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Collaboration in Junior High School
A Survey of Teachers’ Attitudes towards Team Teaching

Tony Brown

Introduction
There are now over 5,800 ALTs recruited abroad, and working in schools throughout Japan, according to the Council for Local Authorities and International Relations (CLAIR 2005), and the JET Program has been in operation for almost nineteen years. This means that many Junior High School teachers have a great deal of experience of team teaching, and in fact for some it has been a fact of life, for better or worse, for their whole career.

This preliminary study aims to draw on that experience in order to examine Junior High School Teachers’ attitudes to team teaching with an ALT. In particular it seeks to find what they perceive to be the merits and drawbacks of JTE-ALT co-operation, as well as what kind of training might maximize the advantages and minimize the disadvantages of team teaching.

Methodology and Background Information
Questionnaires were distributed to 74 Junior School English Teachers currently working at state-run schools in Nagasaki Prefecture. All of the teachers were attending a two-week training course in communicative teaching. This may be thought to introduce bias into the study, however the training course is compulsory, and this is the third of five sets of teachers, so there is no reason to assume that they might be biased either in favour of, or against Communicative Language Teaching, or indeed team teaching.

The questionnaires needed to be kept brief (they were, in fact, on a single side of A4) in order to allow teachers to complete them during their break. This obviously increased the return rate (to 100%), but limited the amount of data that could be gathered.

Some respondents had problems with the concept of ranking, which meant that some of their responses had to be averaged. It is hoped that this did not adversely affect the results. Problems with time (this was a once-a-year opportunity to have such a large group of teachers together in one room) meant that a pilot version of the questionnaire could not be trialed. However, the slight problems encountered with some aspects of the data will help to provide more effective tools for
future research. Instructions in Japanese may have helped circumvent some of the problems with ranking, but this would have meant making the questionnaire more than one page. Items were chosen on the basis of informal conversations with teachers over the past year.

Of the respondents 59 were female, 15 were male. Average length of experience was about 11 years.

**Training Needed by JTEs**

Teachers were asked to rank various types of training, according to which they believed would most help them to make team teaching more successful (see figure 1). The highest ranking was for training in Communicative Language Teaching. It is possible that they feel that training in CLT is lacking in their training in general, a problem outlined by Brown and Wada (1998), who found that teachers with qualifications in EFL felt by far most adequately trained, but only 3.3% actually possessed such qualifications. There is also the slight possibility that some teachers may have considered this to be the “right” answer, as they were attending a series of workshops focusing on CLT when they completed the questionnaires.

![Fig. 1 What Training do JHSTE Need?](image)

It is interesting that many teachers ranked “Training in Everyday English Conversation” first. On the other hand, communication was not seen as a major problem when it comes to working with an ALT. Perhaps this was partly modesty on the part of teachers, and partly an indirect criticism of the English Language education they received before becoming junior high school teachers.

Training in team teaching, and cross-cultural communication were seen as valuable if not essential, while “the lifestyle and culture of English-speaking countries” was the least popular choice.
Training Needed by ALTs

Teachers were asked to rank various types of training, according to which they believed would most help ALTs contribute to a more successful team-teaching partnership (see figure 2).

![Fig. 2 What Training do JHS ALTs Need?](image)

It is clear from these results that teachers feel that ALTs require more training in teaching, not only in Communicative Language Teaching, but also in team teaching. As one teacher pointed out, “...before they come to Japan or teaching students, they should have training for teaching.”

Training in cross-cultural communication and Japanese lifestyle and culture were also seen as valuable. In the light of McConnel’s (2000: 262-266) account of the great problems inherent in CLAIR’s attempts to offer Japanese language training to all JET participants, it is interesting that very few teachers expressed the opinion that ALTs need to be able to speak Japanese before taking up their posts in junior high school.

Benefits of Working with an ALT

Teachers were asked to rank the benefits of working with an ALT in terms of positive outcomes for students (see figure 3). Junior high school teachers in Nagasaki clearly feel that the motivational aspects of having an ALT in the classroom were the greatest benefit to students, with “increasing students’ motivation” and “making classes more interesting and fun” being ranked easily the highest. One teacher commented on how his students look forward to the team-taught lessons. Improving communication skills and offering an opportunity to learn about another culture (two aspects emphasized by the Ministry of Education) were ranked third and fourth respectively.
It is interesting that “improving students’ pronunciation” is regarded as by far the least beneficial aspect of having an ALT in the English classroom. Tajino and Walker (1998: 121-122) found that teaching pronunciation was regarded by ALTs and JTEs as being first in terms of “what students expect ALTs to do”, and ranked second by the students themselves. Given that many of these teachers have a great deal of experience, the results seem to imply that students have not become better in terms of pronunciation, despite regular exposure to native models.

**Problems Associated with Working with an ALT**

Teachers were asked to rank the problems associated with working with an ALT, both in terms of what happens inside and outside the classroom (see figure 4).
The time needed for preparing the team-taught class is clearly seen as a major problem for teachers. This echoes Tajino and Tajino (2000) among others, who see a major problem with team-teaching as “...largely administrative (allowing time for teachers to meet together)”. This choice showed a negative correlation with teaching experience, suggesting that more experienced teachers had lesson preparation better under control, and could find more time to work with the ALT on preparing for team teaching.

There was also a feeling on the part of some, especially older, teachers that having the ALT in the class meant that there was not enough time to work on the text book. Indeed, other studies have shown that some teachers regard time spent with the ALT as somehow frivolous, and distracting from the serious business of working on the text and preparing for exams. Indeed, one might say that the job of the English teacher in Japan is something of a balancing act between making classes communicative and useful (which in any case they may well feel untrained to do), and working on the text book and preparing for entrance exams in the way they were taught themselves.

ALTs’ lack of understanding of the school system and culture was ranked third. Interestingly, this choice showed a high degree of polarization. While many teachers ranked this choice fourth or fifth, there was a significant number of teachers who ranked it first, and even commented on some ALTs' lack of knowledge of, or sensitivity to, the culture in a typical Japanese junior high school. One teacher commented, “ALTs must understand Japanese culture and Japan’s school system... [and] should be responsible to Japan with their own countries' honour.” I outlined some of those potential cultural problems in a previous paper (Brown 2005).

Communication between JTE and ALT was not seen as a significant problem, despite the fact that many teachers sensed a lack in their own English-speaking ability. Moreover, as has been said, knowledge of Japanese on the part of ALTs does not seem to be regarded as necessary. Furthermore, despite the fact that team-taught classes were seen as more fun, teachers seemed little perturbed with the potential lack of control. Most teachers ranked “class can get out of control” as the fourth or fifth most serious problem out of five.

Despite the problems associated with team-teaching, 97.3% of teachers reported that, if given the choice, they would choose to work with an ALT again. Clearly there is a strong feeling among junior high school teachers that the benefits of having an ALT in their school by far outweigh the drawbacks.
Almost all teachers surveyed felt their English had improved as a result of working with ALTs, with 91% stating the team-teaching situation had definitely improved their English, or had improved it a little (see figure 5). One teacher even went as far as to comment, “I really owe it all to my ALTs about my current English skill”.

This may well be an important aspect of teacher development, and a useful spin-off of the system. A recent survey by the Ministry of Education, reported in the Yomiuri Shimbun (2005) found that only 8.3 percent junior high English school teachers scored more than 730 points in the TOEIC test, (a level indicating conversational ability), and only 10.1 percent passed the pre-level 1 or level 1 of the Society for Teaching English Proficiency (STEP) test. Having the opportunity to communicate with a native speaker on a regular, if not daily, basis can only help to improve this situation.

As reported above, when asked the question “If you could choose whether or not you work with an ALT next year, how would you answer?” 72 out of the 74 teachers surveyed answered “yes”. Despite some reservations, it is clear that there is an extremely positive attitude on the part of teachers towards team teaching and the JTE - ALT relationship. Sturman (1992: 151) reports that in 1990 there was a “persistent minority” of Junior High School JTEs who would prefer not to team teach. This minority would now appear to be very small, at least in Nagasaki. It should be noted, however, that many teachers added comments such as “it depends on the ALT”, “ALT’s character is very important”, and even took the opportunity to criticise the attitude of some assistant teachers. The comments of one teacher in particular summed up teachers’ feelings on the hit-or-miss nature of being paired with an ALT.
The ALT I worked with last year was not serious at all. I was very disappointed with him. Team teaching with him could not develop our students' English level. But this month a new ALT has come. I really look forward to team teaching with him. I'll do my best.

Conclusions and Further Study
This initial study shows that junior high school teachers in Nagasaki have generally very positive feelings about team teaching with an ALT. They feel that students benefit from team-teaching, especially in terms of increased motivation. Moreover, they believe that they themselves have become better at communicating in English as a result of working with an assistant teacher. Medgyes (1992:34) called for a balance of native and non-native teachers within a school. The JET Program offers an opportunity for this to take place.

Nevertheless, there was a feeling among several teachers that, while most ALTs did an excellent job, there were also some who contributed little to either the students' linguistic development or their own, suggesting that care needs to be taken in the selection process. ALTs contribution would be enhanced by more initial training in Team Teaching and in Communicative Language Teaching, while they themselves felt they have not had enough training in CLT, and many felt that their general English communication skills still were not sufficient to maximise the value of team teaching.

This paper describes an initial study, carried out with simple analytical tools. I hope in future to carry out more sophisticated statistical analysis on a larger and wider sample. This could include:
• Opinions of Senior high school teachers
• Opinions of ALTs
• Opinions of Students
• A longitudinal study of opinions from teachers, to investigate trends
• Opinions of Teachers, ALTs and students from other parts of Japan

Bibliography


The Yomiuri Shimbun (18 July 2005) “Ministry survey finds schools’ English teaching falling short”