always" (91–100% of the time). The majority of the participants, 51.82%, expressed a preference to be involved "frequently" (76–90% of the time), with 7.79% wanting to be involved only "sometimes" (51–75%). No participants expressed a preference to be involved less than 50% of the time, indicating a relatively strong desire to engage in general classroom practices. It appears as though blame is often directed at JTEs for being inadequately trained in team-teaching practices, and thus having no experience or knowledge regarding how best to utilise ALTs in the classroom (Browne & Wada, 1998). However, given the fact that ALTs on the JET Programme also receive no official teacher training prior to being posted in Japanese schools, and official EFL teacher training is not required prior to joining the programme, it seems strange that blame is placed slowly on the JTE and not also on the ALTs or ministry organisations managing the Programme. Ideally, training is needed for both the JTEs and ALTs together, so that they may build mutual understanding and awareness regarding the successful implementation of effective team-teaching practices to maximise their teaching in the EFL classroom.

### Contribution of ALTs

When asked how useful they felt in the EFL classroom, the majority of the ALT participants (55.47%) claimed to feel either "very" or "sometimes" useful. 19.95% claimed to feel only "so-so," with 16.79%

of participants feeling "not very" or "not at all" useful. Similar results were seen when asked about the degree to which the participants felt they contributed to students' learning in the EFL classroom, as shown in Table 3 below.

**Table 3. The Degree to which JET ALTs Feel They Contribute to Students' EFL Learning**

| Degree of Contribution | (N) | Total Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| A lot (76–100%) | 94 | 23.04% |
| A little bit (51–75%) | 136 | 33.33% |
| Sometimes (26–50%) | 79 | 19.36% |
| Not very much (1–25%) | 61 | 14.95% |
| None (0%) | 10 | 2.45% |
| Other | 46 | 10.79% |

In this case, 56.37% of the participants felt as though they contributed either "a little bit" or "a lot" to students' EFL learning, with 17.40% feeling as though they contributed little to nothing. Despite the majority of the participants feeling as though they *did* contribute to students' learning overall, 83.46% further suggested a feeling that they could be contributing more to the EFL class, compared to just 16.54% who thought they could not. When asked what prevented them from contributing to their full potential, participants identified seven main areas of criticism of the Japanese EFL classroom: (1) the content of the class, (2) the number of schools, (3) the duration of teaching time, (4) the JTE, (5) the students, (6) a lack of information, and (7) a lack of experience and training, as seen in the following comments:

(1) The Content of the Class

> The style of the JHS classes and the overall English level of the teachers does not promote a real language learning environment. Content is memorised with very little language acquisition taking place. (ES, JHS)

> There is a strict curriculum in place focusing on grammar, reading and vocabulary for examination purposes that JTEs will not stray from. So there is no room for a native ALT to teach speaking, which is not seen as a "testable" subject. (SHS)

### (2) The Number of Schools

I teach at too many schools. Five schools means that I'm constantly moving; at the smallest, which I visit four days a term, I'm little more than an exotic guest. It's very difficult to contribute meaningfully in that situation. (JHS)

I have many different schools that I visit, so I never have a chance to communicate with teachers before the day I arrive to teach. When a teacher asks me right before a class what games I know for a certain subject, I usually don't have any ideas for activities. (ES, JHS)

### (3) The Duration of Teaching Time

I have 22 classes in my school and in the last three weeks have taught 6 total. 3 of them for only 20 minutes each to play a game. (JHS)

I have ten schools and am over worked so I can't help and be as useful as I want to be. Out of my ten schools, only two really want me there, so even when I am there, I'm barely utilized. (ES, JHS)

### (4) The JTE

The teacher basically has her own structure and only gives me a very basic outline of what she wants to do, so even if I wanted to be more helpful I don't know how. (ES, JHS)

JTE expectations are the primary factor for why I'm under-utilized. I'd like more freedom in lesson planning and/or more collaboration with the JTE during lesson planning. (SHS)

### (5) The Students

Student behaviour is very unmotivated towards learning English most of the time. They just don't care either way. (ES, JHS)

I would like to be able to do more speaking exercises, but the students don't enjoy it and don't respond well to it. (JHS, SHS)

### (6) The Lack of Information

There is a major lack of communication. I need teachers to be clearer about what exactly they require me to prepare for each class rather than give me vague direction and expect me to show up and lead the class. (ES, JHS, SHS)

> I believe I could design better and more useful lesson plans if JTEs would keep me updated with what students were learning in normal English classes. Because I am not given this information, my lessons do not reflect what students are currently learning. (SHS)

(7) The Lack of Experience and Training

> I still have a lot to learn. The teaching style expected of me this year and last year is drastically different, and without any training it is hard to adjust. I can't contribute fully because I don't know how to, and have not been told. (JHS, SHS)

> I have no teaching expertise, training or experience. I can't speak Japanese, and so lack a lot of self confidence in the classroom. (SHS)

The content of the class, be it a grammar or communicative focus, is a product of the Japanese EFL education system which is geared towards preparing students for grammar-based university entrance examinations. In order for the integration of grammar and communication to be seen in the Japanese EFL classroom, a change would be needed in the education system as a whole, whereby entrance examinations come to involve a communicative aspect and productive English skills are viewed as equally important to receptive skills. However, because the current system has been unchanged in Japan for decades, playing a significant role in both university entrance and the subsequent work employment prospects that follow, it seems unlikely that it will change anytime soon. It is important that ALTs are aware and accepting of the education system in use in Japan, and the cultural and societal norms that underpin its employment.

Both the number of schools at which ALTs are required to teach, and the subsequent short teaching time at each location, result from economic considerations and the limited number of ALTs posted throughout Japan. Particularly in small areas of the countryside, ALTs are often required to teach at multiple schools on any given week. However, as Hasegawa (2008) points out, the "rotation or circulation of ALTs in the JET programme among multiple schools obstructs any stabilised relationship with either the JTEs or the students" (p. 45). The JET Programme has announced plans to increase participant numbers by the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. If this allows ALTs to become more established at a specific school, whereby they may come to know and form relationships with both the JTE and students alike, it may be that

we see an increase in their attitudes towards their job and role in the EFL classroom overall.

## Acceptance of ALTs

The vast majority of participants (80.52%) expressed that their presence felt welcomed in the EFL classroom, compared to just 7.51% who did not. Significantly, however, only 6.81% of the participants claimed that their ideas for lessons and activities were accepted "often," with the majority (70.89%) claiming their ideas were accepted between 50–75% of the time. 19.95% of the participants suggested their ideas were accepted less than 25% of the time.

**Table 4. The Degree to which JET ALTs Feel their Presence and Ideas are Accepted in the EFL Classroom**

| Degree of Acceptance | Is your Presence Accepted? | | Are your Ideas Accepted? | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | (N) | Total Percentage | (N) | Total Percentage |
| Yes, always (76–100%) | 160 | 37.56% | 29 | 6.81% |
| Yes, mostly (51–75%) | 183 | 42.96% | 169 | 39.67% |
| Sometimes (26–50%) | 43 | 10.09% | 133 | 31.22% |
| No, not really (1–25%) | 20 | 4.69% | 49 | 11.50% |
| No, never (0%) | 12 | 2.82% | 36 | 8.45% |
| Other | 8 | 1.88% | 10 | 2.35% |

Some participants commented on how their ideas were accepted often:

> If I give them [JTE] an idea, my teachers are usually receptive and let me do it if it is well thought out. (ES, JHS, SHS)

> JTEs ask for my opinions on activities and how to adjust other plans that didn't work well before. (JHS)

And others suggested effective team-teaching methods by discussing and preparing lessons with the JTE:

> JTEs and I always pool our ideas and agree on what does and doesn't make sense for a given class before finalising the lesson plan. (SHS)
>
> My co-workers are adept at taking my considerations and integrating them into the classroom at their discretion. (SHS)

On the other hand, some participants commented on how their ideas were passively left out of the English classroom:

> None of my ideas get rejected out-right, though some things get quietly left out of lessons. (ES, JHS)
>
> Some of my ideas for projects and units were viewed as "too difficult" or "too complicated to put into place" by the Japanese teacher, so I was encouraged to try a new direction. (SHS)

And others made comments on the blatant manner in which their ideas were dismissed:

> If an idea I have includes a single word students don't know, the JTEs shy away from it. For some reason, they believe that if students don't 100% understand everything they will not be able to participate in an activity or exercise. (JHS)
>
> I have experienced JTEs refusing to consider my ideas for lesson planning as they were fixed on a certain way of teaching, typically just reading aloud from a textbook followed by a discussion in Japanese. (SHS)

This may be due to the cultural differences between the JTE and ALT. Kubota (2002), for example, suggests that some JTEs are against the communicative teaching practices of ALTs, viewing them "as a virus that could potentially harm the intellectual development of students and traditional cultural virtues" (p. 26). This further stresses the importance of frequent communication between the JTE and ALT. A similar idea was noted by Tsuidou, Otani and Davies (2012), who suggested that "sharing ideas or opinions will help both ALTs and JTEs understand each other, widen their views, and become aware of their own cultures, which is one of the goals of JET Program" (p. 57). When frequent communication becomes regular practice, both parties will be in positions in which they can effectively engage in team-teaching and team-learning to improve their own practices and consequently work together to successfully develop students' EFL learning on the whole. Furthermore, as one participant in the present study commented: *I think people tend to forget that they are assistant teachers*, ALTs tend to hold

a missionary mindset that they will change the Japanese education system for the better through their own efforts and ideas. However, there are a number of reasons for which ALT's ideas may not be accepted. For example, they may not fit the culture of the classroom, or the content or structure of the lesson. But it is for this reason that communication between the JTE and ALT is important in the classroom. If the JTE is open and constructive about why the ALT's idea is unsuitable for a particular lesson, then the ALT can grow as a teacher and further develop that idea accordingly.

## Discussion

The major findings of the present study suggest that many ALTs on the JET Programme suffer from a lack of job-satisfaction and sense of contribution to students' learning overall, brought about by one dominant factor: a lack of collaborative interaction with JTEs as a result of insufficient training on both sides. 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. That said, despite the literature suggesting that ALTs on the JET Programme are often under-utilised in the EFL classroom, the present study found that just over half of the participants (55.87%) were involved in classroom practices more than 3/4 of the time, with only 12.44% claiming an involvement of less than half the time; however, this increased level of involvement in relation to past literature has not been shown widely reflected in studies from other Asian EFL education contexts. Participants' comments suggested a relatively frequent involvement in "ALT classes," but a rare involvement in "regular classes" taught by the JTE. Miyazato (2009) suggests that this is because the Japanese EFL education system is geared towards having students pass university entrance examinations that do not test communicative English skills despite the fact that more than half of Japanese universities are reported to have open admissions with no entrance exams (see Gordon et al., 2010). Regardless, JTEs must allow for separate communicative English classes in which the ALT takes the lead, as there is simply no time for a communicative English aspect in their regular class (McConnell, 2000); however, this may also be because, as Moote (2003) reports, non-native teachers often dislike the extra effort involved in planning

team-taught lessons. This left many ALTs in the present study feeling as though they had less time to develop students' communicative competence as they would have liked, resulting in dissatisfaction with their job and a lower sense of contribution to the class. However, it is important that ALTs are accepting of the dominant education system in their country of employment, and the cultural and societal norms that underpin its use. Gay (2010) proposes the term *culturally responsive teaching*, whereby teachers must adapt their teaching style to meet the culture of the country and school to maximise students' learning. It is unfair of the ALT to expect all communicative learning styles and pedagogical approaches from the West to be applicable in an Asian-based EFL context. They must therefore adapt what they know to fit the style of their country's EFL classroom, working within the system to the best of their ability to assist the non-native teachers' regular classes and improve students' communicative English abilities in their own classes in a culturally-sensitive manner. Indeed, issues related to the splitting of classes have also been found in other Asian EFL education contexts, such as the NET Scheme in Hong Kong (see Storey et al., 2001), and EPIK in Korea, where it has been reported that students lack motivation and concentration for ALT-lead communicative classes due to the fact that such classes do not contribute to their exam preparation (Carless, 2006; Choi, 2001). The problem, then, becomes how to maintain continuity between different classes and teaches so that ALTs continue to feel a sense of contribution and job-satisfaction through involvement. Igawa (2009) points out that team teachers must learn to work with one another regardless of class content or whether or not they want to, even when most teachers may prefer to teach solo. JTEs and ALTs must learn to work effectively in collaboration during all English classes, both communicative and grammar-based, as not utilising the ALT when they are present is a waste of a valuable native input.

Indeed, ALTs' issues with their JTE may depend very much on how their JTE views the situation overall. McConnell (2000) discusses the diversity amongst JTEs regarding their outlook on ALTs in the classroom. He categorises them as being either *enthusiasts*, who "view ALTs as much-needed medicine for what they consider to be the ailments of an outdated and insular system of education" (p. 188), or *detractors* who "view ALTs with a great deal of skepticism and the JET Program as illustrating the problems created when Japanese leaders bow to foreign pressures" (p. 189). He also identifies the

*ambivalent* JTEs who "view ALTs as a mixed blessing" (p. 191). Ambivalent JTEs recognise the benefit of ALTs in the classroom, but fear the idea of interacting with them and risking potentially losing face when they encounter conversational English, which they cannot understand (also see Crooks, 2001; Tajino & Tajino, 2000). Such views have also led to issues in team-teaching practices between ALTs and JTEs in which, as participants in the present study pointed out, ALTs receive a severe lack of information regarding classroom proceedings and are effectively left in the dark. Hoogenboom and Uehara (2006) call this the "worst case scenario" for team-teaching, which they claim is when "the ALT is not informed of anything and is simply used as a mechanical model for pronunciation and as a reference source for grammar" (p. 134). It may be the case that JTEs require additional information and training regarding the beneficial role of ALTs in their classroom to see a shift in their mindset towards a more "enthusiastic" outlook overall.

Thus, it appears as though the concept of "under-training" may be an issue that affects both ALTs and JTEs. ALTs in the present study commented widely on the how they felt under-trained and unaware of how to effectively educate students and engage in team-teaching practices. It has been well documented that ALTs have little to no EFL teaching qualifications, training, or experience prior to joining the various Asian-based ALTs such as EPIK in Korea and JET in Japan (see Carless, 2006; Choi, 2001; Gorsuch, 2002; Kim, 2010; Yoo, 2009). Even in contexts in which only qualified teachers are hired, such as the NET scheme in Hong Kong, ALTs have little training or experience regarding how to teach specifically in cooperative team-teaching contexts (Carless & Walker, 2006). This has been criticised by scholars in the past (see Crooks 2001; McConnell, 2000), especially given the fact that Abe (2013) suggests that 50% of students prefer to be taught by ALTs with qualifications in TESOL. The lack of training or teaching qualifications may be so that ALTs seem less intimidating to JTEs (Miyazato, 2009); although the opposite has also been reported, as Carless (2006) states: "when unqualified or inexperienced teachers are imported, tensions can become exacerbated and local teachers may feel resentment at their well-paid but poorly prepared NEST counterparts" (p. 2). Some scholars (see Tajino & Tajino, 2000; Tajino & Walker, 1998) have suggested the need for *team-learning* in place of team-teaching, whereby teachers learn from one another in an ongoing, in-service professional development

regime. Team-learning would not only allow ALTs to improve their general teaching abilities in a specifically Japanese EFL context, but would also provide JTEs with the necessary information regarding how best to utilise ALTs at all times despite the structure of the class, which may lead to increased levels of job satisfaction and a greater sense of contribution to students' learning on the whole.

## Conclusion

Despite the literature that has suggested ALTs are under-utilised in the EFL classroom, participants in the present study suggested a frequent involvement in communicative "ALT classes," but a less frequent involvement in JTE-taught "regular classes." Many expressed a desire to be utilised more often in regular classes, blaming the content of the class, the number of schools and short duration of teaching time at each, the JTE themselves and their students' motivation, the lack of information, and their own lack of experience and training, for their low levels of involvement. However, it is essential that ALTs do not forget two things: (1) their "assistant" teacher status in the classroom; and (2) their lack of professional training as EFL educators. As important as their presence may be in helping to develop students' EFL abilities and cultural understanding, many ALTs enter the classroom with an "missionary" mindset that they will show JTEs how best to educate their students to help save English education in Japan. However, considering the vast majority of ALTs on the JET Programme have received no official training or education on how best to do so, this is an impossible task, and a frustrating mentality for their JTE counterparts. It is important to acknowledge that ALTs are assisting in a Japanese EFL context, and must accept and adapt to the dominant culture of learning within said environment. As Samimy and Kobayashi (2004) state, there are "cultural mismatches between theoretical underpinnings of CLT and the Japanese culture of learning" (p. 253), and ALTs must therefore engage in culturally responsive teaching to find a balance between the communicative language teaching (CLT) methods which they feel they need to implement, and the dominant grammar-based pedagogy with which the students and JTEs are accustomed.

The question, thus, becomes *how* can ALTs do this whilst still maintaining a sense of value and contribution in the EFL classroom? One possible answer is through *team-learning* practices with the JTE, in

which the ALT and JTE undertake in-service training together to develop their awareness, respect and appreciation for one another in the classroom. In doing so, the ALT receives much-needed TESOL training in a specifically Japanese EFL context, and the JTEs receive training regarding how best to utilise the ALTs at all times, including in their regular classes. Only when this happens will ALTs discover the extent of their contribution to students' learning, and will JTEs come to understand and appreciate the true value of ALTs in all EFL lessons.

## Note

The author declares that they have no competing interests when publishing this paper.

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## Appendix

### Questionnaire Survey

Age: below 20 ( ) 21–24 ( ) 25–28 ( ) 29–32 ( )
33–35+ ( ) 36+ ( )

Gender: male ( ) female ( )

Where do you come from?

What level do you teach on JET?
ES ( ) JHS ( ) SHS ( ) Other ( )

How long have you been on JET?

Do you speak Japanese?
( ) No, none
( ) A few words/phrases
( ) I can hold a basic conversation
( ) I am fairly confident, but have some issues
( ) Yes, fluently

What kind of tasks do you do in your English classroom on a regular basis?
( ) Read out English texts
( ) Tells stories in English
( ) Make and play English games
( ) Sing songs in English
( ) Make English posters
( ) Mark students' work
( ) Plan lessons
( ) Other (please explain)

Approximately how often are you involved/utilised in a regular English class?
( ) Always (91–100%)
( ) Frequently (76–90%)
( ) Sometimes (51–75%)
( ) Rarely (26–50%)
( ) Almost never (0–25%)
( ) Other

How do you feel about your level of involvement in your English classroom?

( ) Under-used
( ) Just right
( ) Over-used
( ) Other (explain)

Would you like to be involved and utilised more?

( ) Yes
( ) No
( ) I don't mind

Why do you feel this way?

How much would you ideally like to be involved?

( ) Always (91–100%)
( ) Frequently (76–90%)
( ) Sometimes (51–75%)
( ) Rarely (26–50%)
( ) Never (0–25%)

How useful do you feel in your English classroom?

( ) Very useful
( ) Sometimes useful
( ) So-so
( ) No very useful
( ) Not at all useful
( ) Other

How much do you feel like you contribute to students' learning in your English classroom?

( ) A lot (76–100%)
( ) A little bit (51–75%)
( ) Sometimes (26–50%)
( ) Not very much (1–25%)
( ) Never (0%)
( ) Other

Do you think you could be contributing more to your English classroom than what you currently do?

( ) Yes, definitely
( ) Perhaps, depending on the class
( ) No, not really
( ) Definitely not
( ) Other

If so, in what way? What is currently stopping you?

Do you feel welcome in your English classroom?

( ) Yes, always
( ) Most of the time
( ) Sometimes
( ) Not really
( ) No, never
( ) Other

Why do you feel this way?

Have you ever felt like your ideas were not welcome in your English classroom?

( ) Yes, always
( ) Most of the time
( ) Sometimes
( ) Not really
( ) No, never
( ) Other

Why do you feel this way?