

Effectiveness of ALT Instruction – a Preliminary Study

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Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) or 外国語指導助手 in Japanese, was a term introduced by the Ministry of Education in the late 1980's. The idea was to introduce native English speakers to junior high schools and high schools to improve Japanese students' communicative skills. Despite this effort, Japanese students' English competence remains low compared to their counterparts from other Asian countries. After over 30 years of implementation, ALT program needs to be examined, analyzed, and amended. The purpose of this preliminary study is to discern ALT program effectiveness from the point of view of one of the parties involved: Japanese students.

Rationale and history behind the ALT program

It was 1987, when, in an effort to perhaps mend American-Japanese relations brought by trade tension, the Ministry of Education created the JET program. The official objective of the JET (Japanese Exchange and Teaching) program was to improve English language education and support international exchange (CLAIR, 2017). Participants of the JET program serve as assistant language teachers (ALTs) who work in schools, coordinators for international relations (CIRs) who collaborate with local governments and sports exchange advisers (SEAs) who help with sport projects (McCrostie, 2017). ALTs, therefore, are a *part* of the JET program - a clarification that is helpful in seeking the chain of command, or rather, of responsibility. According to CLAIR (2015), 90% of all JET participants are ALTs, explaining a common assumption that every JET program participant is an ALT.

Cost and Effect

ALTs presence in Japanese schools around the country has become almost natural. However, with the passing years, it has become evident that the arrangement is not working. TOEIC scores have not reflected any change, nor have the speaking and listening skills of Japanese students. In my 20 years of teaching Japanese university students, I have not witnessed any noteworthy improvements in test scores or increases in motivation to learn English or study abroad. If anything, the trends are downward, as the number of Japanese students studying overseas fell

from 82,945 in 2004 to 60,138 in 2012 (OECD 2014). Another complaint is that the program costs too much money. A 2015 Japan Association of Corporate Executives report noted that it was then costing 40 billion yen per year. Thinking about the steep cost of the program, it is not difficult to imagine what the critics think: “where are the results?”

Responsibilities

A prospective ALT is required to have a 4-year university degree, but no teaching license (JET Program, 2016). During the interview process, a personal interest in Japan is emphasized. To fulfill the cultural exchange part of the program, potential ALT should also be ready to participate in international exchange with the community. This could be, for instance, taking part in a local festival, which could be voluntary—but also could be mandatory.

In 2011, in *Five Proposals and Concrete Implementation Plans to Increase Ability of English Language as an International Lingua Franca*, MEXT stated that the purpose of ALTs was to expose students to practical English in natural situations. The proposal stressed the importance of ALTs and team teaching. However, it was up to the boards of educations, schools, and eventually the lead teachers to decide how best to utilize ALTs.

In 2013, MEXT’s pointed out the need for skilled ALTs to be allowed to teach independently in the plan called *Plan for Implementation of English Education Reform in Response to Globalization*. Both, 2011 and 2013 MEXT plans recognized the need to assign a more active role of ALTs in the classroom; either in team teaching or independent teaching sessions.

In 2015, again a proactive role for ALTs was laid out in *Plan to Increase English Ability in Students*. However, there were still no clear guidelines. The result is the continuation of varied expectations of what ALTs should or should not do, which is ultimately left to the discretion of their immediate employers and co-workers.

In schools, ALTs are paired with a Japanese teacher, who is licensed to teach. The lead teacher, as it is sometimes called, is supposed to create and teach useful and communicative lessons, together with the ALT. Reality, unfortunately, does not allow for sufficient time to prepare as a team, and most of the time it is the Japanese teacher who plans the lesson and decides how to use the ALT. Sometimes the cooperation is satisfying, but sometimes, as we will see in the testimonies, ALTs are left out and unappreciated.

The Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this preliminary study was to collect and examine observations of Japanese students from the point of view of overall effectiveness of ALT instruction. Students who participated in this study had ALTs in their junior and/or high schools, and had multiple opportunities to experience classes taught by ALTs and their lead teachers. Thus, their observations regarding ALTs roles and cooperation with the lead teacher could make interesting contribution to the study.

Procedure

I asked them to share their stories with me on the voluntary basis in an email format. The students were informed that their stories will be used in a research on ALT program effectiveness and their anonymity is ensured. A total of 9 students who had attended junior and high school scattered all over Japan responded to this request.

Analysis

The students written testimonies were analyzed from the following points: what ALTs did in class, what was their overall experience with ALTs, and what they think should be changed to make the ALT role more effective.

Results

Below are unabridged responses from students who decided to partake in this study:

Student A:

In my junior high and high school, the ALT teachers mostly told students pronunciation. Japanese teacher could not speak English as well as natives, so the ALT taught us the appropriate pronunciation. Sometimes, the ALT teachers had whole class and did some activities which we did not usually do. The class focused on speaking. How to express something in English, or further pronunciation were the most memorable activities I'd ever had. Also, they had interesting quizzes. We did quizzes when we did not have anything to do.

However, I think they were not treated as usual Japanese teachers. The ALT teachers were having harder time than Japanese. As my school was secondary school, they were in charge of three grades students. Every time I saw them, they were checking a great amount of student's homework such as writing. Besides this, the ALT teachers were checking another writing that students in highest

grades and were studying for university entrance exam. I was not the exception. As for students, it was nice because their writings were evaluated in native's eyes, while it was much disgusting for the ALT teachers. They were used to relieve the burden of Japanese English teachers.

In my life, I think it was good experience to spend time to talk with ALTs. I was trying to talk with them in English, and I definitely believe that my English skills were improved through this. When I went to America as school trip, the ALT helped me a lot. I even believe that if they were not in my school, I could not enter AIU. Therefore, I am glad to meet them in my life.

I think their working condition should be improved because they are spending more time than Japanese English teachers. Also, they should not be regarded just as assistance. They should sometimes have whole class to teach other than English such as other cultures.

Student B:

In junior high school, we had only one ALT and he attend the class once a week. Although he participated in the activities, the class was organized usually. So, we could not do something special.

In senior high school, we had classes not only weekdays but also Saturdays because the school is private school. We had 3 kinds of English classes: English communication, English expression and General English. The ALTs came only the class of English communication and once a week even though each course has three classes in a week. In the class which ALT came, we mainly practice listening English, that is, we did not have many opportunities to speak English.

Totally, I think that ALTs were only in the classroom. They could not work with students because the English teachers control their class. If ALTs could organize class, the class would be better. For example, in AIU, we have many opportunities to express our opinion.

Student C:

My ALT in junior high school was very active, and he often chatted with us (students) both during the English class and breaks. My Japanese English teachers liked to use a textbook which has lyrics on it that we can sing along with the music. Therefore, the ALT would often read out the words so that students can repeat after him, and he did the same thing with the regular English textbook. He

often helped the Japanese teacher handing out some copies, but only if he were asked to do it. Also, while we were doing our writing exercise, the students would often ask the Japanese teacher for any help, so the ALT would usually move around the classroom and teases some students. I had two Japanese teachers who taught me English, and one teacher preferred the ALT to speak during the class. Therefore, when she was asked for any help from students, she would often call the ALT to help them. However, this case did not happen to my other Japanese teacher.

To sum up, I think my junior high ALT had quite a lot of freedom during the class because he could move around the classroom many times. On the other hand, the whole lesson was carried out by the Japanese teachers, so the ALT did not know what to do until the teachers told him.

Compared to my junior high ALT, my ALT in high school was quiet. He only spoke up when students ask him some questions about their exercises they were working on in the class, or when we had Q&A time to the ALT teacher. To tell the truth, he suddenly stopped coming to my school, and no teacher could make contact with him, so I only experienced the high school English class with the ALT for less than two months. If I were to make any comments about him, I would say that he had much less chance to talk during the class, which disappointed me because I had to find and catch him after the class and make an appointment to have some conversations with him. I independently made some chances to be in an English-speaking environment, but I thought the same situation should also be served to my classmates so that they can improve (especially) their speaking skills.

Overall, I was disappointed more than my feeling of excitement towards the ALTs. I believe the ALTs should speak out more during the lesson because students can listen to the 'real' English and ask them to help the students to pronounce correctly by showing the mouth and tongue's movements.

Student D:

At junior high school (private), I don't remember clearly, but a Japanese teacher had more control than ALTs. At high school(private), ALTs gave us advice about writing. In writing class in our 3rd grade, ALTs taught more vocabulary and sentence structures, which was so effective.

I think that ALTs looked sometimes bored during the class because they didn't have much control. In my high school, however, they mainly had control and looked more excited.

Student E:

I was going to secondary school (junior high and high school were combined as one school) and I had a class called SE (Speaking English) for 4 years from the first grade of junior high to the first grade of high school. In the class, the main teacher was absolutely the ALTs. ALTs led the class all in English and Japanese teachers were the assistance. I'm the first grade of junior high school, Japanese teachers were responsible for catch up the direction in Japanese as most of the students had just begun learning English. In upper grades, Japanese teachers also used English mainly and communicated with students. I think ALTs we're responsible for the materials we used, and the evaluation in the speaking tests and presentations as well.

I am very satisfied by the environment I was in. I know it is not always the case in every school, so I think letting ALTs be the main teachers could be one improvement. Also, the content should not be simply singing or playing games, but focus on conversation or speaking skills in speech, presentation and so on.

Lastly, this is my personal experience but I had spent a lot of time with ALTs in club activities for six years, and it was a great experiences. They helped me a lot with practice of pronunciation, English speech, English debate, and even the essays for AIU entrance exam. Their help was something Japanese teachers cannot give fully, and very useful. From such experience, I assume that it would be nice that's ALTs have opportunities to interact with students outside of specific classes.

Student F:

What ALTs were in charge of:

-They mainly took part in teaching pronunciation.

-We did some activities when we had ALT in our class.

What ALTs were not in charge of:

-Although they assist the main teacher, they didn't actually organize classes.

-Because the job of the ALTs is to assist the main teacher, they only got involved in class only when they were asked to do so.

Overall evaluation for this experience:

-For me, the excitement, motivation, and what I learned from the class didn't really change whether the ALTs came to the class or not.

What I think should be changed:

-I think that there should be more classes organized by ALTs because we still don't have enough opportunities to listen to English spoken by native speakers.

Student G:

I had ALTs in my junior high school. They assisted the main teachers(Japanese) by reading the textbooks out loud and letting us do shadowing. They corrected our English pronunciation and grammatical errors. I think these are what they mainly did in English class. They were in charge of English club and had conversations with the students after class. For me, getting corrected my English pronunciation by my ALTs was a helpful experience because other English teachers (Japanese) had a terrible pronunciation. My ALTs also helped me a lot during my practice for speech contests. They taught me natural gestures which other teachers(Japanese) didn't really know. Sometimes there were awkward times when Japanese teachers asked the students to learn and memorize grammatically-broken English sentences. The ALTs seemed to know that it was strange, but the Japanese teachers forced them to read the sentences out because they believed that there was nothing weird about the sentences. To me, there seemed to have an implicit hierarchical relationship between the ALTs and Japanese teachers. Finally, I think ALTs should be given some opportunities to lead the whole class instead of Japanese teachers. It may be difficult since they are "assistant" teachers, but I believe they have many things that they can teach the students which Japanese teachers find difficult to teach (such as culture, natural pronunciation, gesture, and responding skills).

Student H:

I had one ALT either in my junior/high school. During the English conversation classes in my junior high school, the ALT led the students by himself and there was no Japanese teacher. The contents was really easy for me. For example, I learned explaining direction (go straight, turn right, etc.). Also, he can speak Japanese very well, so he used Japanese for most of the time. The handout he gave us was completely made by him, so it seemed he could teach us very freely. I was

excited in his class, because he always said funny things. On the other hand, in my high school, the English classes was provided by one ALT and one Japanese teacher. The Japanese teacher almost led us and we focused on writing rather than speaking. He just checked our writing and gave us advice. It was really helpful for me but it seemed meaningless to have our ALT. In my opinion, ALTs should lead their students by themselves and provide English "conversation" classes.

Student I:

I had ALT in my English classes in both my junior high school and high school. In my junior high school, ALTs were not mainly in charge of English classes. Although they were in my English classes, they just stood in my classroom and sometimes ask questions to students or answer questions from students or main teachers. In my high school, ALTs were not mainly in charge of English classes as well. They seldom attended classes. They spared most of their working time staying in the teachers' room and checked essays from students.

In both my junior high school and high school, the main teachers didn't interact with ALTs so much in classes. I'm not sure these things happen in other schools but I think in this current system, there is little necessity for ALTs. This current situation is meaningless for ALTs as well as students.

I think schools should provide ALTs more opportunities to attend classes.

Discussion

The results of the students' retrospective impressions about ALTs, although limited in number, offer some valuable insights. One reason is that students are more objective in evaluating the situation, as the less-involved, more-passive actor. While a Japanese lead teacher may defend their position waving a demanding curriculum, and an ALT might complain about lack of independence in classroom, the student has an advantage of being an interested audience, thus becomes an evaluator of both and each separately.

The results could be categorized into four following reactions: i.) positive, ii.) positive, yet regrettable, iii.) neutral, iv.) negative, but sympathizing or wishful.

i.) Positive reactions include:

“In my life, I think it was good experience to spend time to talk with ALTs” (Student A)

“In writing class in our 3rd grade, ALTs taught more vocabulary and sentence structures, which was so effective” (Student D)

“They helped me a lot with practice of pronunciation, English speech, English debate, and even the essays for AIU entrance exam. Their help was something Japanese teachers cannot give fully, and very useful” (Student E)

“For me, getting corrected my English pronunciation by my ALTs was a helpful experience (Student G),

“The handout he gave us was completely made by him, so it seemed he could teach us very freely. I was excited in his class, because he always said funny things” (Student H)

“My ALTs also helped me a lot during my practice for speech contests. They taught me natural gestures which other teachers (Japanese) didn't really know” (Student I)

ii.) Positive, but regrettable:

“To sum up, I think my junior high ALT had quite a lot of freedom during the class because he could move around the classroom many times. On the other hand, the whole lesson was carried out by the Japanese teachers, so the ALT did not know what to do until the teachers told him” (Student C)

iii.) Neutral:

“For me, the excitement, motivation, and what I learned from the class didn't really change whether the ALTs came to the class or not” (Student F)

iv.) Negative, yet sympathizing or wishful:

“However, I think they were not treated as usual Japanese teachers. The ALT teachers were having harder time than Japanese”. “As for students, it was nice because their writings were evaluated in native's eyes, while it was much disgusting for the ALT teachers. They were used to relieve the burden of Japanese English teachers” (Student A),

“They could not work with students because the English teachers control their class. If ALTs could organize class, the class would be better” (Student B),

“Overall, I was disappointed more than my feeling of excitement towards the ALTs. I believe the ALTs should speak out more during the lesson” (Student C),

“I'm not sure these things happen in other schools but I think in this current system, there is little necessity for ALTs. This current situation is meaningless for ALTs as well as students. I think schools should provide ALTs more opportunities to attend classes” (Student I).

Despite variety of experiences, students' regrets and wishes show that the ALTs are not at the heart of the problem, but it is rather their little involvement in active teaching, being reduced to

one role, or having to do other things (grading papers). Those elements, to a keen student observant, are recognized as consequences of being controlled or limited by the Japanese lead teacher(s).

Another detectable common point is the discrepancy between junior high school and high school experience with ALT instruction. For instance, Student H writes: “On the other hand, in my high school (...) The Japanese teacher almost led us and we focused on writing rather than speaking. He just checked our writing and gave us advice. It was really helpful for me but it seemed meaningless to have our ALT.” Student I notices that change also: “In my high school, ALTs were not mainly in charge of English classes as well. They seldom attended classes. They spared most of their working time staying in the teachers' room and checked essays from students.” Finally, Student C describes a quite alarming situation in which their high school ALT suddenly disappeared after being “quiet” in class, and couldn't be contacted henceforth.

Conclusion

The generally positive responses confirm that it is not the ALTs or their professionalism that are the problem, but rather the way they are managed and what roles in the classroom are assigned to them. The next step in this study is to collect testimonies from the ALTs. Preliminary results of ALT's questionnaires I have so far conducted show a common thread. Similarly to the students, they observe that their (ALT's) involvement in teaching – fairly active in junior high school - is for the most part marginalized in high school. Finally, to have a complete picture of the situation, Japanese lead teachers' voice should also be heard. Follow-up studies with a larger number of participants on all sides are needed to achieve a broad spectrum of the effectiveness of having native English speakers in Japanese schools.

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