

# English education in elementary schools: Team-teaching approaches

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The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) recently revised its curriculum guidelines for elementary schools effectively making English compulsory for all 5th and 6th graders in 2011. The guidelines call for schools to utilize native-speaking assistant language teachers (ALTs) and Japanese assistant teachers (JATs) in the English classroom. In the two-teacher team-teaching (2TT) approach a homeroom teacher (HRT) works with an ALT, while three-teacher team-teaching (3TT) includes a third teacher, the JAT. This paper discusses the issues involved in these team-teaching approaches.

日本の文部科学省は2008年3月に発表した小学校の新学習指導要領において、2011年度から5年生、6年生の外国語活動（実情としては英語活動）を必修とすることを決めた。英語活動においては、英語を母国語とする補助教員（ALT）と英語が堪能である日本人の教員が活用されるべきであるということも示されている。2人の教員のチームティーチングの場合は、担任教員とALTの2人であり、3人のチームティーチングというのは、日本人の英語教員が入る場合である。この論考では、このようなチームティーチングにかかわるいろいろな点について論じていく。



**I**N MARCH 2008, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) revised the curriculum guidelines for elementary schools calling for a once-a-week class in foreign language activities for all 5th and 6th graders (MEXT, n.d.). According to the new guidelines, the overall objectives of the foreign language classes are to develop a basic communicative ability in the language (which in principle is English), foster an understanding of languages and cultures through experiential learning, and nurture a positive attitude toward communication and a familiarity with the sounds and basic expressions of the language (MEXT, 2009). The English class will not be treated as a regular subject and there will be no official textbook: Instead, the Education Ministry has produced a supplementary workbook, *Eigo Noto* (English Notebook) for teachers to use (Shiomi, November 12, 2009).

According to the Education Ministry, about 98 percent of the nation's public elementary schools were scheduled to offer English lessons in the 5th and 6th grades during 2009, and slightly more than 50% of these schools were to offer thirty-five 45-minute lessons throughout the 2009 school year (Shiomi, November 12, 2009).

Education Ministry guidelines call for homeroom teachers (HRTs) or teachers who are put in charge of the foreign language activities classes to design the language program and decide the content of the lessons (MEXT, 2009). In addition, the guidelines state that an effort "should be made to get more people involved in lessons by inviting native speakers of the foreign language" and "by seeking cooperation from local people who are proficient in the foreign language" (MEXT, 2009).

Elementary schools have been utilizing the two-teacher team-teaching (2TT) approach where the homeroom teacher works with a native-speaking assistant language teacher (ALT). Recently, however, the three-teacher team-teaching (3TT) system appears to be gaining in popularity. Boards of education (BOEs)

across the country have introduced the use of Japanese assistant teachers (JATs) for English lessons, asking for help from and employing community members who are fluent speakers of English and preferably experienced in teaching the language to children (Shiomi, December 3, 2009). The Saitama Municipal Board of Education has used JATs since 2005 and about 160 residents have been registered including some who have worked overseas and former teachers of English. The Saitama BOE pays the Japanese assistant teacher based on the number of lessons he or she covers. The JAT is encouraged to speak English throughout the entire lesson, as he or she sometimes works as a substitute for the ALT ((Shiomi, December 3, 2009). ALTs usually join JATs and HRTs on a biweekly basis.

The addition of the JAT in the classroom may provide a bridge between the HRT and the ALT, especially in situations where the HRT speaks no English and the ALT speaks no Japanese. The JAT can be an aid in explaining cultural differences and help to resolve or alleviate misunderstandings. The extra teacher in the classroom may bring more ideas and energy to the lesson which may help to lighten the other teachers' workloads. However, although the 3TT approach may have some advantages over 2TT, there are problems and challenges that both team-teaching methods face. The average HRT has had much education and experience in teaching regular school subjects, but probably has not received any foreign language teacher training. Although Saitama JATs are supported with training programs during the summer break, and are observed by their BOE regularly (Shiomi, December 3, 2009), many JATs, and ALTs as well, differ widely in their expertise and experience in teaching and language education.

Teachers, teacher educators, and others involved in English as a foreign language (EFL) education in Japan will need to become better informed of the team-teaching approaches and more involved in the process of improving elementary school

English language instruction. According to a 2008 nationwide survey of teachers in charge of English programs at public primary schools conducted by Obunsha, a publisher of English teaching materials, half of all the teachers said they were concerned that they would not experience a smooth introduction into English as their schools had already experienced some problems. The teachers were concerned about what and how to teach, what and how to assess, and how to plan lessons (Shiomi, November 12, 2009).

At JALT2009, the Domestic Affairs Forum focused its panel discussion on the advantages and disadvantages in team-teaching, in particular the 3TT system, in English classes at elementary schools. The panel of members represented a cross section of English language educators: Chair Hitomi Sakamoto, a teacher educator representing the Elementary School Thematic English Education Movement (ESTEEM); 3TT specialist Darryl Sumida from the Saitama Board of Education; ALT panelist Harry Carley of the JALT Teaching Children Special Interest Group (TC SIG); ALT panelist Joseph Schott of the Association for Japan Exchange and Teaching (AJET); and JAT panelist Ethel Ogane, a teacher educator and member of ESTEEM. Richard Bales of the JALT Domestic Affairs Committee coordinated the forum. After the initial panel discussion, panel and audience members broke into groups to discuss the roles of the 3TT teachers and make recommendations on how the system can be improved.

This paper provides information on issues in elementary school English language education and the information on team-teaching approaches offered by the panelists at the forum. It includes an overview of the comments and contributions made by participants during the group discussions. The paper ends with suggestions and recommendations for teachers and organizations involved in team-teaching and English education at the primary school level.

## Panel discussion: Advantages and disadvantages in team-teaching

### Advantages

Many advantages can be seen in the team-teaching approach. Team-teachers share responsibilities and thus lighten each other's workloads, especially in the large-size classes prevalent in Japan. Team-teachers can complement each other by covering each other's weak points and enhancing strong points, thus improving the overall quality of the language lesson. Team-teaching can provide opportunities to make the best use of each teacher's ideas and experiences. Team-teachers can show students how teachers cooperate with each other. Working as a team, teachers can easily present dialogues and role play different personalities and speakers.

When HRTs are present, they can help to, or know how to, control the class as they have spent more time with the students and usually know them better than the ALT or JAT. The HRT can help to identify some of the special needs of particular students and pay special attention to them. When the language program is led by an HRT, the lessons can be arranged consecutively and follow or be more integrated into the school curriculum. HRTs are sometimes foreign language learners and can act as role models for the pupils. As language learners themselves, they can help better relate some of the language materials and content to the class.

The native-speaking assistant language teacher can provide large amounts of natural, spontaneous English language input and can be a rich resource providing tangible cultural knowledge, thus helping to motivate students to use English. The ALT can show how each individual is different and at the same time show how each individual, as a human being, is alike.

The addition of the JAT brings another valuable instructor to the classroom. Since almost all JATs are Japanese themselves,

language barriers are usually nonexistent between the HRT and JAT. And the JAT, who in most cases speaks fluent English, provides a communication link between the HRT and the ALT in the classroom. The JAT can substitute for the ALT in the 2TT system, or be another helpful resource in the 3TT situation. Like the HRT, the Japanese assistant teacher is a role model for the students.

### Challenges in team-teaching

There are, however, disadvantages in both the 2TT and 3TT methods. One of the main difficulties in the 2TT setting is a negative mindset on the part of both the ALT and HRT. Some HRTs are unsure about why and how they should teach English in elementary school. Many primary school teachers feel anxious about teaching English to their students (Shiomi, November 12, 2009). The HRT who is not confident in his or her English ability often leaves the entire lesson completely up to the ALT or expects the ALT to put on a show for the class. There have been cases in which the HRT says he or she is going to the restroom and never returns during the class period. On the other hand, many ALTs feel isolated and excluded from lesson planning (Otani, 2009). Some ALTs who have little or no training in teaching foreign languages or in pedagogy create problems in the classroom. Other ALTs expect too much from the students when they make pronunciation and grammar mistakes and get frustrated when the HRT or students do not understand them. Disciplinary techniques used by some ALTs may be too heavy-handed and the HRT must take responsibility for it. Other ALTs prefer to use Japanese to communicate and play with the students.

In the 3TT method, the disadvantages are intensified. The additional ego involved in the 3TT system may make it more difficult to reach compromises and to find ways to smooth over differences of opinion and style. JATs who are older than

the HRT take control of the class although they may have far less educational training or experience than the HRT. In other cases, retired teachers or principals who are assigned as JATs to new or junior HRTs dominate the class. In some areas of Japan, budget constraints restrict the hiring of JATs with basic teaching qualifications and classroom experience, resulting in many assistant teachers who do not know what to do in the classroom. A Saitama JAT recalls that even as a former cram school instructor specializing in English grammar, she at first had no idea what team-teaching would be like (Shiomi, December 3, 2009).

When there is a substantial language barrier, team-teachers may not be able to communicate well enough to adequately prepare and plan lessons. An informal survey, conducted by one of the panelists, of primary schools in Ehime Prefecture (14 respondents) showed that a majority of HRTs felt it was difficult to communicate with the ALT because the HRT had a limited knowledge of English vocabulary and the ALT was not able to speak Japanese. Coordinating the time or a schedule for meetings on upcoming lessons becomes doubly problematic with three team-teachers. Some ALTs are scheduled to stay at the same school indefinitely, while others visit a school just once every few months. There is not enough time set aside for teachers to discuss lesson planning in many current school situations.

Many HRTs, ALTs, and JATs do not know or do not understand current government and local BOE or school policies regarding English education. The role of each team member, their ability to follow school policies, and their competence to interact in a team-teaching environment are all important components in 2TT and 3TT. Many of the negative aspects outlined above are due to the system and the procedures MEXT has set up, such as the current teaching certification system which does not require prospective elementary school teachers to study how to teach English while at college (Shiomi, November 12, 2009). However, there may be fewer or no problems in team-teaching itself if

teachers respect each other and treasure the affirmative features of working as a team.

### Comments and suggestions from participants

The approximately 30 participants who attended the forum and contributed to the group discussions included public and private elementary school teachers, Japanese assistant teachers, assistant language teachers, private language school teachers and teacher trainers, university professors and teacher educators, graduate students, and college students in teacher-training programs. A Japanese homeroom teacher present at the forum brought up the issue of confusion among HRTs regarding the goals of elementary school English education. Are classes just for having fun with English or for teaching the vocabulary and grammar in *Eigo Noto?* Participants agreed that the different goals wrapped up in the new MEXT guidelines—develop communicative ability, foster understanding of languages and cultures, nurture positive attitudes toward communication, and teach language rhythm, sounds, and expressions—can be confusing. The outcome for some homeroom teachers at elementary schools is a classroom lesson with unclear goals.

A problem related to the issue of classroom and learning goals which was also raised in discussion is that many elementary school curriculum planners may have not yet recognized and provided for the possible distinction between Basic Interpersonal Communication Skill (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), that is, the distinction between conversational and academic aspects of language proficiency (Cummins, 1999-2003). Local boards of education must first decide which type of language proficiency their English programs would be better geared toward. The BOEs need to then implement formal teacher training in this area as many team-teachers may not understand the difference between these two types of language skills. The point was made that oral communication

or communicative language classes should be based on a BICS oriented curriculum, while secondary school English classrooms in which students may be studying for entrance exams should have a curriculum based on CALP oriented goals.

Another area of concern related to classroom goals was the emphasis on teaching the rhythms, sounds, and basic expressions of the language. Many Japanese teachers, the HRT or JAT, may base the pronunciation of English and English expressions used in the classroom on American English. However, not all ALTs are American, and those that are may be speakers of any one of the numerous regional dialects in the States. There are many differences in word choice and pronunciation in the dialects and the World Englishes that different ALTs use which team-teachers will have to deal with in the classroom and explain to their pupils.

Many participants brought up the subject of the roles that they or other team-teachers play or believe they should play. A Japanese assistant teacher in Saitama said that many of the JATs she knows never complain, really enjoy helping students, try to improve their own English ability, and try to act as role models for students. Her BOE in Saitama requires certain qualifications in potential JATs and its hiring practices include a written test, an interview, and demonstration lessons. A private language school instructor said he believes that JATs and ALTs have different teaching roles. The ALT comes to the classroom with cultural background, but the JAT, who may have not lived abroad, cannot provide this kind of resource in the lesson. The ultimate responsibility lies with the HRT, and if the JAT and ALT try to fill this leadership role it might create problems. However, a Japanese English teacher at a private elementary school commented that she found it difficult to maintain discipline in the classroom and to motivate students to learn. A private language school teacher trainer in Tokyo said that, in her experience, many HRTs have not had enough exposure to English, which

leads to communication breakdowns with ALTs. The HRTs that she trains have the choice to attend her workshops or not. Her challenge is to try to teach HRTs how to develop rapport with ALTs and how to motivate their students.

A positive note was sounded by a university teacher educator who has begun training her college students to act as JATs at a nearby high school. These college-age student JATs can be sources of inspiration and motivation to the younger high school students. They can act as role models and having been through high school English lessons themselves, they may have a better understanding of and insight into the problems of language learning for young students and how to find solutions for them.

### Concluding remarks

According to the Education Ministry, primary school teachers have been offered a variety of training programs (Shiomi, November 12, 2009). During the 2008 school year, about 80% of the schools that were to give English lessons to their students in 2009 sent their mid-level teachers to training programs offered by local boards of education. Close to 70% of the schools arranged in-house training programs for their own staff. In junior high school districts, each of which consists of a junior high school and nearby elementary schools, there was collaboration between junior high schools and their feeder schools in areas such as teaching methods (Shiomi, November 12, 2009). However, there needs to be more training of the teachers involved in team-teaching in how to teach 2TT and 3TT lessons and how to work together in the planning of their lessons.

There also need to be preparation periods set aside by schools for team-teachers to meet and plan lessons. At Narita Primary School, English lessons are conducted mainly in English using a 2TT approach. To help its teachers better handle these Eng-

lish lessons, Narita reserves time after school on a set day each week for HRTs and ALTs to get together and work on lesson plans. Teachers gather and divide into groups based on grades, spending much time discussing how to conduct upcoming lessons. Narita has designated this preparation period as “a crucial teacher-training program for English lessons” (Shiomi, November 12, 2009).

There are great differences between each of the three teacher roles in 3TT, but there are as large or larger differences among the people playing each role. For example, the community members who act as JATs may or may not have lived or worked overseas, have adequate cross-cultural understanding, have adequate English ability, or have experience in teaching. Therefore, many participants agreed that the most critical quality a person playing any of the three roles can have is flexibility and a willingness to work with other team-teachers. This is obviously true of any team, but particularly so in 2TT and 3TT because the differences among teachers can be so great.

### Bio data

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**Darryl Sumida** is a native English teacher for the Saitama City Board of Education. He is interested in curriculum development and implementation.

**Joseph Schott** is an Assistant Language Teacher and the Vice-chair of National AJET. He is interested in global education and grassroots internationalization.

**Richard Bales** is Chair of the JALT Domestic Affairs Committee. He teaches in the Department of English Communications at Tokyo Kasei University and his interests include teacher education and second language acquisition among younger learners.

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