

# **Differences in Beliefs between Assistant Language Teachers and Elementary School Teachers**

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## **Abstract**

As the Japanese government plans to increase the number of Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) in schools, it is essential that Homeroom Teachers (HRTs) and ALTs have a common understanding of the issues involved. The authors developed and administered a survey to 89 HRTs and 35 ALTs in Tokushima Prefecture. The survey found that HRTs and ALTs had similar beliefs about being prepared to teach, being prepared for team-teaching and understanding teaching responsibilities, but differed in their beliefs about national language policy, the effectiveness of pre-training and time constraints for preparation.

(Keywords: ALT, HRT, Team-Teaching, beliefs)

## **1. Background**

### **1.1 Recent Trends in Education Policy**

Today, English education policy “in elementary schools is an issue of top priority since it may be a key factor in determining the future orientation of English education in Japan from the elementary through tertiary levels” (Wakita, 2013, p. 7). The Ministry of Education, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), based on proposals by the Education Rebuilding Council (*Kyoiku Saisei Kaigi*), plans to increase Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) in the JET Program(me) (Cabinet, 2013, ERC, 2013) and begin Foreign Language Activity (FLA) lessons in the third grade of elementary school (MEXT, 2013). According to this proposal, third and fourth

grade students would have Foreign Language Activities once or twice a week, and fifth and sixth grade students would have English as an official subject three times a week. Beginning English lessons earlier in elementary schools and increasing the number of native speakers is part of the government's plan to help students acquire a basic level of English competence in order to cultivate global citizens.

In light of these government initiatives, we would like to take a look at research completed in the field and analyze data collected in a survey of ALTs and elementary school teachers locally. It is hoped to outline areas that must be addressed if government plans for the future are to be a success.

## **1.2 History of the Implementation of English in Elementary Schools**

The debate concerning English education started in 1986 in the Central Council for Education. There, an advisory board to MEXT discussed the need for starting English at an earlier age. Three basic stages of implementation followed (Matsukawa, 2008):

**First Stage:** An experimental research period with designated research schools being set up around the country, beginning with 2 schools in Osaka and spreading to one school in every prefecture in the country. Though many problems were left unaddressed, many positive classroom results led the government to expand the possibilities of English programs.

**Second Stage:** As a part of the new course of study introduced in 2002 a new subject known as Integrated Studies was introduced. The guidelines for Integrated Studies stated that English Activities could be taught as part of international understanding within this class. This led to the spread of 'English Activities' to over 90 % of elementary schools around the country.

**Third Stage:** In 2008, MEXT revised the national curriculum and added Foreign Language Activities to its elementary course of study for 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grades starting in 2011. According to Wakita (2013), this was due to a disparity among elementary schools within the same junior high school catchment areas concerning content and number of classes. Beginning in 2011, all fifth and sixth grade classes were to commence once-a-week FLA classes following the guidelines in the course of study.

The goal is outlined below:

*To form the foundation of pupils' communication abilities through foreign languages while developing the understanding of languages and cultures through various experiences, fostering a positive attitude toward communication, and familiarizing pupils with the sounds and basic expressions of foreign languages (MEXT, 2010).*

Though the course of study stated that HRTs should take a leading role in English instruction, surveys and classroom observations have shown that, in reality, HRTs are relying heavily on ALTs and other assistants to teach the classes.

### **1.3 The JET Program(me)**

Since its introduction in 1987, the JET Program(me) has played an important role in English education throughout the school system in Japan. In junior high schools and high schools, ALTs have assisted Japanese teachers of English (JTEs) for over 20 years and team-teaching has been thoroughly discussed in the literature. ALTs have also played an important role in elementary school English since its early years. However, in elementary schools, ALTs often find themselves team-teaching with teachers who are not trained English teachers and who have limited English language skills.

The main goal of the above mentioned JET Program(me) was originally to bring native English speakers to junior and senior high schools to assist JTEs and encourage grass root level internationalization. Over time the program spread and more and more ALTs were invited to teach in elementary schools. Participants with exceptional skills who had fulfilled the primary three-year contract were sometimes asked to become specifically elementary school ALTs. Notably, in the authors' local context, there has been an effort to place ALTs in remote municipalities where many have been involved in developing unique language programs at the elementary school level. As far back as 1992, remote towns and villages were offering weekly English classes to elementary school students from the first grade onward. These classes and programs were developed and taught by ALTs with minimal involvement of the HRTs.

However, in recent years these unique courses and ALT involvement have diminished. There are two major reasons for this: (a) a national reduction in the number of ALTs [6273 from 40 countries in 2002 to 4372 participants today] (JET, 2013) and, (b) the introduction of elementary school English. New national policy guidelines made it more difficult to have language programs below the fifth grade and, as mentioned above, the course of study states that the HRTs or the teacher in charge of foreign language activities should be responsible for lesson plans and for leading classes.

Based on proposals by the Education Rebuilding Council (*Kyoiku Saisei Kaigi*), there are plans to increase the number of ALTs in the JET Program(me) to 10,000 over the next 10 years (Japan Today, 2013). The government plans to cultivate global human resources by dispatching native English speakers to all elementary, middle, and high schools around the country.

### **1.4 Problems and Implications Related to Team Teaching**

The government plan to increase the number of ALTs in itself will not solve all of the problems that exist today. Not all team teaching in Japan at present achieves positive results (Carley, 2013). Carley writes that for team-teaching to be successful, enthusiasm and a positive attitude are essential, that there should be no reluctance or indifference when collaborating, and that differences in educational concepts, approaches, and attitudes should be eliminated.

Research suggests that before the implementation of the new government policy, there are a number of issues that need to be resolved. One major issue is the lack of teacher training in

team-teaching (Kushima & Nishibori, 2006; Otani & Tsuido, 2009; Fukuda, Fennelly, & Luxton, 2013). Kushima and Nishibori (2006), in their survey of 229 ALTs and 229 JTEs, suggested that training should consist of (a) awareness of the actuality and purpose of team-teaching lessons in Japan, (b) what a Japanese teacher's job entails, and (c), understanding of the Japanese school management system and Japanese students. Otani and Tsuido (2009) found in their preliminary study that some problems were yet to be solved such as ALTs responsibilities and communication barriers. Fukuda, Fennelly, and Luxton (2013) argued for more practical training for team teaching for both parties as well as guidelines and training on how to prepare together efficiently and effectively.

Language barriers are a major obstacle to team teaching relationships (Fukuda, Fennelly, & Luxton, 2013). For instance, Sato (2012), realizing that the language barrier was a major obstacle, interviewed ALT supervisors about what vocabulary was needed to improve communication. He then categorized the findings for Japanese elementary school teachers with the hope of making communication easier for both parties. Providing language training for both ALTs and JTEs specifically related to classroom and preparation language may prove beneficial as a foundation for the practice of team teaching and the preparation for it.

## **2. Present Study**

As Uenishi (1999) stated over a decade ago, the first step to improving the team-teaching relationship between ALTs and JTEs is to increase understanding and improve communication between the two groups. The present study examined the question: Is there a difference in beliefs between ALTs and HRTs? We looked into the following six topics: (a) preparedness to teach at elementary school, (b) understanding of FLA policy, (c) effectiveness of training before teaching, (d) teaching responsibilities, (e) preparation for team teaching, and (f) time constraints to prepare for class. Our null hypothesis was that there is no difference in beliefs concerning the six topics.

### **2.1 Setting and Sample**

We delivered questionnaires to 100 elementary school teachers and 50 ALTs. We received responses from 89 HRTs and 35 ALTs. The ALTs were from the following countries: 19 from the USA, three from Australia, five from Britain, four from Canada, and one each from Ireland, New Zealand, Singapore, and South Africa. They had been in Japan for an average of 1.5 years and had an average length of teaching experience of 1.6 years. All the ALTs except one were teaching in junior high schools as well. Out of the 89 HRTs, 22 did not respond to the question asking how long they had been teaching. The remaining 67 respondents had an average of 21.6 years of teaching experience. The least experienced teacher was a first-year teacher and the most experienced was a teacher who had been teaching for 38 years.

## 2.2 Data Collection Instruments

A questionnaire was designed and distributed by the authors to investigate beliefs about the six themes mentioned above to test the null hypothesis. The questionnaire consisted of the following six questions:

- (1) Were you prepared to teach at the elementary school level?
- (2) Do you understand the goals of Foreign Language Activities in elementary schools?
- (3) Did your orientation, training, and the material you received beforehand prepare you for this job?
- (4) Are you asked to teach on your own?
- (5) Were your HRTs prepared to team teach?
- (6) Do you feel you have enough time to prepare for classes?

The questionnaire was first written in English for the ALTs and then translated into Japanese for the benefit of the Japanese teachers. The Japanese translation was checked by a junior high school English teacher for content and face validity. The questionnaire was distributed to the ALTs by email and to the HRTs by postal mail. The questionnaire used a binominal response Yes-No method with a neutral slot marked “slightly”. The questionnaires were sent out in November 2011 and responses were received in December 2011.

## 3. Results and Discussion

The descriptive statistics and frequencies of the questionnaire are displayed in Tables 1 and 2. Question 1 asked the ALT if he or she felt they were prepared to teach in elementary school and, in the case of the HRT, if they felt their ALT had been suitably prepared to teach. Our results showed that 54.3 percent of the ALTs and 58.4% of the HRTs thought that the ALT was only slightly prepared to teach at elementary school. Around one-third of the ALTs and HRTs responded positively, reporting that the ALT had been suitably prepared to teach at the elementary school level.

A difference in answers was seen in Question 2 which asked if ALTs understood the course of study mandated by the government. Interestingly, 60 percent of HRTs said they believed the ALTs had a suitable understanding. However, the ALTs themselves did not seem to agree, with only six percent responding that they understood the policy.

Question 3 asked if ALTs had received a suitable orientation and training prior to teaching, and showed similar results to the above. About two thirds of the HRTs (61.8%) thought that their ALTs had received suitable training as opposed to one-third (34.3%) of the ALTs themselves. Forty percent of the ALTs said that they had not received suitable training. This may suggest that the orientation for ALTs needs to spend more time on helping the ALTs understand national language policy and how that relates to actual classroom practice. If this were done, ALTs may

feel more prepared for the task of teaching in elementary schools.

Table 1

*Results of Descriptives and Frequencies of Questions 1 to 3*

	Q1		Q2		Q3	
	ALT	HRT	ALT	HRT	ALT	HRT
Yes	11 (34.4%)	30(33.7%)	6 (17.1%)	60(67.4%)	12(34.3%)	55(61.8%)
No	5 (14.3%)	7 (7.9%)	4 (11.4%)	13(14.6%)	14(40.0%)	17(19.1%)
Slightly	19(54.3%)	52(58.4%)	25(71.4%)	16(18.0%)	35(25.7%)	17(19.1%)

\*ALT (n = 35), HRT (n = 89) \*\*Themes: Q1 = preparedness to teach at elementary school, Q2 = understanding of FLA policy, Q3 = effectiveness of training before teaching.

Results for Question 4, which asked if ALTs were ever asked to teach alone, revealed similar beliefs between ALTs and HRTs. Most HRTs (58.4%) reported that they did not ask the ALT to be the lead teacher and 40% of the ALTs agreed. This result suggests that HRTs today may be better prepared and more confident in leading the FLA classes than they have been in the past and that the majority of them are following the regulations outlined in the course of study.

Beliefs concerning how well prepared team teaching partners were for team teaching were revealed in responses to Question 5. Most HRTs and ALTs believed their partners to be either suitably prepared (ALTs 14.0%, HRTs 42.7%) or slightly prepared (ALTs 40.0%, HRTs 44.9%). Here too, results show that the learning context and training may be improving. The reasons for this change will need to be discussed further but are beyond the scope of this paper.

Question 6 asked the ALTs and HRTs if they have enough time to prepare for lessons. Unfortunately the question did not ask whether the preparation was done together or individually. However, results show that most HRTs (69.7%) believed that they did not have enough time to prepare for classes and most ALTs (88.6%) agreed. As often noted in the literature, this lack of preparation is a major issue for team teaching at the elementary school level and it is an area which needs to be resolved by administrators.

Table 2

*Results of Descriptives and Frequencies of Questions 4 to 6*

	Q4		Q5		Q6	
	ALT	HRT	ALT	HRT	ALT	HRT
Yes	8(22.9%)	16(18.0%)	14(40.0%)	38(42.7%)	3(8.6%)	23(25.8%)
No	14(40.0%)	52(58.4%)	7(20.0%)	10(11.2%)	1(2.95%)	62(69.7%)
Slightly	13(37.1%)	21(23.6%)	14(40.0%)	40(44.9%)	31(88.6%)	4(4.5%)

\*ALT (n = 35), HRT (n = 89), however, 1 data missing for Q5

\*\*Themes: Q4 = teaching responsibilities, Q5 = preparedness for team teaching, Q6 = time constraints to prepare for class.



A Mann-Whitney U test was then administered to examine differences in beliefs between the ALTs and the HRTs to ascertain whether the differences were significant or not. This was done in order to test our null hypotheses. A test of normality revealed the raw data to have a non-normal distribution, thus the choice of our non-parametric test. The Mann-Whitney U test evaluates whether medians differ significantly between groups. Results for the Mann-Whitney U test are shown in Table 3. There were significant differences between ALT and HRT responses for Question 2, understanding the course of study goals; Question 3 regarding the adequacy of the pre-teaching orientation and training; and Question 6 regarding the time allotted for class preparation.

When asked if they understood the goals for FLA, 71 percent of ALTs said they only slightly understood. Conversely, 67 percent of HRTs believed that the ALTs had sufficient understanding of government goals. The results of the test were meaningful,  $z = -5.763$ ,  $p < .05$ , revealing that ALTs and HRTs had significantly different beliefs in the ALTs understanding of national language policy. The ALTs had an average rank of 89.77, while the HRTs had an average rank of 52.58. Some may feel that the HRTs are simply being kind or that the ALTs are simply not ready. With a reasonably strong effect size ( $r = .513$ ), this difference in beliefs must be investigated further.

Question 3 asked respondents if the pre-job orientation and training for ALTs was satisfactory. Forty percent of the ALTs answered *No*, and 61.8 percent of HRTs responded *Yes*. The results of the test were meaningful,  $z = -2.504$ ,  $p < .05$ , revealing that the ALTs and the HRTs had significantly different beliefs about how well the ALTs were prepared. The ALTs had an average rank of 74.96, while the HRTs had an average rank of 58.84. Again, this could be the cultural interference of the HRTs being kind or could also be related to a language and communication barrier, i.e. HRTs not really understanding the ALTs. Though the effect size is small ( $r = .223$ ), this also must be investigated further.

Finally, in Question 6 (time constraints to prepare for class), 88 percent of the ALTs answered “slightly” when asked if they had enough time to prepare, and 69.7 percent of the HRTs said that they did not have enough time to prepare. The results of the test were meaningful,  $z = -7.760$ ,  $p < .05$ , revealing that ALTs and HRTs had significantly different conceptions of the suitable time required to prepare for lessons. The ALTs had an average rank of 98.99, while the HRTs had an average rank of 48.75. Though these results may simply reveal the well-known fact that HRTs are very busy and do not have enough time to prepare, they may also point to a language and communication barrier. With a large effect size ( $r = .683$ ), this should be investigated in more detail.

Table 3

*Mann-Whitney U Test Results*

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6
U	1578.000	674.500	1222.500	1534.000	1612.000	333.500
Z	-.415	-5.763	-2.504	-.663	-.201	-7.670
p	.678	.000	.012	.508	.840	.000
$r^*$		-0.513	-0.223			-0.683

*\*Calculation for effect size for Mann Whitney U used:  $r = Z / \sqrt{N}$*

This study set out to investigate the differences in beliefs of the following six topics: (a) preparedness to teach at elementary school, (b) understanding of FLA policy, (c) effectiveness of training before teaching, (d) teaching responsibilities, (e) preparedness for team teaching, and (f) time constraints to prepare for class. Our results above allow us to reject the null hypothesis for three of the six topics. We found a significant difference in the beliefs about understanding policy, effectiveness of pre-training, and time to prepare for class.

#### 4. Conclusion

With the government planning to increase the number of ALTs and expand and increase language programs at the elementary school level, it will become even more necessary to understand the issues related to the team-teaching relationship in order to improve the orientation and training for ALTs and HRTs alike.

The first step to solve these issues is to understand the differences in beliefs of the teachers who are working together and try to work out those differences. This study found that ALTs and HRTs have a mutual understanding related to how well the ALTs are prepared to teach at elementary schools, how well they are prepared for team teaching, and how well they understand teaching responsibilities. However, beliefs were significantly different in understanding national language policy, effectiveness of orientation and pre-training, and time constraints for preparing for class. These are three areas which should be addressed if future policies are to succeed. It is vital that ALTs are better prepared in the understanding of language class goals at the elementary school level. It is also imperative that the HRTs be made truly aware of what the ALTs truly are. In other words, very few HRTs seem to understand that many ALTs are fresh out of university with no background in language teaching and that they have a very poor understanding of the Japanese education system.

The final point to cover is the time allotted to prepare for team teaching classes. In many of the surveys to date, such as Benesse (2010) and Eiken (2012), the issue of a lack of time to prepare has been noted as a top concern. Our survey would suggest that many ALTs believe this is



less of an issue than HRTs do. This may relate to the lack of training or understanding of what classroom preparation is on behalf of the ALTs and to a lack of confidence on the part of the HRTs (Fennelly & Luxton, 2011). This issue must be resolved and school administrators need to provide teachers with a better system for class preparation with team teaching partners within the school day.

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