

# Roles and Limitations for Assistant Language Teachers in Elementary School English Classes

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## Abstract

There are currently almost 4000 foreign nationals working as Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) on the Japan Exchange and Teaching Program (JET Program) as well as many others who are contracted outside of the JET Program. Previously, ALTs were engaged in team teaching with Japanese teachers of English in junior and senior high school. More recently, since English has been implemented at elementary school, ALTs often find themselves teaching at that level also. This has been a relatively new development and it is very important to realize that ALTs face unique challenges in elementary schools. Japanese teachers should be aware of the realities and limitations of the JET Program, especially when considering the elementary school context. This paper illuminates these limitations, describing the history of the JET Program before focusing on the current situation. Finally, some suggestions regarding the roles for Japanese homeroom teacher as well as ALTs are presented.

## 1. History of the JET Program

### 1.1 Beginnings of the JET Program

As outlined in McConnell (2000) and Ohtani (2010), the JET Program began in 1987. The program replaced two small-scale existing programs which invited American and British young people to Japan to assist with English language education and would soon become much larger and involve many more countries than its predecessors. Although improving English education was one of the goals of the program, it was created in an economic climate where specific Japanese industries such as the automobile industry were threatening the U.S. economy and ‘Japan bashing’ was increasingly being seen. The JET Program would invite prominent young people to Japan, with a view that they would go back to their own countries to pursue careers in a variety of fields with a positive impression of Japan. In this way, the JET Program might help to shape a more positive image of Japan in other countries at the grass roots level. Furthermore, there was a trade imbalance between Japan and many western countries. Paying participants in Japanese

yen, which they would take back to their countries would help to correct the imbalance and send a signal that Japan was opening up their country to the west and becoming more transparent. The program was designed with these factors in mind, and then unveiled at the “Ron-Yasu” summit between American president Reagan and Japanese Prime Minister Nakasone in 1986.

1.2 The boom years for the JET Program

By the 1990’s, Japanese English education was facing increasing criticism that it was not communicative or practical enough. (Taguchi, 2005; Hagerman 2009; Nishino, 2011). To correct this, the Ministry Education, Science, Culture and Technology, (MEXT), took a number of steps. In 1989, Oral Communication (OC) classes were introduced into the curriculum for all high school students. Then, through the 1990’s the number of ALTs increased year over year. In 2002 MEXT released the new course of study. In response to the advance of globalization, English education should focus on developing students’ practical communicative abilities, including the ability to exchange information and conduct daily conversation. Then, in 2003, MEXT announced an “Action Plan” to create “Japanese with English abilities” (MEXT, 2003), calling for increased use of ALTs and requesting teachers to make a greater effort to realize the aims of the new course of study. They also recommended that English teachers should use English as the medium of instruction and that special English programs be created at designated elementary schools also. (At that time, English was taught from junior high school through university.) Through the 1990’s ALTs were tied to notions of communicativeness and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in Japan and were in high demand. Figure 1 shows the growth of ALTs through the 90’s.

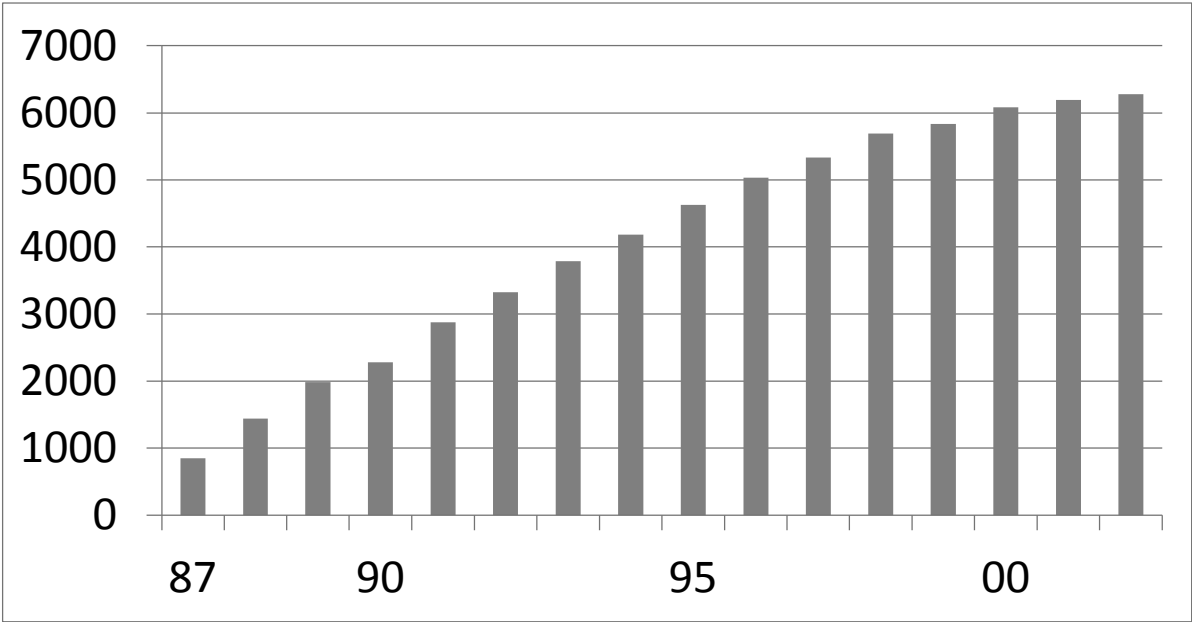
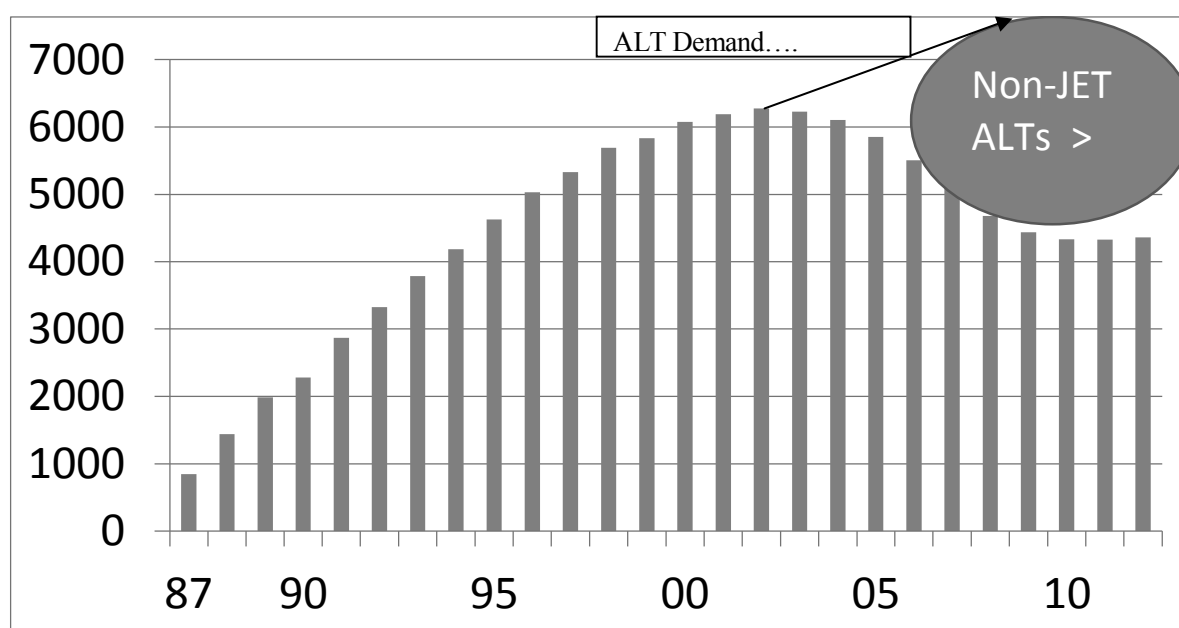


Figure 1. JET Program participants up to 2012 (JET Program Official Webpage)

### 1.3 Toward the Current Situation

As the 90's progressed, it is likely that the JET Program expanded faster than the infrastructure to support it. Gradually, inevitable problems and isolated incidences arose, which some were keen to pick up on (Kan, 2002). The Japanese economy was also had also been suffering from a decade of stagnation and the government was reigning in budgets. JET Program participants peaked in 2002 and then started a sharp decline to just over 4000 people by 2010, as shown in figure 2.



**Figure 2. JET Program participants up to 2012**

While the number of JET Program ALTs was declining, however, English was being introduced gradually at elementary schools. Because elementary school teachers were not trained as English teachers, ALTs were often requested to teach English at elementary schools. At the same time, Japanese English education has continued to face criticism that it is not communicative enough. Therefore, the demand for ALTs continued to rise. To meet this demand, native English speakers outside of the JET Program have increasingly been employed by schools to work as ALTs. These non-JET ALTs are a less homogeneous group and have not been the focus of much study compared with JET Program ALTs, since they are outside the domain of any single government body. They have, however, received some media attention. The Japan Times (2008) reported some of the issues that they face. Unlike their counterparts on the JET Program, whose working conditions are clearly defined, non-JET ALTs are often dispatched from an agency and face wages and working conditions that pale in comparison to the JET Program.

As of 2016, there are around 4400 participants on the JET Program, around 4000 of which are ALTs. Interestingly, however, in 2013 Prime Minister Abe called for the number of JET Program participants to be increased to 10 000 people by 2016, as reported in the Japan Times (2013). This was one of several initiatives which have been taken to improve the communicativeness and practicality of English education in the last couple of years. Clearly, this goal will not be met, since the number has yet to increase, but it shows that some in the government still view ALTs as a solution to Japanese English education. Before we simply increase the number of ALTs, I think it is important to consider the limitations of the program and question whether Japan should really be looking towards the JET Program to save English education.

## 2. ALTs in reality

### 2.1 ALTs as “Assistants” Participating on an “Exchange” Program

It should be noted that the ‘E’ in JET stand for *exchange*. Having participated on the JET Program in the past, and having worked with ALTs over the years, I would suggest that most ALTs are bright, hard-working individuals who would like to make a positive contribution in their school environment. However, there are various limitations - a better word might be *realities* - to the Program. The JET Program is an exchange program. Participants join the program in most cases not to start their career, but as an aside, to learn a little about Japan and have a good experience. The qualifications to join the program are simply to be a native English speaking foreign national and to have a University degree in any discipline. ALTs are not required to have a teaching degree or background in applied linguistics. Most participants have a completely unrelated academic background and will go into an unrelated field when they start their careers in their own country. Likewise, most ALTs do not speak Japanese when they arrive and have little knowledge of Japanese culture outside of their own personal interests. In a recent meeting with elementary an elementary school ALT in Tokushima prefecture, discussing problems at his schools, he said:

“The homeroom teachers expect us to come into class and be teachers. They don’t realize that we’re not.”

Most ALTs take their jobs seriously and learn quickly with help from their peers, but there is also a time-limit to the JET Program. ALTs are given a one year contract which is renewable for up to three years. At the three year period, some ALTs are given permission to stay for an additional two years, for a maximum of five years, but many ALTs stay for only one or two years. The program is indeed an *exchange* program, not a *career*.

It should also be noted that the ‘A’ in ALT stand for *Assistant*. The official website makes it very clear that ALTs are not intended to be the main teacher in the classroom, but are to assist the Japanese Teachers with the lesson as well as help with preparation and possibly join in

extra-curricular activities. The duties of ALTs are described below, according to the official website:

1. Assistance in foreign language classes, etc. taught in junior and senior high schools.
2. Assistance in foreign language activities, etc. in elementary schools.
3. Assistance in preparation of materials for teaching a foreign language.
4. Assistance in language training of teachers of a foreign language, etc.
5. Assistance in extracurricular activities and club activities (e.g. class activities, homeroom activities, student council activities, club activities, school events.)

## 2.2 Complications at in Elementary Schools

For most of its history, ALTs worked primarily at junior and senior high schools where English is taught by specialized teachers as a regular subject (MEXT, 2008). While different teachers use ALTs in different ways, it is commonly understood that the ALT is an assistant. English was only recently introduced in elementary school, however, and in principal, the homeroom teachers who are not specialist in English are required to teach the class. This is where problems arise. Elementary school teachers have less understanding of, and experience with the JET Program. Additionally, they are not English specialists. Considering this, it seems very natural that they would rely on ALTs to teach when they visit the class. ALTs, on the hand, face unique problems in elementary school. Firstly, communication problems are heightened in and outside of the classroom in elementary school. Secondly, the curriculum is not as well defined or established, since English only regarded as a “subject area” in elementary school, rather than a full subject. In fact, it is not mandatory at all until grades one through five. There are schools in the immediate area which have been observed to be teaching English from grade one and rely heavily on the ALT for a curriculum which had not been provided by MEXT.

The reality, as observed in this prefecture, is that the teaching environment in elementary school varies widely from school to school and the role of the ALT likewise, shifts from being the only participating teacher in charge of a class of 40, to being a very marginalized “assistant”. I would suggest that ALTs at elementary school have a much more difficult job than those at junior or senior high school. Certainly, homeroom teachers who expect to be able to rely on the ALT to teach their Foreign Language Activities classes should reconsider the limitations of the JET Program as well as their valuable role and knowledge as homeroom teachers. While inviting native speakers into the classroom can help motivate students, the homeroom teacher knows their students better than anyone. Homeroom teachers can play a powerful role in igniting students’ interest and channeling their motivation.

## 2.3 Other issues facing ALTs

Ohtani (2010) participated in prefectural level training sessions with ALTs and identified a number problems that ALTs face, including:

- Inadequate training

- Ambiguities between expected duties and actual roles
- Problems at the school site

These are issues which I have also observed directly, having participated on the JET Program for three years, and through conversations with ALTs. When these issues are examined further, we see that they might be heightened in an elementary school environment. Japanese teachers should be aware of these issues. In many cases, very simple steps can be taken to alleviate them.

### 2.3.1 Inadequate training

ALTs receive three days of training in Tokyo upon arrival, followed by periodic prefectural and national level training conferences once or twice a year. Much of training focusses on cultural integration and getting along in the school environment rather than teaching. The prefectural conferences tend to be more practical, focusing on games and classroom activities, but they are lead largely by ALTs and are inconsistent. Generally ALTs do tend to improve quickly over the course of a year or two, learning on the job as well as absorbing ideas from training, but because of the conditions of the program, they usually do not stay in Japan for more than a couple of years. As talented as they may be, it must be remembered that they are participants on an exchange program, rather than trained teachers.

### 2.3.2 Ambiguities between Expected duties and actual roles

As outlined above, the job of an ALT is to assist Japanese teachers, stated clearly on the JET Program official website. The expression “every situation is different” is often heard on the JET Program (McConnell, 2000) and ALTs are play a variety of roles in and out of the classroom. In elementary schools, ALTs are often expected to teach the class, sometimes without any curriculum, for example if they are asked to teach grades one through four, where English is not a required subject. This can be a great challenge, particularly for new ALTs.

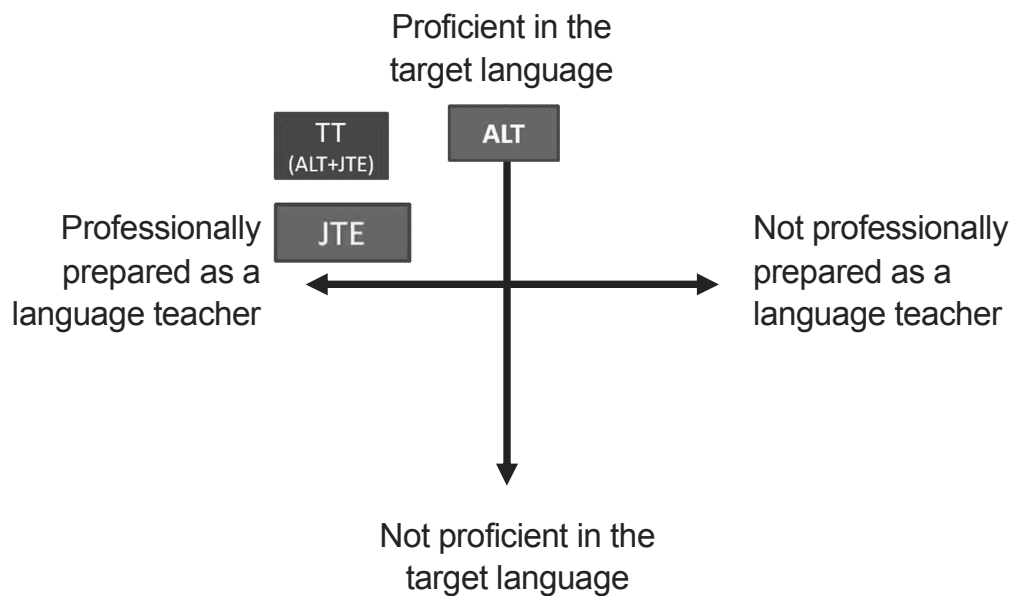
### 2.3.3 Problems at the school site

ALTs have reported various problems at the school site, many relating to communication. ALTs face obvious language and cultural barriers. Furthermore, they often visit schools on a very occasional basis and simply do not have access to basic information such as schedule information, extra-curricular events or meetings, and so on. Teachers may be reluctant to speak with ALTs also, fearing that their English is inadequate. In junior and senior high schools, ALTs should be able to communicate adequately with Japanese Teachers of English, but becomes a bigger problem in elementary school. I would suggest that ALTs will probably appreciate even very small gestures like a friendly greeting. Many ALTs feel a demotivating sense of isolation in their school environment, and small acts of kindness can go a long way towards alleviating that. Homeroom teachers who have to teach with ALTs should also make effort to meet with them or communicate by email regarding lesson planning. This

can be a challenge, but in training sessions with Japanese teachers and meetings with ALTs, I encourage everyone to make the extra effort.

### 3. Various Roles for Japanese Teachers and ALTs

This section provides some suggested role models for Japanese Teachers of English (JTEs) and ALTs at various levels of education. Homeroom teachers in elementary school should also be aware of this research and consider it in their own situation. Bailey (2002) advocated team teaching, suggesting that ALTs and JTEs can complement each other's strengths and weaknesses. His framework is shown in figure 3.

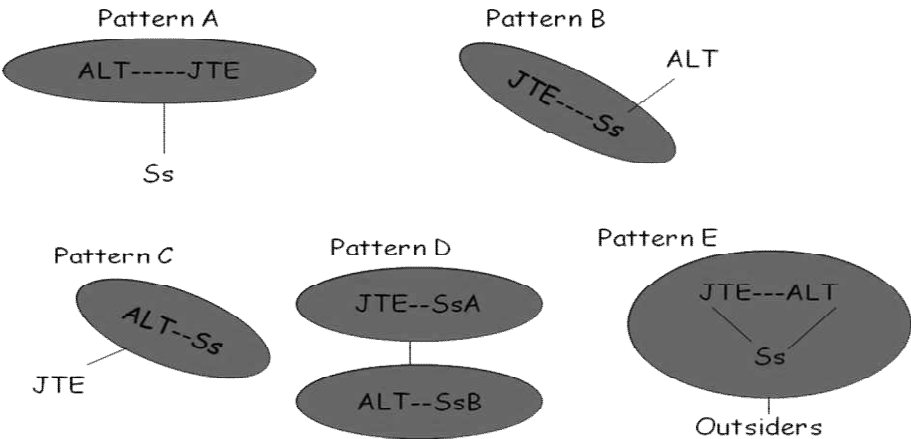


**Figure 3. Proposed roles for ALTs and JTEs**

As native speakers of English, ALTs are expected to have a high proficiency of English. However, ALTs are not qualified to have a teaching license and usually view teaching English in Japan as an excursion between University and more permanent employment, more often than not in another field. Therefore, they are less professionally prepared as language teachers. JTEs, meanwhile, are professional teachers, but often their English ability represents a relative weakness. With two teachers co-teaching, they are able to complement each other's strengths and weaknesses so that the team functions high in the upper left quadrant. Since Bailey was primarily concerned with the junior and senior high school context, elementary school teachers should be even less proficient in the target language. ALTs also, are likely to be even less professionally prepared as language teachers for the elementary school environment, since the students speak less English and the curriculum is not as clearly developed and defined. It therefore becomes all

the more important for ALTs to work together with Japanese teachers.

Tajino and Tajino (2000) also showed enthusiasm for team teaching. They reviewed 10 years of team-teaching in Japan and suggested various roles which ALTs and JETs should play. Consistent with modern views, they suggest teachers should de-centralize the classroom, proposing the term “team learning” rather than “teach teaching”. They propose several patterns indicated in Figure 3. Pattern A represents a traditional role where the class is teacher fronted and the teachers pass knowledge to the students. In pattern B however, the students play an active role teaching the native speaker. We see an alliance between the JTE and the students such that the Japanese teacher may help or facilitate the students, in teaching the JTE. The students may for example, wish to teach the ALT something about Japanese culture, or perhaps more interestingly, about their favorite TV program, etc. Pattern C has the ALT working with the students, perhaps to teach the JTE something, or to translate what the JTE is saying in Japanese. In pattern D half of the students work with the ALT and the other half work with the JTE. Finally in pattern E, all of the participants work together toward one common goal. This pattern might be practical for group projects such as correspondence with a sister school in an English speaking country or introducing students’ hometown in English. Figure 4 illustrates the roles which they propose.



**Figure 4. Roles for ALTs and JTEs (Tajino & Tajino, 2000)**

In elementary schools, while MEXT recommends that homeroom teachers should primarily teach the curriculum, homeroom teachers often take a backseat, letting ALTs or other support staff lead the class. It is understandable that homeroom teachers are worried about their English ability, but perhaps they should focus on their strength in dealing with their students, rather than their weaknesses and reconsider the role that they play in the classroom. Considering Tajino & Tajino (2000), for example, homeroom teachers may align themselves with the students, acting as co-learner, shown in Pattern C above. Alternatively, both the students and homeroom teacher, being “experts” on Japan or Japanese culture, can work together with their students, teaching the



ALT about Japan, as illustrated in Pattern B. This puts the students together with the homeroom teacher in an active role. Certainly, when an ALT is leading the class, showing a positive attitude and engaging in the class provides a good example and sets the tone for students.

#### 4. Conclusion

The primary purpose of this paper is to increase awareness and understanding of the JET Program and ALTs. The program was designed with a number of motives besides just English teaching in mind. Although it has been cast as a solution to problems in English language education, it is an *exchange* program and participants are typically recent University graduates from a variety of disciplines who simply want to experience life in a foreign country for a year to two. It is probably unrealistic to expect ALTs to transform English education. From the limitations of the program, suggestions are made for Japanese teachers who are working with ALTs. Japanese teachers are encouraged to communicate with ALTs outside the classroom, not only regarding lesson planning, but also to help integrate the ALTs into their schools. In the classroom, Japanese teachers should try to play an active role, drawing on their strengths as homeroom teachers.

The scope of this paper did not include improvements to ALT professional development or structural recommendations for the JET Program. The recommendations target mainly Japanese teaching faculty, but of course improvements to ALT training may also help to improve the program and subsequently English education in Japan. In the meantime, it is important to recognize that introducing English in elementary schools presents huge challenges for ALTs as well as Japanese elementary school teachers. ALTs have not been equipped to teach English at elementary school and given the current conditions of the JET Program, improvements in this regard will probably be limited. The best way to meet these challenges is probably by working together both in and out of the classroom.

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