

ALT Training Online (ALTTO): User Guide

Recommended Reading

1.0	Introduction	1
1.1	Why Read This Guide?	1
1.2	Who Is This Guide For?	1
1.3	Why Do The Course?	2
1.4	Summary	3
2.0	Using the ALTTO Website Effectively	3
2.1	Overview	3
2.2	Course Modules	4
2.3	Resources	7
2.4	Comments and Forum	8
2.5	Writing Circle	9
3.0	Study Guide	9
3.1	How to Study	10
3.2	Personal Study Program	11
3.3	Sharing	12
3.4	On Topic	13
3.5	Reading and Watching	13
3.6	Reading Techniques	13
3.7	Consolidation	14
3.8	Support	15
3.9	After the Course	15
4.0	Bibliography	17

Recommended Reading

- [Bollen, D.](#), Cooke, S., Fenton-Smith, B., Rivers, D. J., Ruegg, R., Stillwell, C., & Yamamoto, K. (2010). Taking action on professional development. In A. M. Stoke (Ed.), JALT 2009 Conference Proceedings. Tokyo: JALT.

1.0 Introduction

Welcome to ALT Training Online (ALTTO).

Thank you for joining the first online teacher training specifically designed for all ALTs in Japan. This guide gives you a brief introduction to the website and training course, explains what the content and interactive features are, and how to make full use of them. It will make clear the importance of your comments and questions, give advice on how to study, and make suggestions on developing your individual study plan.

This guide will be periodically revised to reflect changes to the website and course – if you spot something that needs to be updated, or any dead links please email alttrainingonline@gmail.com to help keep this course as up to date and relevant as possible.

1.1 Why read this guide?

By reading this guide you will know:

- How to make the most effective use of this website.
- How to complete the modules.
- How to comment on the reflection activities in the modules, and why commenting is an essential part of the course.

1.2 Who is this guide for?

This guide is for:

- Practicing ALTs.
- People considering an ALT position/candidates that have secured a position.
- Those interested in language education in Japanese public schools.

- Anyone interested in contemporary teacher development programs.

1.3 Why do the course?

With the students learning needs in mind, this course aims to advance ALT teaching abilities and professional development. ALTTO aims to support ALTs in meeting targets set by the Japanese Ministry of Education (MEXT), and to connect teachers to share and grow as part of a community. Key motivations for ALTTO evolving include:

- **Existing pre- and in-service training** for ALTs (that experience it) is neither standardized nor systematic, and it takes place over a few days; unlike typical teacher training programs that (in other OECD countries) last a year, and include weeks of in-class practicum.
- Published **ALT questionnaires** have found ALTs to be requesting more training. JTEs consistently **request trained ALTs**. And the boards of education, that dispatch ALTs to the schools they convene, actively **hire trained ALTs** (Tsuido, Otani & Davies, 2012).
- Despite regular and **increasing language goals** set by the Japanese government, there has been **no change to ALT training** to meet these goals.
- **Previous ALT** training has produced positive outcomes for both teacher training, and instilled a sense of connectedness between ALTs (Kushima, Obari & Nishihori, 2011).
- The cost and time involved in traditional Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) courses require a financial and time commitment. Such courses are not contextually specific (Liu, 1998), and they do not support connectedness through collaborative learning. ALTTO is free, context specific (to ALTs in Japanese public schools), designed to fit around your schedule, and works by teachers collaborating.
- The high turnover of ALTs, and resulting lack training from peers, creates an ineffective system for on the job (in-service) training.

1.4 Summary

The three main aims of ALTTO are:

- To support ALTs to teach based on the Course of Study supplied by the Ministry of Education (MEXT).
- To improve the working relationship between ALTs and JTEs.
- To build a community of ALTs.

2.0 Using the ALTTO website effectively

This section summarizes the main components of the ALTTO website, what they are, why they are included, and how you can make best use of them.

2.1 Overview

This course first evolved from research I did whilst writing an MA dissertation. A dominant theme of the newspaper and academic articles is that all parties involved in language education in Japanese public schools are seeking trained ALTs (the ALTs, the JTEs and the boards of education). One JTE commented “getting a good ALT is like winning the lottery” (Clavel, 2014), and one board of education official commented that “by MEXT actively employing untrained teachers, and failing to offer any similar initiative may indicate their belief that improvements will organically occur” (Crooks, 2001) – this was over 15 years ago.

- Articles used in this guide are discussed throughout the modules to **proactively** support quality education for our students.

The plan then is to provide a training platform that all ALTs can contribute to developing and gaining from. A training specific to ALTs working in Japanese public schools, written by ALTs, for ALTs.

2.2 Course modules

The contents of the modules are overviewed in the [Introduction](#); this section explains the goals of the modules, and how to complete them.

There are 21 modules divided into 3 categories: Contextual, Training and Personal Development. **Contextual** modules cover socio-cultural factors that directly and indirectly relate to the classrooms we teach in. Content here is assumed in later modules (so it is recommended reading/watching even if you've been living/teaching in Japan for years).

Training modules are more practical, and talk about how to teach the four skills (listening, reading, speaking, and writing), in addition to vocabulary and phonics. Here are not just a lot of activities specific to our workplace that other websites usefully provide (e.g. [ALT wiki](#), [Englipedia](#), [English WebBook](#)), but how to teach (such activities) in consideration of the information discussed in Contextual modules. Finally, the standard modules of any teacher training program: **Professional Development**. These modules provide support for professional growth in this teaching context, with an aim of pushing language education forward in Japan, by you, the ALTs taking part in the course.

Throughout the modules there are **reflection questions** for you to respond to by writing in the interactive features outlined below. The primary place for responses is in the **Comments** directly after the questions. For longer comments, please write in the [forum](#), and/or [Facebook group](#). Commenting is a fundamental part of ALTTO and serves two main purposes; to consolidate your own learning, and to share with/learn from other ALTs taking part in the course, (more on this in section 2.4 below).

The ALTTO initiative is not the first in-service training program for ALTs in Japan. Other independent small-scale in-service training has happened over the years, for example the

flower forum. The content of modules on ALTTO comes from successful elements of such previous training initiatives, and recommendations from the abundance of research that has been carried out on language teaching, and ALTs, in Japan. As a result, module content discusses workable solutions for ALTs in Japanese public schools developed from previous successful ALT training programs. All modules are being tried out by practicing ALTs, with a range of experience, to check for quality and relevancy before going online.

The last fundamental points about the modules concern: their style, quality, and you (the active participants).

1. All module content is written for training purposes and, being an independent initiative, ALTTO is not guided by the views of any groups: business, political or other. Therefore, none of the content is bias to a certain opinion or intentionally provides an incorrect view of any particular topic. The aim is to present the teaching situation, how to teach in it, and how to improve it (as reflected in the module categories; Contextual, Training, Professional Development).
2. With the aim of providing an impartial and quality course, leading ALT researchers and teacher trainers have been sourced to write modules and contribute to the recommended reading. This second key factor is vital to the effectiveness of the whole program in providing quality content from a variety of perspectives.
3. The acronym ESID (Every Situation Is Different), an established meme in the ALT community, guides much of the module content. ESID refers to the wide variety of variables influencing us, and each school we teach in, such as: our employers, our contracts, the teachers we work with, the resources at each school, the levels and

background of our students, the amount of time we spend teaching in class etc. With the wide variety of differences between contracting bodies and schools, some aspects of the module content may not apply directly to you or your current schools, so the aim is for content to be general enough to apply to all teachers, but specific enough to apply to the many aspects of ALTs in Japanese public schools. By sharing your advice in the comments, forum and Facebook, you will support other teachers who may have similar working conditions, and encourage discussion on how to promote effective teaching in view of similar (or different) teaching situations.

4. In addition to the established ESID meme, the variety of ALT backgrounds, qualifications and abilities is another key consideration in the construction of the course. Some ALTs have no teaching background, and are only in Japan for a year, other ALTs have education related Master's degrees, backgrounds in education and a house/family in Japan (with a variety of diversity in-between) – as such, some aspects of the course may be completely new to some, and others may know things quite well (ALTs are discussed in the ALT module). Here is where we can support each other by posting questions (about the course or job), and writing responses in the comments sections, on the forum or on the [ALTTO Facebook](#) page.

5. Finally, and connected to the 'time spent teaching' aspect of the ESID notion, is our teaching roles. The lack of clarification of what our job roles are (a common topic in ALT research), has resulted in many roles being identified. At opposite ends of the scale 'human tape recorders' to solo teaching have been widely documented since the late 1980s. The 'human tape recorder' role is when an ALT reads a short passage in class, and nothing else. Solo teaching is a teacher teaching by themselves in a non-assistant position. Going by existing research findings, solo teaching has been increasing since first

researched by The Institute for Research in Language Teaching in the early 1990s. They found that 30% of the time the ALT was in charge (solo), 25% the Japanese Teacher of English (JTE) in charge, and 36% of the time was spent team-teaching (McConnell, 2000: 211). [AJET](#) (2014), and [Reed](#) (2015) both found solo teaching to be a more common practice than this previous study. The training being offered on ALTTO aims to empower ALTs to be more successful in their variety of teaching roles, and harness our students' potential.

In sum, this course will develop your teaching skills through deeper understanding of the teaching context in Japan, the teachers you work with and the students you teach (**Contextual modules**). The course will use knowledge from Contextual modules as a foundation of how to teach in the Japanese public school context (**Training modules**). Finally, this course will build from the previous modules by developing your professional skills and increased awareness of your teaching context (**Professional Development modules**). This whole project is a group initiative, shaped and molded by all involved – you and your comments (see 2.4 below).

2.3 Resources

The resources are the articles and movie clips that aid the ALTTO course. All resources are free, and accessibility of content has been made under the paradigm of the Open Access Movement. Reading comes from both academic and mass media sources. To maintain the high quality and standards of ALTTO, experienced ALTs, ALT researchers, teacher trainers' and educational researchers have been asked to contribute their papers and research. The primary source of contextually specific papers comes from the Japan Association of Language Teaching ([JALT](#)), and the authors that have granted permission for their use here.

In the module content, both free reading and reading accessible through a database is used.

Where free reading is used, there is a live link in the text. These accessible papers have been researched, and permission to use them has been granted by their authors. Reading them will enhance your insight and awareness of your job, and encourage discussion in the forum/Facebook (such papers are included in this guide too – as you may have seen above).

All quoted material is referenced at the foot of the modules where teachers' can look for additional publications to understand any point more. A further resource for literature is university libraries that may allow you to join for a small fee (my local university, with a huge resource section of linguistic and English textbooks, has an annual fee of ¥500).

As always, please email in or post in the [forum/Facebook](#) anything that you feel may support the course, and other teachers.

2.4 Comments and Forum

There are periodic reflection questions throughout the modules with a '**Comments**' button below each question. Click here to write your responses to the question, and to read other teachers' answers. Because of the huge number of variables in our teaching context (ESID, previous teaching experiences and classroom roles, for example), our feedback will vary. By sharing and reading the responses from other ALTs we can guide language education forward by collaboratively shaping our skills.

The ALTTO [forum](#) is another place to write and read comments to questions. Teachers may also use the forum to ask questions about anything to do with the course, ALT life, or teaching in general. Previous use of forums, for example the flower forum noted above, successfully connected and supported professional growth in ALTs. There is also a wealth of research supporting the use of forums in contemporary teacher training programs, for the

same reasons: connectivity and developing professional skills.

As far back as 1993, Harasim stated that a higher conceptual knowledge can be gained through the knowledge and experience of others through online forums. The wealth of research on this later gave rise to Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) in web-based education, which evolved into the Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) phenomena growing today. Building on the effective elements of online learning (interactive modules, forums and writing circles), and positive research findings specific to the ALT teaching context, these aspects, in addition to reflection questions, comments and Facebook group play an instrumental part to the success of ALTTO and our community.

2.5 Writing Circle – Google Drive

The aim of the writing circle provides a place for teachers to upload their working papers for other teachers to edit and comment on drafts. ALTs that are interested in this avenue of professional development email their interest to altrainingonline@gmail.com and they will be added to as an editor. From here they can upload documents for other teachers to read and comment on, and comment on other people's drafts.

The tools to conduct publishable research are primarily in the Professional Development modules along with suggested places where to submit writing, academic or otherwise.

3.0 Study guide

The guide here is aimed to support your study experience with tips and advice on how to make the most out of this course. The ALTTO MOOC is a variant from traditional MOOCs that have emerged over recent years, as it is a self-growing, self-perpetuating system designed

to reflect the fluidity of our teaching context. Nothing is marked, all responses are peer reviewed and there are no deadlines to start or complete modules. Staying on top of the reading material and completing modules may be challenging, so to stay motivated this guide gives suggestions and how to study effectively, and develop your study plan.

3.1 How to Study

The course modules are on live webpages, and can be downloaded as pdfs. The live modules have links to the recommended reading material, as well as comment links to type responses to reflection questions.

To complete the modules you must read all the modules and comment on all reflection questions. The recommended reading is written at the beginning of the module (like at the top of this User Guide), with links that will open in a new page. Reading this is not compulsory, but it will deepen your awareness considerably. To comment on reflection questions just click on the comments button directly after the question and write your response/comment, or, for more space, comment on the forum or Facebook page.

It is better to complete the modules in order because knowledge from previous modules is assumed in later modules. Modules may be skipped and returned to in certain cases. For example teachers that require practical teaching support can immediately go to the Training modules, returning later to the Contextual modules at a convenient time to understand how to better initiate teaching approaches. Teachers who are interested in doing research and/or getting published may also jump to the Professional Development modules, and return to previous modules to stay up to date with the teaching context and contemporary teaching practices later.

3.2 Personal Study Program

Questions you should consider before and during studying on ALTTO: When are you available to study; weekdays, weekends or both? How should you study? Are you a morning person or an evening person?

ALTTO modules are designed for you to study at your own pace, and to fit around any schedule – you simply read modules and comment on reflection questions when it is convenient for you. Creating a study plan (even one that you modify later as you get into routines) will vastly help to stay on top of this course. You are the only person to know when is best for you to study. Becoming more aware of when you are most able to concentrate and focus, and what affects your concentration levels, takes time but results in efficient study. By acknowledging when you are better able to concentrate and process information, you allow yourself to seek more effective study times, and write more thoughtful comments for other teachers to read.

You may find that just starting to read the modules may be an obstacle, but starting is the only way of seeing how you will get on. Actively taking part in the course (i.e. writing regular comments) will help your motivation and sense of professional growth. By simply reading, you will start to figure out your personal and professional schedule. Broadly, some people digest and process information earlier in the day, others later. Moreover, our professional schedules can be very random (ALT schedules often change from day to day, week to week), so studying and working may create challenges for you to consider. Studying at work can have advantages, as the information you read can be immediately applicable to your classes. Information in Contextual modules may be considered as your lessons take place too.

Some final considerations on developing your study plan are:

- If you've been away from studying for a while, ease into this – do not aim to read through module content, and comment on reflection questions, in an unrealistic time frame.
- Remove distractions/close other webpages, and organize your time. Make time to focus on the course without stressing about other things that you need to do. Of course unexpected things will come up, just make sure that when you return you are in a position to focus on the course, when you feel ready.
- Any MOOC requires a high degree of self-discipline. As you progress through the course and start growing professionally, your motivation to continue will raise. This, joint with easing into the course, removing distractions, maintaining focus and managing your time will organically create a sense of purpose and self-discipline.
- A standard way to chart your progress, that you may well have done previously, is to keep a reflective journal. The positive outcomes for personal growth using journals are so well established, and integrated into study at all levels that there is little need to explain the value of them here. Only that, as we move on from paper-based journals, a nice online provider is <https://penzu.com/>. By updating your journal as you go along the course, you can conveniently reflect back on how you have grown professionally using multiple search paths on the site (keyword and date of entry).

3.3 Sharing

ALTs can be isolated geographically and professionally, like educators in any context. This isolatedness, together with research on interactive learning and the ESID meme, emphasizes the significance of community building. ALTTO has simply incorporated the interactive elements (comments, [forum](#) and [Facebook](#) group) that studies have repeatedly found to be effective in online learning and community building. Just by writing comments to reflection questions, asking to and responding to questions in the forum will make a substantial

difference to your own learning experience, and others taking part in the course. ALTTO is not the place for negative criticism or personal complaints, this community strives to be professional and constructive in our posts.

3.4 On Topic

It is easy to go off topic when writing responses to questions, and making comments. Going off topic stops the focus of your mind and can be distracting (as well as time wasting for others to read). One strategy to stay on topic when commenting and writing posts is simply to review them first, asking yourself questions about the relevancy of your comment or question. When asking questions about the ALT position remaining professional can, at times, be challenging (especially if something frustrating has recently occurred). Other ALTs may have experienced the things happening to you, and be able to offer useful advice.

3.5 Reading/Watching

ALTTO is completely free, and so a major consideration (and challenge) has been to deliver a quality course equal to any other TEFL-type course, at no expense to you. In section 2.3 above we saw the generous collaboration with JALT, and the authors of articles, which has helped to elevate the standard and relevance of the course (as papers are specific the Japanese education system). All the recommended reading has been carefully selected and peer checked for further quality and relevance. As ever, if you have written a paper, or found something (article, or other media) suitable for the course, either post it, or email it in for consideration. The supplementary reading is recommended (not mandatory as ALTTO is a completely free MOOC), but reading it, and checking the references of papers will significantly increase your knowledge of the learning points and your own professional ability.

3.6 Reading techniques

This sub-section is particularly useful for teachers who may have been away from academic reading for a while. Reading is a vital component of ALTTO, but it is a skill that is often not taught. ALTTO uses articles from a variety of sources, such as newspapers and thesis', in addition to peer reviewed academic articles. Academic reading, as you will be aware, is not the same as reading newspapers or books so a little bit of practice here will increase your reading speed, and develop skills on how to get the information you are looking for much faster:

- Read the abstract or introduction, and the conclusion. From this you can understand what the text is about, and the authors' stance.
- Scan the paper to get the general idea and structure of the paper. This will help the detailed read later by putting the details in correct context.
- Read the paper, but not every single word. Inevitably words and phrases may trip you up, but often will be naturally understood once the full paper is read. You can waste a lot of time by re-reading many times. Return to tricky sections after you have read the paper.
- After reading the paper, identify the main points, talk about it with anyone that will listen, comment on it on the ALTTO comment boxes, forum and/or Facebook. Look for strengths and weaknesses of the paper, as well as things that you agree and disagree with, and articulate why.

These steps usually take a little practice, and the only way to get faster is to keep reading.

Skills you develop here can be transferred to many aspects of your professional position, and higher level education.

3.7 Consolidation

Here we look at how you can digest learning that takes place during this course so that it becomes easier to recall for later use (in the classrooms, interacting with other teachers, writing papers etc.) The primary way MOOC users consolidate their learning is by writing responses to questions and commenting on other participants' responses. As detailed throughout this guide, ALTTO has incorporated this established feature in the reflection question comments, forum and Facebook group. The purpose of writing in these places is to harness the memory and cognitive processes involved in recalling and processing information. Writing, responding and asking questions allows you to process the information you have retained, as well as exposing any gaps in your understanding.

Another way to consolidate your learning is to talk to other people about what you have learnt and/or start discussion groups – if you find that something is difficult to explain, go back and review to content of that section of the module, look at the references in the recommended reading, read other people's comments and make fresh comments.

3.8 Support

You are never on your own during this course, as 3.3 discussed above. If you have any questions or comments, other teachers can be reached on the interactive features. A benefit of asking here is for the sheer wealth and variety of responses. Your question may be shared with others who will experience similar needs at some point later on.

Also, feel free to email anytime too about the course, or how to become more involved. Your support, ideas and queries are very much appreciated.

3.9 After the course

By successfully completing ALTTO you will have shown and developed self-discipline, and time-management, as well as useful study and academic skills. By reading the modules and recommended reading (perhaps further reading), responding to reflection questions and making full use of the interactive features, you will be better prepared instruct and facilitate your learners. You will also be prepared to take on higher level education (I did mine online at [Birmingham University](#), which gave me the chance to get connected with a lot of educators in Japan and present ALTTO at the JALT 2015 conference). In addition to the skills you have developed you will be in a position to do classroom research, write articles and insightful blogs. Papers to do with ALTs in Japan come out very occasionally (these papers are used throughout the course), and are insightful when they do, working to drive our skills forward. Contributing your experience and insight to this catalogue will only be beneficial to other teachers, the education system and ultimately our learners who deserve the best we can offer.

4.0 Bibliography

AJET National Council. (2014, June 16). *Assistant Language Teachers as Solo Educators*.

Retrieved from http://ajet.net/downloads/reports/2014/ALTs_as_Solo_Educators_ENG.pdf

Bollen, D., Cooke, S., Fenton-Smith, B., Rivers, D. J., Ruegg, R., Stillwell, C., & Yamamoto, K. (2010). Taking action on professional development. In A. M. Stoke (Ed.), *JALT 2009 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

Clavel, T., (2014, January 5). English fluency hopes rest on an education overhaul. *The Japan Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/community/2014/01/05/issues/english-fluency-hopes-rest-on-an-education-overhaul/#.Vxb2xNR9600>

Crooks, A. (2001). Professional development and the JET program: Insights and solutions based on the Sendai city program. *JALT Journal*, 23(1). Retrieved from <http://jalt-publications.org/jj/articles/2666-professional-development-and-jet-program-insights-and-solutions-based-sendai-city-p>

Harasim, L. (1993). *Global networks: Computer and international communication*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Kushima, C., Obari, H., & Nishihori, Y. (2011). Fostering global teacher training: The design and practice of a web-based discussion forum as a knowledge building community. *International Journal of Information Systems and Social Change*, 2(1), 5-8. Retrieved from <http://dl.acm.org/citation.cfm?id=2440090>

Liu, D. (1998). Ethnocentrism in TESOL: Teacher education and the neglected needs of international TESOL students. *ELT journal*, 52(1), 3-10.

McConnell, D. (2000). *Importing diversity: Inside Japan's JET program*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Reed, N. (2015). Contemporary roles of foreign English teachers in Japanese public secondary schools: An exploratory study. *The Asian EFL Journal*, 85. Retrieved from <http://asian-efl-journal.com/9031/thesis/2015/06/contemporary-roles-of-foreign-english-teachers-in-japanese-public-secondary-schools-an-exploratory-study/>

Tsuido, K., Otani, M., & Davies, W. (2012). An Analysis of Assistant Language Teachers' Perceptions of their Working Relationships with Japanese Teachers of English. *Hiroshima Studies in Language and Language Education*, 15. Retrieved from <http://ir.lib.hiroshima-u.ac.jp/en/00032294>