

Team Teaching Revisited – The Challenges and Benefits

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Abstract

It has been thirty years since The Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program was introduced in Japan and with it the widespread use of team-teaching for English classes in Junior and Senior High schools. As most teachers have received very little training in team teaching, and most teachers are accustomed to teaching alone, it can be difficult for teachers to make the relationship between native English speaker and Japanese teacher work well. With the introduction of more English classes in elementary schools, Assistant English Teachers (ALTs) and Japanese Teachers of English (JTEs) are going to elementary schools to teach English. This entails more and more team-teaming in public schools in Japan. Very little qualitative research has been done into team-teaching in Japan. Listening to the opinions of teachers with experience of team teaching might offer insights into the ways in which team teaching can be effective and also give teachers an insight into how to conduct a team-taught lesson. This paper will show data gathered from in-depth interviews with teachers who have had experience of team-teaching, and observations of English classes at elementary schools in Japan. The results offer hints for best practices in team-teaching, which should be of help for elementary homeroom teachers, JTEs, ALTs and school administrators.

Keywords: Team Teaching, Japanese Education, TESOL

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Introduction

In general teaching is a solitary profession, although there are students in the classroom, generally teachers are trained and accustomed to teaching alone. Team teaching is quite different to this and as such can be challenging for the teachers involved. Teachers need to plan lessons together, agree on classroom roles, coordinate their teaching and support each other in the classroom. Without good communication between teachers this is unlikely to be successful. The aim of this paper is to offer insights for all teachers into how to make team-teaching effective. Listening to the opinions of teachers with experience of team teaching might offer insights into how teachers could work together effectively in a classroom. This paper will focus on a common situation in Japan with a Japanese English teacher (JTE) and a native English speaker (ALT). The paper will report on data from in-depth interviews with ALTs in elementary English classes and offer advice for teachers on how to achieve successful English lessons.

Literature Review

The founder of the JET program and the main initial proponent of team teaching – Minoru Wada, stated himself that “team teaching began without any form pedagogic research to validate it as an effective educational innovation” (Tajino, Stewart & Dalsky, 2015 p.79). Since it was initiated, a number of researchers have tried to analyze the JET program with various recommendations on achieving successful team teaching outcomes. Leonard (1994) had a long experience of working as a team teacher in various schools. Based on his own experience as well as interviews carried out with other teachers in the program he offers advice on conducting successful lessons. The most important point he makes is in respect to the two teachers building up a rapport and meeting with each other to plan lessons. He offers two scenarios in which the lesson will not be successful. One in which the native English speaker is given almost no information about the lesson and secondly in which the Japanese teacher creates an overly detailed script for the lesson, so that rather than teaching, the two teachers are performing a preplanned performance. Both of these scenarios produce a lot of stress for the teachers creating a bad atmosphere are not conducive to students learning to produce English in a natural communicative manner. His main recommendation is that at first the teachers need to meet to get to know each other. Subsequently the teachers need to find time to talk to each other to plan lessons and share ideas. Japanese elementary school teachers are notoriously time deprived, not even having a lunch break as they eat with their students, so this could be very difficult. JTE Institute for Education and Culture (2008) found that Japanese teachers work the longest hours, nearly twice as long as Finnish teachers and in addition have the least teacher training in the four countries compared. This is supported by a recent survey by the OECD, which also found that Japanese teachers had the longest hours of any teachers around the world. Due to this it might be that teachers don't have enough time to prepare English lessons or communicate with their team teacher.

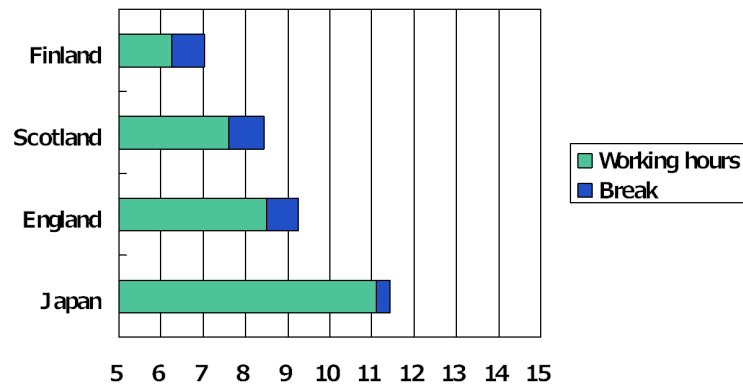


Figure 1: Average working hours of teachers at school (JTU Institute for Education and Culture, 2008)

In addition Machida (2016) found that elementary school teachers were suffering from significant anxiety due to English teaching. Most Elementary school teachers were not trained to teach English at all.

Hougham, Walter, and Sponseller (2017) state that another big reason that the relationship between the Japanese teacher and native English speaking teacher are not good is because of the language barrier. The two teachers do not have a common language and cannot communicate well. Even when communication occurs, lack of cultural understanding can cause misunderstandings. In a large-scale survey carried out with 1545 ALTs by Kano et. al. (2016 cited in Hougham, Walter, & Sponseller, 2017) it was found that in elementary schools the greatest barrier to communication between teachers was language, whereas in Junior High School and High School the main barrier was the Japanese teacher not wanting to include the ALT in lesson planning and not utilising them as team teachers. There are various reasons for this reluctance, but the most important seems to be lack of time and that many Japanese teachers not regarding the ALT as a qualified teacher. Hougham, Walter, and Sponseller (2017) found that students also saw the value of ALTs only as providing model pronunciation and as some sort of “mood maker”.

Igawa (2008) found that ALTs also needed feedback from the JTEs to improve their lessons as many of them were very inexperienced teachers. This added to the workload for already overworked teachers. School officials, homeroom teachers and ALTs all had doubts about the English ability of homeroom teachers. There is also a perception of overburdening the homeroom teachers with English classes (Robertson 2015).

In Hougham, Walter, and Sponseller’s (2017) survey of JTEs and ALTs they found that lesson planning was usually initiated by the JTE, completed by the ALT and checked by the JTE before the lesson. Unfortunately, they did not feel that this was cooperative, but each person was completing their part alone. Igawa (2008) found significantly different perceptions of team teaching between JTEs and ALTs. 60% of JTEs perceived that they met the ALTs to plan lessons, but only 20% of ALTs felt that they were meeting to plan lessons. The definition of lesson planning may be different, but also the amount of time expected for lesson planning is probably

different. The JTE is satisfied with a very short exchange of information, but the ALT may require a longer discussion of lesson objectives and pedagogy.

Methodology

Data was collected through five in-depth semi-structured interviews with teachers who had a variety of experiences of team-teaching. Three women and two men were interviewed. The aim of the interviews was to find common themes of shared experiences and solutions to the challenges of team-teaching. The data was analyzed through grounded theory. The interviews were transcribed then parts of the transcription relating to different themes were highlighted creating initial themes, this data was entered in a spreadsheet for all interviewees, then reexamined to create more detailed themes. The codes were compared in an attempt to find a new theory of team-teaching and how it can be implemented successfully. The data was also supported by three observations of team teaching classes in elementary schools in Japan.

Findings

Through constant comparison and analysis of the interview data two main themes emerged. Firstly, that the amount of time spent together by team teachers was very limited and viewed as a problem by most of the teachers, and secondly that one of the most important factors in successful team teaching was rapport between the team teachers. In the literature lack of English ability by the JTE was often listed as a barrier but was not really mentioned by the ALTs.

Time spent planning lessons by team teachers.

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) recommends that team teachers work together planning lessons (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2002), which is supported by the ALTs in this research.

I think before the class starts they should spend more time preparing together then they know what to teach and what the goal is for that day. (Teacher 3, personal communication, 4th November, 2017)

This obviously requires the two teachers to spend time together, which seems to be one of the biggest problems, as the ALTs are often not based in one school and the Japanese teachers seem to be very busy.

I was scared in the beginning to try to talk to the teachers and in the staff room everyone looks busy no one ever looks available like they have time for people to come and talk to them so I always feel rude just going to someone's desk and saying "Do you have time to talk?" (Teacher 5, personal communication, 21st February, 2018)

It is hard to say if all the teachers are really busy, or if it's just an impression, although (Tsuboya-Newell (2018) and JTE Institute for Education and Culture (2008) both found Japanese teachers to work the longest hours of any teachers in the world.

The teacher, who continued in the JET program for the longest period stated that the Japanese teachers are over worked and need to know that the ALT really wants to help them. In order to do this, she offered to help grade essays and give feedback. It is an unusual situation for ALTs to be grading written work as their job is usually involved exclusively with the oral aspects of the English curriculum. The teacher stated that she spent a huge amount of time grading essays, but it gave her a twofold benefit. Firstly, the JTEs appreciated that she was actually reducing their work load and due to this their relationship with her improved and they were happy to work with her on lesson planning and listened to her ideas. In addition, she felt that she was really benefiting the students, which gave her job satisfaction.

I remember sitting with a student who was applying for Tokyo University and losing sleep because I thought, I need to help him to write the best essay that he can, and he did get in and it was wonderful to support him, but I did feel a lot of pressure in supporting him. However, in the end I felt really satisfied with my day's work, I felt like I contributed, which I know is something that some people on the JET program don't feel. (Teacher 1, personal communication, 19th December, 2017)

Even if the teachers did find time to plan lessons there seems to be some confusion about who should plan the lesson and who should control the lesson. The Ministry of Education recommends teachers planning lessons together. The reality is that planning lessons together tends to take more time than planning on your own. Some of the teachers also felt that they needed guidance on who was leading the lesson.

Even though it is team teaching there should be one who is taking the active voice and one is more passive, so in the relationship you need to work out who is taking the lead in the situation and work collaboratively. (Teacher 2, personal communication, 11th November, 2017)

If there was some sort of template that was laying out how the class should go how a team teaching class should go like the certain parts that the JTE should do and how the ALT can support those types of activities and then the activities that the ALT can run and how the JTE can support. It would help immensely. (Teacher 1, personal communication, 19th December, 2017)

The teachers also seemed to think that it was necessary to spend a lot of time planning unique lessons each time rather than using the lesson plans in the teachers' book supplied by MEXT. "We might default to the MEXT plan which sounds like maybe lazy." (Teacher 5, personal communication, 21st February, 2018). It is surprising that the teacher thought it was 'lazy' to use the textbook lesson plans, as these have been written very carefully by very experienced teachers. The teachers also commented on the problems which could happen when there was not enough time for lesson planning.

I didn't always have an opportunity to talk to the JTEs beforehand and sometimes we would run into miscommunication... In my second year I planned well in advance, so that there wouldn't be those barriers in the classroom. (Teacher 1, personal communication, 19th December, 2017)

With teachers who I don't often contact outside of school maybe it'll just be that morning and in 5 minutes they'll give me a quick run-down, we're going to do this activity, please do this and that. In those situations, maybe the first period class doesn't go smoothly. (Teacher 5, personal communication, 21st February, 2018)

It is obvious from these comments that not spending time together preparing the lesson led to miscommunication and problems in the classroom. Even when there were prepared lesson plans sometimes one of the teachers did not read the lesson plan properly before the lesson as well as not talking to the other teacher (Teacher 3, personal communication, 4th November, 2017). In that case they may not look professional in the classroom. Teacher 1 (personal communication, 19th December, 2017) also commented that in the situations when teachers had not planned the lesson together or communicated with each other it would look bad in front of the students.

Rapport

Lack of communication in lesson planning and not looking good in front of students is a problem that can be alleviated or exacerbated by the rapport between the teachers. Lessons can be planned, but cannot be choreographed, so teachers need to be able to anticipate and react to each other's needs. Unfortunately, some JTEs do not want consider the ALT to be an equal in the classroom.

One individual he always thought he was better than the ALTs because he was an actual educator and ALTs were just human tape recorders. A lot of other ALTs have had that experience with other teachers especially in JHS where they feel that they don't want the ALT to challenge the children too much and that can be a huge frustration. (Teacher 1, personal communication, 19th December, 2017)

One teacher told me there shouldn't be any discipline provided by you. You shouldn't really be providing any of the educational material it's all just provided for you and you just toe the line. (Teacher 2, personal communication, 11th November, 2017)

It is disappointing to hear that some teachers do not regard the ALTs as teachers. There are obviously a variety of teachers recruited by the JET program. Many of the teachers on the JET program are qualified teachers in their home country. There seems to be a gap between the expectations of the ALTs and some of the JTEs. Additionally, some of the ALTs were told that they were not in the classroom to teach, but just to entertain the students.

The perception of ALTs is pretty true. You're the 'genki'¹ side to the Japanese teacher's trying to get the knowledge to the students and you are just trying to be the star of the show. I think that's pretty true you just go in there and make sure the kids are really excited and into the lesson and you try to work with the JTE as much as you can. (Teacher 2, personal communication, 11th November, 2017)

¹ This is a commonly used Japanese word meaning 'energetic or exciting' in this situation.

Don't be afraid to make an idiot of yourself, you need to be 'genki', when students think of English class they should smile you know. (Teacher 1, personal communication, 19th December, 2017)

Possibly the JTEs have also been given this information, which leads to an impression of the ALTs as being entertainers rather than teachers and as such not being a very important part of the education system. One of the ALTs commented that when she first came to Japan the JET program emphasized their role as ambassadors for their country and how important they were in the Japanese education system, but when they arrived at their schools they did not receive the same reaction.

I think that when you come on the JET program you are told that you are representing your country, and you are great, and it's so prestigious, then you are just sitting at a desk where every ALT before you has sat. People come in with these ideas that what they are doing is really important and sadly when you get to your school there is so much going on - you are not nearly as important as you thought. (Teacher 1, personal communication, 19th December, 2017)

Possibly in the early stages of the JET program, the ALTs were seen as something special, but as years went by it became normal for the schools to have non-Japanese teachers. It is very difficult for schools to maintain the enthusiasm if teachers are changing every one or two years. All of the ALTs said very clearly that qualified teachers and educators should be hired for the JET program, but if this is the case the ALTs should then be given more responsibility in lesson planning and teaching.

Most of the ALTs thought that the two teachers needed to have a rapport outside the classroom for them to interact effectively in the classroom. This was also stated by Leonard (1994) as one of the most important factors in creating successful team teaching lessons.

Students are very perceptive and they can see if you are trying to put it on or if it's an actual connection you have, so if you are actually able to work well with somebody outside of the stressful situation like the classroom, if you have a good rapport with them I think it translates well to the classroom. (Teacher 2, personal communication, 11th November, 2017)

In trying to build relationships with Japanese teachers the ALTs offered various advice.

I was never rude I would just find five ways to meet them in the corridor or whatever. It was always coming from me. I would find them at the year opening ceremony and I made sure I had a chat with them and tried to get them to laugh or something because it was an easier way to introduce myself than formally at school. (Teacher 1, personal communication, 19th December, 2017)

It appears that the ALT was making an effort to meet the JTEs, but the JTEs were not trying to meet the ALTs. Another factor in building the relationship between the team teachers is how often the teachers meet. Unfortunately, due to the JET system many

ALTs travel round to a number of schools. One of the teachers visited seven different schools in the course of a month on a rotating system of visiting schools twice every three weeks. Apart from being confusing for the teacher and students, it is very difficult to build up a rapport between students and teachers if you don't meet them on a regular basis. On the other hand, one of the most positive ALTs stated that she had stayed at the same school for five years. She tried to build up relationships with all the teachers in her school. She said that teachers came to her for help with other parts of their job outside the lessons, for example asking for her help with preparing students for speech contests and English exams. This was possible because she was placed in one large High School. She was in the school five days a week so teachers could spontaneously ask her questions.

Another interesting comment made by two of the teachers was that they always asked the JTE for feedback after the lesson. Igawa (2008) stated that ALTs needed feedback from the JTE in order to improve their teaching, but this took a lot of time.

I found that after each lesson I started asking teachers " How do you think that went?" I would ask them for feedback straight away and they realised that I would do it even if they felt uncomfortable. I would say, "You know these kids, you need to give me feedback so I can adjust lessons for these kids." Gradually as the JTE knew that these questions were coming they would prepare answers. (Teacher 1, personal communication, 19th December, 2017)

It is reasonable to ask for feedback and in fact it is recommended by MEXT that team teachers should meet to share feedback on the lesson. This is another way in which the rapport between the two teachers could grow. On the other hand, one of the teachers said that the JTE at his school was only paid when they were in the classroom, so he felt guilty asking for time outside class to build rapport or plan lessons.

The JTE only gets paid per hour and per lesson, so they are not getting paid unless they are in the classroom actively teaching.... it's something I'm acutely aware of so I never try to keep them after the lesson. (Teacher 5, personal communication, 21st February, 2018)

Teachers are paid in various different ways, but even when they are only paid for the class, it is usually assumed that this money should include lesson preparation. The ALT should be able to work with the teacher even if they are only paid per lesson.

Discussion

Listening to the voices of team teachers revealed the main problem with team teaching is that it takes time to prepare good lessons and to build a good rapport between the teachers. This can be difficult when the ALT is based in the same school all week, but many of the ALTs are travelling to different schools around the city, which makes it much more difficult. In addition, Japanese teachers seem too busy to meet with the ALT and may not be paid for planning time which made it difficult for ALTs to ask to spend time together planning lessons. Lesson planning time should probably be formalized.

There also seems to be a disconnect between how ALTs are regarded. It appears that the perception of ALTs as entertainers rather than teachers seems to be fairly widespread, but it is a fairly unrewarding role in the long term. It is possible that thirty years ago when the JET scheme was first introduced students were unfamiliar with non-Japanese people on the whole, and just seeing a foreigner was an important step in familiarizing students with foreign culture and language. It is still very important to introduce culture in the language classroom. Brown (2007) states that it is impossible to separate language from culture without losing the significance of one or the other. When teaching a language outside the native country of that language it can be very difficult to incorporate culture in the language classroom. Having teachers come into the classroom from foreign cultures can easily incorporate culture into the classroom, although only using the ALTs for this purpose is underutilising their potential. In the classroom observations I was able to see the ALTs introduce various aspects of culture in short five-minute presentations. In one case the ALT introduced Valentine's Day in America. As the students had some knowledge of Valentine's Day in Japan they were interested and motivated to hear about the USA. In another observation the ALT explained about the schedule in his American school. He showed photographs of his high school and told students which subjects he had studied at school, which they do not have in Japan and vice versa. The students had been learning about class subject names in English and were very interested to hear about American school. Having ALTs in the classroom made it easy to incorporate culture in the classroom. In the classes I observed the students seemed to be excited to have a native English speaker in the classroom, but they still tended to turn to the Japanese teacher when they had questions and problems. The Japanese teachers maintained discipline, acted as role models in learning the language and also helped students when they had questions. The ALTs were very good at providing not only natural pronunciation, but communication and culture. None of the teachers I observed behaved as entertainers, but the classrooms were interesting and educational. In many ways these classes were the best-case scenario with ALTs, homeroom teachers and JTEs working well together.

In all cases the teachers struggled to find time to communicate with each other. Through offering to help the JTEs and trying to meet the JTEs at social events before the start of the academic year the ALTs proactively tried to improve the rapport and create time to plan lessons. One teacher suggested that he would be happy to offer special English classes in the school for the Japanese teachers so that they would not need to attend the education centre.

I think the problem with these English classes for teachers was that they were being offered at the education center and it's outside school and the teachers have to get permission, so I said like ALTs are going to these schools so maybe we can just give English classes to the teachers you know. (Teacher 5, personal communication, 21st February, 2018)

If the ALTs are willing to teach extra classes to teachers, schools should accept their offers, which might also create time for team teachers to plan lessons and build a good rapport. The ALTs were generally positive about teaching, but some of them did comment on the fact that it could be very lonely being the only foreigner at the school. Another teacher also spoke of the loneliness of living in rural Japan.

It can be very lonely. I think that when you come on the JET program you are told that you are representing your country and you are great and it's so prestigious, then you are just sitting at a desk where every ALT before you has sat, sadly when you get to your school there is so much going on that you are not nearly as important as you thought. (Teacher 1, personal communication, 19th December, 2017)

It would be helpful if Japanese teachers would appreciate this and effort was made to incorporate the ALTs into the school even when they are only at the school a couple of times a month. In the classes that I observed the ALTs seemed to have very good relationship with the JTEs and homeroom teachers. They spent some time chatting before and after classes. It is likely that this is one of the reasons for the lessons running so smoothly.

Conclusion

The ALTs in this study were all very enthusiastic English teachers. Many of them felt underutilized and wanted to be a more important part of the school. One of the main barriers to building better team teaching classes was the paucity of time on the side of the Japanese teachers. The ALTs spoke of wanting to talk to the Japanese teachers and wanting to build more of a rapport, but not being able to spend enough time with them. There are a number of possible reasons for this. The first one is that Japanese teachers are notoriously overworked. They do not get a lunch break as they need to eat with the students and they are often engaged in after school activities. Another reason that ALTs have difficulty building a rapport is that they travel to different schools every day. They are not seen as a large part of the school. Finally, English communication might be a problem for the Japanese teachers, although in these interviews all of the teachers had some level of conversational Japanese. It would be recommended that as much as possible ALTs should have fixed schedules and visit the same school as regularly as possible. There is an issue with ALTs feeling lonely, which might be improved by incorporating them into the life of the schools. Asking them to fulfill extra tasks, such as helping with school events and grading written work might build rapport and reduce loneliness as well as reducing the Japanese teachers' workload. Finally, the board of education needs to consider the need for communication between team teachers and make this easier by sending the same teacher to a school more than once a week and organizing events at which team teachers can meet and get to know each other before the start of the academic year. It would also help if the teachers engaged in team teaching could have specific time allocated to lesson planning so that the ALT does not need to try to find a chance to speak to the JTE.

Team teaching could be a very effective way of teaching with the Japanese teacher providing knowhow of Japanese schools and the students, and ALTs providing authentic language experiences for students. In some cases it is working well, but in many cases at the moment it seems that ALTs are underutilized and dissatisfied with their role.

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