

ALTs' Roles and Duties: Official Documents Versus ALT Self Reports

ALT の役割と職務：公式文書と ALT の自己報告との比較

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1. Introduction

Through the Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme (JET Programme), over 48,000 people have come to Japan to participate in international exchange and foreign language education (JET Homepage). A majority of the participants are recent university graduates with no teaching education or experience and work as assistant language teachers (ALT) (Inoi, et al. 2001). As a result, the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) training that most participants receive is through conferences sponsored by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) and organized through each prefectural Board of Education. The author, a teacher trainer for such conferences in Nagano Prefecture, conducted an exploratory survey to determine how qualified the ALT participants are, their responsibilities, and the ALTs' perception of their role and the role of the Japanese teachers of English (JTE) with whom they teach. The survey was followed by interviews and lesson observations to clarify and contextualize survey results.

The results of questionnaires completed by all 39 senior high school JET-sponsored ALTs employed in Nagano Prefecture will be compared with previous studies and official documentation to illustrate how actual ALT responsibilities differ from the job description, the contradictory views ALTs have of their role and also of the JTEs' role, and the implications for future training programs.

2. The JET Programme

If the order of ALT duties as found in the programme pamphlet is any indication of priority, the teaching aspect and materials preparation is heavily weighted (CLAIR, 2007b: 4). Experiences among participants, however, vary widely. In some schools, ALTs have significant responsibility in curriculum and materials development, whereas in other schools, the JTE maintains ownership of these duties (CLAIR, 2007a: 125). The background and qualification of the participants themselves also vary considerably but many participants are untrained teachers (Inoi, et al. 2001). As a result, the teacher training participants receive is both crucial and essential as "the success of any team teaching situation depends on the skills of the 2 teachers and how clearly they have understood their roles within the team" (Richards

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& Farrell, 2005:161). Since it has been argued that this training can be improved (Crooks 2001; Gillis-Furutaka 1994; Kushima & Nishihori 2006), the author seeks to gain a better understanding of ALT qualification, responsibilities and role perception to improve future training sessions.

3. Researching ALT Duties and Perceptions

To understand how qualified the participants are, their responsibilities, and the ALTs' perception of their roles and the JTEs' roles, an exploratory survey was administered to all 39 JET-sponsored ALTs employed at senior high schools in Nagano Prefecture in February of 2008. Questions concerning background information and role perception were based on a MEXT-sponsored research project (Inoi, Yoshida, Mahoney & Itagaki 2001; Mahoney 2004) to allow for a comparison with those studies' results and official documentation. To clarify how ALTs are being utilized, an additional 4 questions were designed for this study and modified after being piloted on 3 ALTs. In the following sections, the questions will be discussed in greater detail.

3.1 Questions concerning background information

While reviewing previous studies concerning ALT qualification (CLAIR 1992 as cited in McConnell, 2000:59; Inoi, et al. 2001), it was noted that results were often reported independently of each other. For example, there was no way of knowing if the ALTs who studied Japanese before coming to Japan were also the ALTs who had previous ESL experience. Therefore, the data from the four questions concerning the ALT's background is used in conjunction to determine how qualified the ALT is for the position. Information collected included the number of years on the JET programme, their university major, whether they had studied Japanese before coming to Japan and whether or not they had any relevant teaching experience or qualifications. ALTs who had studied Japanese at the university level for at least 1 year and had TEFL-related experience or education were considered to be well-qualified for the position. Those with either Japanese ability *or* relevant TEFL experience or education were considered qualified. The remaining candidates were classified as either having some qualifications (e.g. they had taught music) or simply as having met the minimum hiring criteria (e.g. A university degree, a desire to teach, etc).

3.2 How ALTs are being utilized

How ALTs are being utilized was determined through multiple-choice questions, which clarified what the ALTs are teaching, how often, and the degree to which a textbook is being used. In the final version of the survey, ALT responses were elicited in reference to one group of students as opposed to general tendencies (pilot version). For example, if the ALT

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taught *Oral Communication I (OCI)*, they were also asked how often they taught the *same* group of students and not *OCI* classes in general. The weakness of this approach is that ALTs likely reported experiences at their main school versus those at their visit school.

Concerning textbooks usage, for each class (e.g. *OCI*), ALTs were asked if (1) they followed a textbook with little deviation, (2) modified textbook activities on a regular basis, (3) used a textbook and then their own materials for half of a class respectively, or (4) used their own materials for the duration of the class. In an open-ended question, ALTs were also asked who prepares the lesson.

3.3. Role Perception

The last question on the survey, an open-ended question taken from Inoi, et al. (2001) and reported in Mahoney (2004), sought to elicit ALT perceptions of their role and the JTE's role. Answers were initially classified according to the categories and methodology found in Inoi, et al. (2001). For example, if an ALT stated that one of their roles was to communicate with students, this was classified under the category 'Offer English conversation and pronunciation model / Talk to students.' When there was not an appropriate category to fit the survey data, additional categories were constructed. Another difference is that the data was categorized by only the author due to the limited number of surveys.

3.4 Interviews and classroom observation

Data analysis was followed by a small number of interviews and classroom observation in order to contextualize and clarify survey results. 20 out of 39 ALTs indicated that they were willing to be interviewed and have their classes observed. 3 ALTs representing the different levels of qualification outlined in Section 3.1 and working at 2 schools with special English programs were selected, enabling the researcher to observe both regular classes and special English classes. Four JTEs with whom the ALTs taught were also interviewed. Unfortunately, it is outside the scope of this paper to report these observations in detail.

4. Survey results

In this section, survey results will be reported along with implications for future training programs.

4.1 How long have you been on the JET Program?

54% of the participants are in their first year, 33% in their second and 10% in their third year; the national averages are 47%, 33% and 17% respectively (JET Programme Homepage). Compared with the national average, there is a slightly higher turnover in Nagano Prefecture. Only 2.5% of the participants have been on the programme for 4 years or

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more despite MEXT's intention of utilizing experienced ALTs as stated in the 2003 Action Plan (MEXT, 2003). The implication for teacher training workshops is that training materials could be recycled every 2 years as preparing 3 years of materials would not be cost effective.

4.2 How qualified are the ALTs?

For this study, Japanese ability, teaching education and experience, and university major were combined to determine how qualified JET participants are. From this analysis (Table 1), we can see that about 26% of ALTs appear to be well-qualified, which was defined as someone who has at least a certificate in TEFL and 1 to 2 years of Japanese at the university level. It is unclear, however, how comprehensive some of the certificates are as some respondents did not elaborate. When combined with the 'qualified' group, who have relevant experience / education or Japanese ability, but not both, we could argue that 65% of the participants are quite qualified for the position of ALT. On the other hand, about a third only meet the minimal requirements and it appears that the mix of participants has not changed recently as the number of ALTs with teaching experience and / or a qualification in this study, 33%, is similar to the findings of Inoi, et al. (2001), who reported 30%. The inclusion of 'less-qualified' participants may be due to the fact that recruitment is the responsibility of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which has as its main goal, not language education, but "to increase understanding of Japanese society and education among youth in the participating countries" (A Ministry of Foreign Affairs official as quoted in McConnell, 2000:30).

Meets minimum criteria (No qualifications, experience or Japanese ability)	7 (18%)
Some qualifications (Majored in foreign language or English, Studied Japanese a little before arriving)	7 (18%)
Qualified: Relevant Education / Experience OR Studied Japanese extensively	15 (38%)
Well-qualified: Relevant Education / Experience AND Japanese ability	10 (26%)

Table 1: How qualified are the ALTs?

4.3 ALT Utilization

Predictably, almost all ALTs teach *Oral Communication I (OC I)* and over half *OC II*. The third most commonly taught class, *English I*, is taught by just under 40% of the ALTs. Encouragingly, when asked how often they teach the same group of students, at least 60% of ALTs reported seeing these classes once a week or more and this goes up to 80% for *OC II* and *Reading*. It is likely, however, that ALTs are reporting the situation at their main schools and not at the visit school(s) where they teach less frequently.

Birch, G. (2008). ALTs' roles and duties: Official documents versus ALT self reports. *Journal of the Chubu English Language Education Society*, 38, 101-108.

With respect to teaching materials, in the *Oral Communication* classes, many ALTs reported using their own material despite MEXT assertions that the textbook should serve as the main source of instruction (MEXT, 2002: 20). For example, 39% of ALTs reported using their own materials for the entire OC I class and another 39% reported using their own materials for half of the class; in OC II classes, the percentages are 48% and 30% respectively. Based on these results, one could argue teaching training sessions could focus on Materials Development for OC classes as ALTs and JTEs do not appear to be using textbooks extensively. The problem, however, is that it is unclear what sort of activities the ALTs and JTEs are preparing and how closely these activities are linked to textbook content. This issue was brought up in subsequent interviews and ALTs justified developing their own materials as they rarely have a chance to sit down individually with each of the many JTEs with whom they teach, a problem also reported in Inoi, et al. (2001). This situation may result in team-taught lessons that are only nominally related to textbook content.

With respect to *English I* and *English II* classes, 40% of teachers report using the textbook for a majority of class time, but modify textbook activities on a regular basis. Textbook usage is even more predominant in the *Reading* classes. Therefore, one focus of teacher training concerning these classes could be Materials Adaptation, or the ability to make textbook activities more communicative.

4.4 Lesson Preparation

Contrary to the job description, 33% of ALTs reported that they prepare the lessons and a further 18% reported that they prepare the lesson with JTE feedback. Another third stated that it depended on the class or school. A further review of the 'it depends' answers reveals that when OC classes or their main school were mentioned, it was the ALT who is preparing the lesson. Therefore, at an ALT's main school and in OC classes, about 70% of the lessons are primarily prepared by the ALT. Again, this tendency is likely due to one ALT working with many JTEs with whom they have little time to prepare.

3 (8%) of the 4 ALTs who reported that JTEs prepare the lessons work at former Super English Language High Schools (SELHIs) where it is understandable that the JTEs wanted to maintain ownership of the classes as they were the focus of the SELHi-related research and often observed by other teachers and teaching consultants.

4.5 Role Perception

4.5.1 ALT perception of ALT roles

The results of this survey (Table 2) resemble those of Mahoney (2004). 'Talking to students,' 'motivating students,' and 'sharing culture' were all ranked highly. 'Lesson planning' was not, but in this study, a question concerning lesson preparation preceded the

question of role, which may explain its relatively low ranking. Of greater interest, a third of the ALTs in this study see themselves as the 'main teacher', while only 25% see themselves as 'assistants.' One reason for this could be that the Inoi, et al. (2001) study was a MEXT-sponsored project, which may have influenced how the surveys were answered. However, Mahoney (2004), which uses the same data as Inoi, et al. (2001), reports that the 8th most common role of JTEs, according to SHS ALTs, is 'support / assist ALT in class.' Furthermore, Mahoney found that more SHS JTEs' saw the ALT as a (4) 'Teaching plan maker' and (6) 'Chief classroom manager, conductor' than (8) 'AET is class assistant / Assistant for CLT activities.' As a result, even though official documentation stresses that the ALT is an assistant, some ALTs and JTEs see the ALT's job as more than just that. During one of the follow-up class observations, the researcher noticed that an experienced JTE served as a mentor to the ALT, allowing the ALT to be the 'main teacher,' but the JTE monitored the class, providing assistance (clarification of vocabulary or instructions) when she deemed that students were not following the ALTs' lesson. It is unclear how prevalent this mentoring role is among JTEs.

Rank	Mahoney Rank	Citations in this study
1. Offer English conversation & pronunciation model / Talk to students.	1	15 / 38%
2. Motivate/prompt/encourage	3	15 / 38%
3. Main teacher / Significant responsibility (more than stated in documents)	-	13 / 33%
4. Share culture	2	12 / 31%
5. Assist JTE	-	10 / 26%
6. Assist in lesson planning	4	3 / 8%
7. Help JTE with their English		2 / 5%

Table 2: ALTs' Perceptions of their role (39 surveys / 70 comments)

4.5.2 ALT perception of JTE role

Like Mahoney (2004), the two most common SHS JTEs' roles, as perceived by ALTs, are 'translation' and 'discipline.' The former is likely due to the relative difficulty of high school textbooks compared to junior high school ones, and the latter is due to the fact that ALTs are specifically told that discipline is the domain of the JTE. After these results, there appears to be little correlation between the results of this study and Mahoney (2004). For example, the third most common response in this study was 'to lead the class,' which was only ranked 10th in Mahoney (2004). In addition, this result seems contrary to the results reported in the previous section, where many ALTs saw themselves as the 'main teacher,' but

perhaps they assume this role reluctantly. (This may also be true of lesson preparation.) In follow-up interviews, some teachers, both ALT and JTE, reported that their team-teaching roles were inherited, passed down from their predecessors, and rarely discussed. Initially, this may not be a bad starting point as seen in the following example. One ALT working in a new school said “I do not have the cues (while teaching) with the JTEs I am working with for the first time. They themselves do not appear to have decided what they want the ALT do exactly.” In this situation, a lack of concrete roles appears to be detrimental to the success of the ALT's classes.

Rank	Mahoney Rank	Citations in this study
1. Discipline	2	11 (28%)
2. Translation	1	10 (26%)
3. Lead Class	10	8 (21%)
4. Provide clear communication lines with students, AET	7	8 (21%)
5. Team Teach*	4 Equal roles	7 (18%)
6. Motivate	6	6 (15%)
7. Monitor class / time / flow / curriculum (Managerial)	-	5 (13%)
8. Design Lesson plan	5	4 (10%)
9. Model Communicative Relationship	3	3 (8%)
10. Provides explanation on / teach grammar	4	2 (5%)

Table 3: ALTs' Perceptions of JTE's role. (39 surveys / 64 comments)

6. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to clarify ALT qualification, responsibilities and role perception. Ideally, teacher trainers would use this information to improve teacher training seminars. For example, with respect to teacher qualification, JET participants who possess some relevant teaching experience or education could be given more active roles at training seminars. Great care, however, must be taken when basing teacher training workshops upon these survey results. Many ALTs, for instance, reported that in team-taught *Oral Communication* classes, textbook usage is not prevalent. For better or worse, it appears that many ALTs are using materials that they have developed themselves. Teachers trainers are then left to decide whether it is better to encourage this trend by focusing on Materials Development or to train ALTs on how to make better use of textbook activities.

How ALTs view their role and the JTE's role varies considerably. In this study, many ALTs see themselves as the main teacher and yet, 'the JTE should lead the class' was the

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third most common view of the JTE's role. An ALT in this study summarized it best by stating, 'No concrete role exists.'

Problems will arise when ALTs and JTEs do not share the same view of their respective roles, and they may find it difficult to work together. This could be addressed in future training seminars through awareness-raising activities that aim to promote constructive discussion. Future research, however, must uncover how these roles are arrived at and how possible conflicts are best resolved. Such information, if properly disseminated, would help ALTs in their transition into a new work environment and help inform and improve both pre-service and in-service teacher training of ALTs and JTEs.

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