

## Abenomics and the LDP's Push for *More* ALTs in Schools

Ben GRAFSTRÖM  
Akita University

Prime Minister Abe Shinzō's and the LDP refer to their radical monetary stimulus policy, fiscal spending policy, and structural reform policy as "Abenomics." Abenomics, characterized by its "three-arrows," appears to be a purely economic stimulus strategy. However, since a strong economy requires a strong education system, education reform is also a part of the policy. As one may expect, the education reforms target math and science education, but they also call for English education reform, which surprised many people both in Japan and abroad. "Three arrows" also describe the English education reforms: 1) increase the available opportunities for students to earn an International Baccalaureate Diploma (International Baccalaureate 2013) make the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) a mandatory requirement in high schools (Yoshida, 2013), universities, and for gaining government employment, and 3) double the number of JET Programme Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) (Mie, 2013b).<sup>1</sup> Both the International Baccalaureate Organization (IB) (The International Baccalaureate, 2013) and *Japan Today* (*Japan Today*, 2013) reported that MEXT would be collaborating with IB to have a "significant number" of newly authorized IB World Schools operating by 2015 "to address the growing need for English skills in a more globalized world." The second reform mandating TOEFL scores appeared in articles by Kazuaki Nagata, who reported "the government is considering requiring candidates to take the TOEFL test from fiscal 2015" (Nagata, 2013) and by Ayako Mie, who reported "the LDP plan would mandate that people reach or exceed a threshold in scores on the TOEFL to gain college

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper "ALT(s)" (Assistant Language Teachers) means JET Programme participant(s). The term ALT has been adopted by private, for-profit companies operating outside the jurisdiction of MEXT, CLAIR, and local boards of education. The term is not officially limited to JET Programme participants.

admission and graduation” (Mie, 2013a), both from *The Japan Times*. Thirdly, *The Japan Times* reported that Abenomics would double the number of ALTs from 2012’s total of 4,360 to 10,000 within 10 years (Mie, 2013b). Other reports had the target set for as early as 2016. In spring of 2013, both the Council of Local Authorities for International Relations (CLAIR) and MEXT corroborated these reports via their respective websites, but by fall 2013 these reports seemed to have been scrubbed from both their web pages.

Approximately nine months have passed since the press releases and neither CLAIR nor MEXT have released much new information regarding their plans. At the time of the press releases, the plan to double the number of ALTs triggered a slew of reactions by people all over the internet, especially in the comments sections of online news articles, blogs, and official JET Programme/ALT web forums. Countless detractors commented online with nothing but contempt for the program, claiming that it was a waste of time and money. Many of the fiercest critics claimed to be JET alumni. But for every aspersion there was also an accolade—both *ex-* and current ALTs offered personal stories to support the program’s value to English education in Japan. These fierce exchanges lambasting and lauding the program prompted the question: after nearly thirty years, what is the program doing wrong to elicit such negative response to its potential expansion? Therefore, this research sets out to identify the JET Programme’s shortcomings and to prescribe some potential adjustments. Many of the negative comments online and comments that I collected in interviews with ALTs, identified the program’s flaws as poor team-teaching practice, lack of communication between ALTs and their partner-teachers, and being unprepared for the classroom. Thus it is these points that I set out to examine.

The JET Programme is a rather unorthodox education program because ALTs are neither required to speak Japanese nor have any education training or teaching background. Despite the best intentions of the program’s education-based mission statement, this combination does not

always lead to results that benefit students' education. While I would argue that ALTs should *not* be speaking (or practicing) Japanese at school with their students and co-workers (the ALTs are there so that the JTEs'<sup>2</sup> language ability may improve as much as for their students' language ability), I do argue that basic teaching practices must be presented to ALTs on a regular basis for the sake of professional development and better comprehensive English language education.

Charlotte Danielson's framework for teaching (Danielson, 1996) outlines four domains that enrich both the educator's teaching experience and the student's learning experience. The conclusion of this research suggests that incorporating this framework for teaching responsibility into ALT training both at the local and prefectural levels is a cost effective and practical solution to fundamental problems in the program. The four domains are: Planning & Preparation (Domain 1), the Classroom Environment (Domain 2), Instruction (Domain 3), and Professional Responsibilities (Domain 4). Each of the four domains has multiple components that add dimension and detail to each one's scope. Figure 1 lists these domains and the corresponding components.

**Figure 1** *The Four Domains of Teaching Responsibility and Their Components and Their Components*

<b>Domain 1: Planning and Preparation</b> 1a: Demonstrating Knowledge of Content and Pedagogy 1b: Demonstrating Knowledge of Students 1c: Setting Instructional Outcomes 1d: Demonstrating Knowledge of Resources 1e: Designing Coherent Instructions 1f: Designing Student Assessments	<b>Domain 3: Instruction</b> 3a: Communicating with Students 3b: Using Questioning and Discussion Techniques 3c: Engaging Students in Learning 3d: Using Assessment in Instruction 3e: Demonstrating Flexibility and Responsiveness
<b>Domain 2: The Classroom Environment</b> 2a: Creating an Environment of Respect and Rapport 2b: Establishing a Culture for Learning 2c: Managing Classroom Procedures 2d: Managing Student Behavior 2e: Organizing Physical Space	<b>Domain 4: Professional Responsibilities</b> 4a: Reflecting on Teaching 4b: Maintaining Accurate Records 4c: Communicating with Families 4d: Participating in a Professional Community 4e: Growing and Developing Professionally 4f: Showing Professionalism

## 2. Participants and Procedures

During summer 2013 I interviewed seven Hokkaidō ALTs who were currently serving on

<sup>2</sup> The regular teachers with whom ALTs are partnered are referred to as Japanese Teachers of English (JTE).

the program. I referred to a list of prepared questions when necessary, but followed a typical semi-structured interview style recommended by scholars such as Zoltán Dörnyei and Ema Ushioda (2001). The prepared questions covered general demographic details (number of schools to which the ALT is assigned, which school-levels do they teach, etc.) as well as on aspects of the framework such as lesson-plan design, deciding instructional goals, evaluating lessons, etc. The interviews lasted for approximately thirty minutes each.

Next I designed a survey consisting of twenty-seven items. Four of the items collected demographic data, three items on the ALT's formal education training, eight questions on the ALT's teaching situation (number of schools, number of classes per day, etc.), and finally eleven, 6-point Likert scale items. Four of the Likert scale items gauged the participant's feelings towards pre-lesson teacher practices; three of the items gauged feelings towards post-lesson teacher practices; and, the last four dealt with miscellaneous items such as how the participants feel they are utilized as ALTs. The survey was designed using Survey Monkey ([surveymonkey.com](https://www.surveymonkey.com)) and distributed online. I utilized networks such as the National Association for Japan Exchange and Teaching (National AJET) as well as the Hokkaidō and Akita local AJET branches. Fifty-two ALTs currently serving on the JET Programme completed the survey. The survey was anonymous, but many participants offered their names and e-mail addresses in the event that I wanted to follow up with them. 59.6% of the participants were from Hokkaido (n=31), 25% were from Akita (n=13) and the remainder were from prefectures such as Aomori, Iwate, Tochigi, and Niigata. The majority of the participants were 1<sup>st</sup> year ALTs (34.6%, n=18), had no formal background in education (61.5%, n=32), and had no formal teaching experience prior to becoming an ALT. Keeping in mind the requirements to become an ALT, this information is not too remarkable, but is proof that indeed, participants *do not* have formal education-training.

### 3. Results & Discussion

#### 3.1 Planning & Preparation

Regional and national standards dictate what material teachers must cover in a given year. Regional education authorities then compare standardized test results locally & nationally to determine an individual school's performance. Therefore, Domain 1: Planning and Preparation is critical for teachers, as it is the time when teachers must transform the curriculum so that it is accessible to their students (Danielson, 1996, p. 43). Not only is this time important for JTEs to organize the curriculum to make it comprehensible to the students, but ALTs need this time to familiarize themselves with the curriculum's broader picture—not just the lesson to which they are contributing. Also, the ALT may not immediately recognize why the required material is ordered and presented to students the way it is, so time spent planning and preparing is essential for the ALT's familiarity and understanding of the with the curriculum's broader picture.

Items 17 through 20 of the survey focus on Component 1c: Setting Instructional Outcomes. Domain 1's six-components (Figure 1) are each equally important teaching successfully, but this component is directly relevant to the team teaching situation in which ALTs and JTEs find themselves. Also if an ALT is at school for only a limited amount of time, achieving proficiency in this component may prove critical for planning lessons "on the fly."

Item 17, "Meeting with the head teacher/JTE before class to discuss & plan leads to better lessons," (Figure 2) received a 5.02 rating average. However Item 18, "Before class, I am likely to meet with my head teacher to plan/prepare for class," had a 3.86 rating average. The difference may only be subtle but it does seem to indicate that ALTs are perhaps not confident that meeting with their JTEs prior to the lesson is part of their daily teaching routine, which is what educational research professionals recommend it should be. Having time scheduled to meet with the JTE before the lesson should be mandatory. During this time, ALTs and JTEs can practice the activities they

have planned, prepare any multimedia they may need for the day, or make corrections to handouts together.

**Figure 2** *Pre-lesson professional teaching practices*

	<b>Disagree Very Strongly</b>	<b>Disagree Strongly</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Agree Strongly</b>	<b>Agree Very Strongly</b>	<b>Rating Average</b>
Item 17. Meeting with the head teacher/JTE before class to discuss & plan leads to better lessons.	0	0	3	13	14	20	<b>5.02</b>
Item 18. Before class, I am likely to meet with my head teacher to plan/prepare for class.	5	2	8	23	4	8	<b>3.86</b>
Item 19. In order for the students to benefit the most from class, it is important for me to meet with the head teacher to plan/prepare for class.	0	2	4	17	9	18	<b>4.74</b>
Item 20. For one-shot (multiple-school) ALTs, it is preferable to meet with the head teacher or JTE during Homeroom and/or 1st period to plan for classes.	1	0	8	12	14	15	<b>4.66</b>

At the end of the survey, some participants freely offered anonymous comments related to the items on the survey. With regards to the Planning and Preparation domain (Items 17-20), ALTs commented:

**Comment 1:** “Ideally the ALT would never be assigned to a first period class, especially if they travel around a lot. First period is often necessary for setting up the day’s activities.”

**Comment 2:** “Sometimes I am not sure of what I should prepare, and am often surprised just before the lesson.”

**Comment 3:** “The plan for class is usually broken down [explained] on the walk to the classroom.”

**Comment 4:** “If JTEs would take the time to discuss plans with ALTs before (not right before) classes then, I think, lessons will be better.”

Judging by the results of these items and by the comments voluntarily offered by the research participants, ALTs and JTEs do not appear to be diligently carrying out the professional teacher practice of Planning & Preparing. If more ALTs are added to the school system and English classes are made mandatory starting in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade of elementary school, as per Abenomics’ education policy, it will only exacerbate these weak teaching practices. Having fixed time for ALTs and JTEs to meet before class to discuss the curriculum and the material can be introduced to students should be a

standard practice. Certainly Japanese professionals in any other discipline (for example engineering, medicine, and the like) are afforded planning and preparation time, so this should not be a foreign concept to CLAIR, MEXT, and the local boards of education. Furthermore, given the comments, it would appear as though it would be an easy practice to enforce.

### 3.2 Professional Responsibilities

Domain 4, Professional Responsibilities, consists of six components (Figure 1). Due to the auspices of the JET Programme and of the ALTs' own limitations, a couple of them may not be directly relevant to the ALT scenario. For example, 4c: Communicating with Families is most likely out of the question given that ALTs do not generally speak Japanese with enough proficiency. Component 4a: Reflecting on Teaching, on the other hand, is perfectly suited to the ALT job description. This component emphasizes the necessity for teachers and ALTs to think critically about their lessons in order to improve their teaching methods, classroom management, and pre-lesson planning. Items 21-23 (Figure 3) pertain to Component 4a.

**Figure 3** *Post-lesson professional teaching practices*

	<b>Disagree Very Strongly</b>	<b>Disagree Strongly</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Agree Strongly</b>	<b>Agree Very Strongly</b>	<b>Rating Average</b>
Item 21. Meeting with the head teacher/JTE after class to evaluate & provide feedback leads to better future lessons.	0	0	5	18	15	9	<b>4.60</b>
Item 22. After class, I am likely to meet with my head teacher/JTE to evaluate the class and discuss how it went.	6	10	9	19	4	0	<b>3.10</b>
Item 23. There should be a set time (e.g. during last period, after last period), to meet with the head teacher/JTE to evaluate & provide feedback on lessons.	1	0	7	21	6	13	<b>4.46</b>

Item 21, "Meeting with the head teacher/JTE after class to evaluate & provide feedback leads to better future lessons" received a 4.60 average rating (Figure 3). However, Item 22, "After class, I am likely to meet with my head teacher/JTE to evaluate the class and discuss how it went,"

received a 3.10. This average rating discrepancy between the two items appears to indicate that what ALTs consider would “lead to better future lessons” is not happening consistently.

Again, ALTs volunteered comments directly addressing this professional responsibility described by Component 4a:

**Comment 5:** “Speak to me, allow me to plan/prepare/be involved in the lesson, discuss the class afterwards, don’t use me as a CD player, but actually team-teach!”

**Comment 6:** “As for meeting after class for feedback: I was stationed at the BOE, and only went to the schools as scheduled. It is often very difficult to meet with teachers after class, either because I wasn’t at that school all day, or [I] had to leave to go to another school. If this is a point that needs to be stressed, it should also be communicated to the JTE as well. I honestly don’t remember talking about classes after the fact unless the students were particularly unresponsive or despondent.”

These comments show that ALTs desire to have a more active and *professional* teaching role.

Considering that having teaching experience (or even wanting to be an educator) is not a prerequisite for hire, the very fact that there are ALTs who feel strongly about working to improve students’ learning experience is a great compliment to JET Programme participants. However if the plan to double the number of ALTs that was originally included in Abenomics’ education reform is to be implemented at all—it would only double the unsatisfactory teaching practices for which the program allows. Allocating time after the ALT’s last class for the JTE and ALT to meet does not cost anything per se, only time—valuable time that can be viewed as an investment for the benefit of future success.

The results gleaned from these items beg the questions: why *aren’t* ALTs expected to assume a more professional-educator capacity? Judging by these results, no matter how limited in scope they may be, ALTs clearly value English education and professional practice. Perhaps thirty years ago, when the JET Programme began, this ambitious program’s future was uncertain. It seems as though CLAIR and MEXT set the standards for hire (no Japanese language ability, no formal education training, and no formal teaching experience—only a bachelor level degree from an



accredited school) to the bare minimum. After thirty years however, the ALT demographic has changed. Not only that, but English language education is not even remotely close to what it was thirty years ago. It is about time the demands on ALTs for professional educational practice change, too. Doubling the number of ALTs without addressing this basic issue will surely continue the program's boondoggles, rather than contribute to the program's boon.

#### 4. Conclusion

As a part of the broader Abenomics policies announced in early 2013, Prime Minister Abe's three-arrows policy for English education consisted of 1) an increase in the available opportunities for Japanese students to earn an IB Diploma, 2) to make TOEFL a mandatory requirement in high schools, universities, and for gaining government employment, and 3) to double the number of JET Programme ALTs. Of these three, the administration's intention to double the number of ALTs received a substantial amount of negative English-media coverage and drew by far the most criticism online by both *ex-* and current ALTs. Although these education policies seem to have been de-prioritized by the administration as of fall 2013, initial adverse responses to the possibility of expanding the JET Programme prompted my initial questions of "what do ALTs feel the drawbacks of the program are?" and "how can these drawbacks be addressed in a manner that is professionally acceptable and cost efficient?"

In answer to the first question, it appears as though there are two possible explanations. One is that over time the expectation has been established that ALTs are responsible for actually teaching English language to students, despite the program's mission of simply providing cultural exchange and *teaching of* said culture. ALTs are generally more than eager to assume this professional role of educator. Because the majority of ALTs lack education training and experience prior to becoming an ALT, they do not know where to begin to assume this role.

In response to the second question, ALTs are already required to attend regular conferences and workshops throughout the year—varying from one a year to two or three, depending on the prefecture. These conferences offer ALTs some support with designing specific lessons, but the conference topics tend to be more broad, covering life in Japan, dealing with culture exhaustion, and addressing the decision to re-contract or not. Since the ALTs are already required to attend these conferences, using them as a time to focus on professional responsibilities as outlined by Charlotte Danielson’s framework for teaching would not add to the expense of the program. And, since these professional responsibilities are transferable across all professions, they may appeal to more ALTs—specifically, to ALTs who are *not* particularly interested in foreign language teaching (a topic that these conferences does tend to showcase).

From my own training in educational practices and by my experience as a professional educator in America, I was already a little bias towards focusing on pre-lesson and post-lesson teacher practices. However, in the future I would like to form a survey gauging ALTs’ perspectives on all twenty-five components of the framework. The results of that survey would reveal which of the components (and domains) ALTs find most directly relevant to their situations. Then based on those results, I will design a professional development workshop that will be offered to ALTs. A second approach would be to design a Japanese version geared towards JTEs. Results from such a survey would be very valuable and could possibly help open the lines of communication between ALTs and JTEs—the results of which would no doubt have positive effects in the classroom.

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