

When Public Education Meets Educational Business: A Case Study of a Newly Employed Assistant Language Teacher

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Reference Data:

Sato, Y. (2012). When public education meets educational business: A case study of a newly employed Assistant Language Teacher. In A. Stewart & N. Sonda (Eds.), *JALT2011 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

This study addresses four cases in which a newly employed Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) encountered intercultural conflict outside the classroom in a non-teaching context. As a Japanese teacher of English in a junior high school, I observed many situations where an ALT's course of action was misinterpreted by Japanese teachers and resulted in the ALT being regarded as a troublemaker. However, a considerably different interpretation can be placed on the ALT's course of action when observed from non-Japanese perspectives. This study analyzes the causes of such troubles through four narrative-based case studies. It also provides some insight on how to mitigate such issues not only for Japanese teachers of English, but also for ALT *haken* companies.

本研究は新任のAssistant Language Teachers (ALTs)が日本の公立学校に勤務する際、教室外、及び教務外のコンテクストで直面する問題を4つの事例研究を通して取り上げる。著者は以前公立中学校で英語教師として勤務していたが、日本の教育現場に不慣れなALTが取る行動が度々日本人教員によって問題行動と解釈される事例に遭遇した。しかしながら、ALTの観点からは、また違った意見が提示された。そこで、本研究は新任のALTが日本の教育現場で直面するであろう4つの事例を体験談として取り上げ、その原因を分析し、その分析結果に基づき、日本人英語教師だけでなくALT派遣会社に対しても示唆を与えることを目的とする。

ASSISTANT LANGUAGE Teachers (外国語指導助手, ALTs) play important roles in English education in Japan. As their job title indicates, ALTs are expected to assist Japanese teachers of English in the classroom by facilitating oral practice, with natural pronunciation, as well as communicative practice. According to Wada (1990), students also benefit from team-teaching between Japanese teachers and ALTs because it fosters their willingness to communicate. Moreover, Kuno, Sato, Nagai, and Kasuya (2006) suggested that team-teaching between Japanese teachers and ALTs is desirable because it could enable natural English interactions in the classroom. In addition, native speakers can be regarded as the ultimate goal of students' foreign language learning, and the Japanese teacher can therefore be a tangible role model for the students. The presence of ALTs in the language classroom can also foster students' cultural sensitivity and help them recognize the necessity of English interaction.

Although some native English speaker teachers are directly employed by educational boards or schools, most are Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) programme or *haken* (派遣, dispatch) ALTs. The JET programme was established in 1987 by the Ministry of Education, Culture,



Sports, Science, and Technology (文部科学省, MEXT) to introduce native English speaking teachers to English language classrooms in public schools. In 1999, the deregulation of the *rodosha haken ho* (労働者派遣法, Dispatch Law) enabled *haken gaisha* (派遣会社, private language teaching companies) to send more ALTs to public schools. A survey conducted by MEXT in April 2009 indicated that 168 local boards of education would rather choose *haken* ALTs than other contract types, while only 12 were willing to choose JET ALTs (Heisei 21 nendo gaikokugo shido joshu (ALT) no koyo/keiyaku keitai ni kansuru chosa ni tuite [On a survey of Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) contract in 2009], 2009). One reason is the less complex paperwork, and the cost of *haken* ALTs is generally reasonable as well.

The introduction of *haken* ALTs, however, does not always have a positive effect on teaching. As noted by Martin (2010), *haken* ALTs faced more problems after deregulation. It is partly because *haken* companies are not fully aware of ALT problems. Compared with JET ALTs who received more teacher training, ALTs from *haken* companies are less familiar with public school discourse. Therefore, newly employed *haken* ALTs who are not familiar with the Japanese public school system are especially likely to experience problems. Comments by ALTs that I have interviewed suggested that they have more problems with non-teaching related issues than in actual classroom teaching situations.

ALTs as Persona Non Grata?

On August 4, 2010, the *Asahi Shimbun* (朝日新聞) reported that in a public school in Kashiwa, Chiba, Japanese English teachers tried to negotiate with a newly employed ALT about what to teach in their team-teaching classrooms. The ALT thought this was a violation of his contract and as a result, he decided to leave the school. Two other ALTs were sent to the same school after him, but they had the same problems and left the school

before the end of their contracts. As a result, the *rodokyoku* (労働局), or labor bureau, in Chiba, in order to avoid further troubles, issued a warning to the school and implemented regulations to prohibit Japanese teachers' interaction with ALTs. Because team-teaching between Japanese teachers of English and ALTs triggers actual communication, through which teachers can provide a role model of L2 performance (Ushiro, 2001), those regulations resulted in a huge pedagogical controversy among not only ALTs, but also Japanese teachers according to the newspaper article. In light of this, the regulation was rescinded in 2011.

While working in a public junior high school, I also observed many situations where newly employed ALTs were involved in disputes, often involving non-teaching-related issues. One day, Johnny (not his real name), a newly employed 24-year-old male *haken* ALT from the U.K., used hair wax to make his hairstyle spiky, which was banned by school rules. The vice-principal of the school noticed it and asked Johnny not to use hair wax at school. Johnny argued back and refused to follow the vice-principal's request. His defiant attitude caused other Japanese teachers to feel uncomfortable, and this eventually created a disharmonious atmosphere among the teachers.

Such cases may indicate that newly employed ALTs may come to be regarded as *persona non grata* by Japanese public school teachers. This concern eventually made me want to work on ALT issues from the *haken* company side to try to eliminate such problems. Currently, I work for a *haken* company and engage in curriculum development for team teaching lessons, and I often hear ALT's complaints about their working environment, including their discomfort, frustration, and job stress in relation to miscommunication with Japanese teachers.

McConnell (2000) described what it is like to be an ALT on the JET programme in Japan. He used comments not only from ALTs, but also from junior high school teachers, school managers, and civil servants to provide multiple perspectives on JET

programme issues. His book describes the situation of the first decade of JET ALTs. However, the introduction of *haken* ALTs as a result of the 1999 deregulation changed the situation. Therefore, new studies were called for to shed light on what has happened since the change. Responding to that, some awareness surveys were conducted (Aihara, 2007; Kakimoto, 2003; Ogawa, 2011; Otani & Tsuido, 2009; Tanabe, 2008, 2010a, 2010b). Among them, Ogawa's (2011) statistical study dealt with ALT job issues with regard to classroom teaching. Her study revealed that, while Japanese Teachers of English and ALTs had similar ideas about what ALTs should do in classrooms, there was still some discrepancy between Japanese teachers' wants and ALTs' needs, particularly with regard to ALT teacher development. While these studies made a great contribution to ALT studies, little research has been done on ALT issues in non-teaching contexts in the post-deregulation period. This has led me to the following research questions:

- Are newly employed ALTs really troublemakers in public educational discourse? If not, why do Japanese teachers think they are?
- To avoid these problems, what should newly employed ALTs know and what should a *haken* company do?

Methodology

This study presents four narratives about an ALT's problems in a non-teaching context outside the classroom in a public school. The research context of this study is my former school where I was working as an English teacher (from April 2009 to March 2010). This public junior high school is located in the southwest of Tokyo. It was also a base school where student-initiated learning activities were encouraged. At the school I observed a newly employed ALT involved in problems due to his low familiarity with the Japanese school system. As I was also a newly

employed teacher, I did not have the authority to tackle such problems then. Now that I have left the school, and have been working for a *haken* company, I will tackle the above research questions from an ALT caretaker's viewpoint.

Data Collection

To collect data, I conducted several oral interviews in English with Johnny, a newly employed ALT, about his job problems. I recorded the interviews with an IC recorder and transcribed them later. Based on these interviews, I rewrote 10 situations where Johnny was involved in problems as narrative stories. As Polkinghorne (1995) stated, a narrative analysis is effective because it is a way where "researchers collect descriptions of events and happenings and synthesize or configure them by means of a plot into a story or stories" (p. 12).

Data Reliability Check

To make the data more reliable, I went through the following procedure. First of all, I showed the 10 narratives I had written, of Johnny's encounters, to the other Japanese teachers working at the school to confirm their truth. Then I asked 10 other people with experience of working as ALTs (including current and former ones) to check whether the incidents were typical of new ALTs' encounters. This paper presents four of those excerpts. Based on this prepared data set, I will conduct an interpretive qualitative analysis.

Data Analyses

In this section, four different cases will be presented. All the people's names mentioned here are pseudonyms. Based on the narratives (italicized), I will analyze the causes of the ALT's troubles.

Case 1: “Don’t use hair wax.”

One day, Johnny used hair wax to make his hairstyle spiky, which was banned by school rules. The vice-principal of the school realized this and called him. “Johnny,” he said, “do you use hair wax?” Johnny said “Yes.” The vice-principal replied, “I don’t want you to use hair wax.” He continued, “If you spike your hair, our students will imitate you and start to do the same.” Frustrated by that, Johnny argued with him, which caused further controversy between them.

The vice-principal, as the school manager, had a talk with Johnny over his use of hair wax at school. From his standpoint, all the teachers in his school should be role models for the students. This warning would probably sound fair enough to many experienced teachers. Johnny commented:

I understand what he said. But still, I have been wondering if he is the right person to say that to me. Actually, it should be my company’s role. Well, I know I should take his order seriously, though. (Johnny, Interview, October 7, 2009)

Being an ALT new to the Japanese school system, he was not able to be flexible about this situation. Although Johnny was not fully familiar with the Japanese working context and his refusal appeared to be impolite, the conflict was not necessarily the sole fault of Johnny. There are many other non-overt factors that caused Johnny’s defiant attitude and eventually triggered their misunderstanding, including the gap in age and experience between Johnny and the vice-principal, the lack of maturity of Johnny as a teacher, and peripherally their mutual insensitivities to the cultural differences between East and West.

Case 2: “Could you volunteer to supervise our ESS club activity?”

The vice-principal, who used to be an English teacher, asked Johnny whether he would be interested in supervising an English Speaking Society (ESS) club activity. To that, Johnny asked him to call his company and ask for an amendment of his job contract. After contacting the company, the vice-principal said, “Sorry, we cannot change your contract due to financial limitations, but please do the club activity as a volunteer. Then we will be all happy.” Johnny was confused by this explanation.

The vice-principal, in this case, took it for granted that Johnny would be happy to volunteer, as other teachers in his school tended to do. This school was a *kyoten-ko* (拠点校, base school) for studies on active teacher-student interaction. Therefore, teachers’ voluntary educational involvement in students’ school activities, especially student-initiated club activities, was encouraged. However, Johnny, who was on a much lower salary than the other teachers and was paid by the hour, thought it was unreasonable for him to have to work as a volunteer. Therefore, miscommunication resulted between the Japanese and foreign teachers due to this difference of working attitude.

When I interviewed 10 ALTs, one of them suggested that this conflict was quite typical of newly employed ALTs (an ALT, Interview, August 15, 2011). According to one of the English teachers, there are some ALTs who are more willing to volunteer (a Japanese English teacher, Interview, October 7, 2010). These comments indicate that this conflict could be potentially avoided; a possible solution will be discussed later.

Case 3: “Let’s go to kenkyu-jugyo.”

A Japanese English teacher, Kochi, came to Johnny asking him to observe kenkyu-jugyo (研究授業, teaching demonstration)

classes. Johnny tried to turn it down by saying “Ah, do I have to? I don’t think it was included in my contract.” Kochi answered, “Today is a special day. Ms. Toishi, the head teacher of the English department in this school, is going to teach the lesson. We all must go.” Johnny reluctantly accepted, and Kochi gave him an evaluation sheet and took him to the classroom.

On the Job Training is a necessary process that all the newly employed teachers go through. Johnny tried to turn down Kochi’s request by indicating that this was out of his contract. Kochi, in contrast, knew that all teachers were expected to go and pushed Johnny to attend. Yielding to his push, Johnny finally agreed. From Kochi’s standpoint, his course of action was quite reasonable and was helpful to Johnny. On the other hand, Kochi’s request appeared to be unrefusable and unfair to Johnny because it was not included in his job contract. This value discrepancy eventually caused further conflict between them.

Case 4: Volunteer, or Self-Sacrifice?

After the above event, Johnny started to have some negative feelings about Kochi. Kochi also felt their relationship was awkward, but he was sure it was all because of Johnny’s lack of understanding about Japanese norms. One day, Kochi tried to have a candid discussion with Johnny to maintain their relationship. He tried to convince Johnny of the importance of self-sacrifice in Japanese school discourse. He even referred to his extra work on Sunday. Kochi also explained to Johnny that he was quite happy to work extra hours on Sundays for 1,000 yen.

Since Kochi was a full time public junior high school teacher, his salary payment was ensured on a monthly basis. In contrast, Johnny’s payment was calculated on the basis of his working hours. Therefore, Kochi thought it fine to work on Sunday with extra payment added to his monthly salary. In contrast, Johnny

misunderstood that Kochi was happy to sacrifice his entire Sunday for only 1,000 yen. What this excerpt suggests to both Japanese teachers and ALTs is how unaware they are of each other’s situations and how many stereotypes they unconsciously deal with while working in an in-school intercultural setting. I observed that Kochi and Johnny better understood each other after this discussion.

A few years after I left this school, I had a chance to talk with Johnny. He commented that he had become more familiar with Japanese working styles and was less likely to encounter problems on the job (Johnny, Interview, December 17, 2011). Now, he thinks familiarity with workplace discourse is an important factor for ALTs to avoid intercultural conflict outside the classroom in non-teaching related contexts.

What Do These Four Cases Suggest to Us?

As he was a newly employed ALT, his lack of familiarity with Japanese public school discourse involved Johnny in a number of intercultural conflicts. Although some teachers saw him as a troublemaker, the data analysis also suggested to the Japanese teachers the importance of raising awareness of these ALT problems. The first excerpt suggested that Japanese teachers should also be more aware of the implications of dealing with a *haken* company that combines education with business. Tanaka (1997) stated that managers’ insensitivity to different job responsibilities between Eastern and Western cultures could cause intercultural misunderstanding (p. 15). The second excerpt indicated that Japanese teachers should be more aware of the differences in job contracts between themselves and ALTs. Tanaka’s (2008) study on Japanese-specific business discourse also argued that the volunteer spirit is frequently employed to maintain in-group harmony, but it is not true everywhere under all conditions. To avoid problems, careful explanations about the working discourse should be provided to ALTs. Excerpts three and

four, however, might suggest that Japanese teachers should be aware, as a result of globalization, that the Japanese *atarimae* (あたりまえ, taken-for-granted norm) is not always universal even in Japanese domestic worksites. Tanaka (1997) believes that the Japanese managers' insensitivity to their subordinates' job descriptions often results in intercultural business conflicts (p. 15). In Japanese work settings, people traditionally placed value on harmoniousness (e.g., Nakane, 1967; Sugiyama, 1974; Vogel, 1979) and self-sacrifice is considered to be virtuous. To solve these problems, public school teachers are advised not to deal with such conflicts independently; rather, they should collaborate more with the *haken* company, raise their awareness of ALT issues, and improve the relationship between Japanese teachers and ALTs.

Lastly, it is astonishing that what was discussed about the *haken* ALT in this data analysis overlaps to a large extent with McConnell's (2000) description of JET ALTs over a decade ago. This fact suggests that the role of *haken* companies should not be limited to simplifying ALT contract paperwork and reducing cost. Rather, *haken* companies should more actively engage in ALT improvement/development than before.

Research Question Revisited

Based on the research findings, I would like to answer the research questions.

Are newly employed ALTs really troublemakers in public educational discourse? If not, why do Japanese teachers think they are?

Newly employed ALTs are highly likely to be involved in business problems in public school discourse, partly because of their lack of familiarity with Japanese worksites. However, the data analysis in this paper suggests this is mainly due to misun-

derstandings between Japanese teachers and ALTs. This is what newly employed ALTs are advised to keep in mind.

To avoid these problems, what should newly employed ALTs know and what should a *haken* company do?

To avoid these problems, I believe *haken* companies should provide consultation services. As a person who has worked for a private language teaching company, I need to tackle these issues actively, for instance, by hosting workshops to let newly employed ALTs know what intercultural problems are likely to happen not only inside but also outside classrooms. Many *haken* companies are not fully aware of issues outside the classrooms. In the meantime, Japanese teachers of English in public schools need to raise their intercultural awareness. Lastly, not only public school teachers and *haken* companies, but also academics might want to tackle this ALT issue more aggressively, to prevent further problems from happening.

For Further Studies

In this paper, I selected only four cases and provided some ways to solve the problems from the perspective of a person who had worked in a junior high school and is currently working for a *haken* company. However, there are some limitations in this study. First of all, it is highly likely that there are several more issues to consider, particularly for newly employed ALTs. Hence, experienced ALTs might also have different problems, which have not been touched upon here. Furthermore, the assessment of administering such consultation and workshops, which was one of the proposed solutions, was beyond the scope of this study. Therefore, these points should be explored in a future research project. Secondly, this line of discussion focused on one particular specific school context, and the generalizability of the proposed resolution cannot be 100% guaranteed. Therefore,

further exploration on this research agenda will be of value. Third, this research approach itself contains some potential limitations. To begin with, readers should think carefully about their own context before applying the research findings. In addition, this study presented its data in the form of *retrospection* of earlier events partly because empirical data are hard to obtain in public-education discourse due to its traditional confidentiality. The prepared data set can help capture only limited aspects of the problems, and the lack of authenticity might have led me to overlook some other points. Therefore, the results of this analysis should be applied to wider contexts to check their external validity. Lastly, this study focused on outside-the-classroom and non-teaching contexts, where problems are more likely to happen. However, because ALTs are expected to teach, actual classroom teaching practices and their relevant problems should be taken up in future studies. In these respects, further study will be called for to overcome the above potential limitations of this study.

Conclusion

It has been over a decade since McConnell's (2000) comprehensive study addressed issues of JET ALTs. This case study, in contrast, focused on the post-1999 deregulation period and shed light on *haken* ALTs' non-teaching-related problems outside the classroom context. This study employed an interpretive qualitative approach to find out what new ALTs have in mind while working in public schools, particularly outside actual classroom teaching situations where problems are more likely to happen. The analyses have shown that misunderstanding and miscommunication occur between Japanese teachers and ALTs, due to both the Japanese teachers' insensitivity to intercultural business communication and the ALT's low familiarity with Japanese working discourse. I understand that solving this problem will require a huge amount of energy for all of us, including

Japanese public school teachers, ALTs, *haken* companies, and academics. However, I believe that this endeavor will contribute to the further development of English education in Japan.

Bio Data

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