

Cross-Cultural Misunderstandings Between JTEs and AETs

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Team teaching (TT) between a Japanese teacher of English (JTE) and an assistant English teacher (AET) has difficulties due to differences in terms of status (teacher-in-charge versus assistant), linguistic proficiency (nonnative versus native speaker), and cultural proficiency (cultural native versus cultural non-native). In addition, many problems are caused by intercultural miscommunication (Tajino & Walker, 1998). The purpose of this study was to examine TT relationships by focusing on cross-cultural misunderstandings through interviews with 8 JTEs and 7 AETs as well as class observations of 8 TT pairs. The results show that the AETs and JTEs encountered enormous cross-cultural differences inside and outside the classroom. They struggled with differences in teaching styles and philosophies, student discipline, and teacher images, which are influenced by socio-cultural norms. As for differences outside the classroom, the JTEs' sacrificial professionalism clashed with the AETs' professionalism, which was influenced by their individualistic cultural values.

日本人英語教諭 (JTE) と英語指導助手 (AET) のチームティーチング (TT) は、職業上の身分(主教師対助手)、英語力(ノンネイティブ対ネイティブ)、地元文化の熟達度(文化的ネイティブ対文化的ノンネイティブ)などの違いにより様々な困難を抱えているが、異文化間ミスコミュニケーションもその一因であると言う。本研究は8名のJTEと7名のAETへのインタビューと8組のTTペアの授業観察を通して、異文化による誤解に焦点を置き、TTの教師間関係を探ることを主目的とする。調査の結果、AETとJTEは教室の外で様々な異文化の違いに遭遇していることが判明した。授業スタイルや教育哲学、生徒への指導法などの相違に苦闘しており、これらの違いは社会文化的概念に影響を受けていることが分かった。教室外での相違に関しては、JTEの犠牲的職業意識が個人主義的文化に影響されたAETの職業意識と激しく衝突している様子などが報告された。

TEAM TEACHING (TT) between a JTE (Japanese Teacher of English) and an AET (Assistant English Teacher) may bring about tremendous difficulties because the problems involve various issues such as power-sharing between native speakers (NSs) and non-native speakers (NNSs), different teacher beliefs and philosophies, and personality mismatching in team formation. Some of the misunderstandings are caused by cultural differences. The purpose of this study was to investigate TT relationships by focusing on cross-cultural issues through interviews with eight JTEs and seven AETs as well as class observations of eight TT pairs.



Literature Review

Power-Sharing in TT

Due to the different linguistic and cultural backgrounds of team teachers, power issues are complex. JTEs' have feelings of inferiority regarding their English competence, caused by their low proficiency in oral English (Kamhi-Stein, 1999; McConnell, 2000; Miyazato, 2006; Tajino & Walker, 1998). This occasionally results in their belief in the native speaker fallacy—that NSs of English are automatically the best teachers of the language (Phillipson, 1992). On the other hand, JTEs have longer teaching experience, while AETs are often recent college graduates with little experience (Tajino & Tajino, 2000; Uehara & Hoogenboom, 2009). This also means that JTEs have more knowledge about the local language, culture, society, education, learners, and school life than AETs. In addition, as short-term teaching assistants in the Japanese educational system, AETs lack political power (Mahoney, 2004; McConnell, 2000).

Cultural Influences on Team-Teaching Relationships

Various differences between Japan and English-speaking countries are reported based on concepts such as the individualism-collectivism dichotomy (Gudykunst & Kim, 1998). Hall (1976) pointed out two types of human communication: high-context communication, in which things are left unsaid and the culture is meant to furnish the explanation, and low-context communication, in which “the mass of information is vested in the explicit code” (p. 70). He defined Japan as a high-context country and the U.S. as having a low-context communication style. Gudykunst and Kim (1998) explained that individualistic cultures, such as many western countries, perceive directness as effective while collectivistic cultures, such as Japan, prefer indirectness.

Kobayashi (1994) analyzed cross-cultural issues in TT settings through the concepts of individualism vs. group harmony. She said direct refusals by AETs, for instance, sound cold to JTEs, who give priority to others' feelings and group harmony. Ochiai (2000) maintained that many AETs perceived difficulties as cross-cultural differences, while JTEs did not. This means that AETs, as a foreign minority in Japan, are more likely to perceive cultural issues as the cause of problems, but JTEs, who live in their mother country, perceive these differences as personality traits.

Differences in culture also affect teacher beliefs and classroom management. According to McConnell (2000), in JET orientations and seminars, AETs have been trained to “see as ideal the student as active learner; the teacher as facilitator . . . and classes that are marked by liveliness and spontaneity” (p. 213). In contrast, secondary education in Japan still emphasizes memorization and repetition in teacher-centered lectures. Gorsuch (1999) also pointed to the priority JTEs place on students' success on entrance examinations, which makes them continue teaching traditions that emphasize knowledge transmission.

JTEs' Lack of Overseas Experience

The number of JTEs with extensive overseas experience is still small. The National Center for Teacher Development provided overseas training opportunities for 15 JTEs for 12 months each and 85 JTEs for 6 months each in 2003 (MEXT, 2003). However, 12-month overseas training was abolished in 2007, as was 6-month training in 2010 (MEXT, 2013). Instead, a new 2-month training is now offered to only 30 JTEs. Compared to 10 years ago, fewer JTEs are being given the opportunity for even the shorter-term overseas training.

Horwitz (1996) argued that few NNS teachers have had extended stays in a target language community and, therefore,

their language abilities often exceed their degree of acculturation. She further maintained that NNS teachers who have stayed for only a short time in the target country show a negative attitude toward target language use in the classroom, since they have passed through only the beginning phases of cultural adaptation. It can be assumed that JTEs' lack of extensive cross-cultural or overseas experience might contribute to cross-cultural misunderstandings.

Method

In addition to class observations of eight TT pairs, individual interviews with eight JTEs and seven AETs were conducted to investigate issues of cross-cultural communication difficulties. I visited seven junior and senior high schools in the Tokyo area. Interviews with the JTEs were conducted in Japanese and with the AETs in English. All interviews were conducted in a private room to protect privacy and encourage the expression of honest opinions. The interview time ranged from 10 minutes to 100 minutes, depending on the interviewees' schedules. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed for data analysis. I translated all the Japanese interview and observation data into English. The JTEs and the AETs are identified by number in order to preserve anonymity.

Interview Responses and Class Observations

In this section, interview and observation data are summarized from two perspectives: issues inside and outside the classroom.

Issues in the Classroom

Teacher Images: Control-Conscious JTEs vs. Friendly AETs

The AETs were good at creating a relaxed and friendly atmosphere, while the JTEs presented themselves as serious, authoritarian teachers. Three AETs let the students call them by their first names combined with the Japanese honorific title *sensei* (teacher). The AETs also tried to produce laughter from the students. For example, students laughed when AET3 used exaggerated gestures:

I guess that the Japanese students burst into loud, unexpected laughter when they saw gaps in their image of teachers as an authoritarian figure and as just a human being. (AET3, 7 Mar 2002)

In contrast, JTE3 said,

I wouldn't do such things like an actor or even comedian although I respected [AET3]'s efforts. You know I would like to protect my pride as a teacher. (7 Mar 2002)

My observations confirm this pressure on JTEs to be authoritative or knowledgeable about every matter. In one TT class, the game "Hangman" did not work because JTE5 was unable to understand the English directions that AET4 gave in class, despite having said he knew the game. In general, the JTEs' image seemed to be influenced by societal expectations toward teachers while the AETs, who were foreign assistants, were free from these expectations.

Student Discipline: Mild JTEs vs. Strict AETs

Cultural variation concerning teachers' attitudes toward student discipline was also reported. In spite of the JTEs' authoritarian

image, many of the AETs complained that the JTEs were less strict toward latecomers, sleepers, and chatters than the AETs would have been. JTE4 explained:

Japanese teachers don't want to spoil the friendly class atmosphere as a whole by scolding a few students. After being scolded, the class becomes quieter as an indication of their regret and apology or even resentment of teachers. . . . Besides, students' talking wouldn't stop . . . so we considered scolding as useless. (12 Mar 2002)

However, AET3 interpreted the JTEs' passive attitude differently:

The JTE said that it is better to let sleepers sleep in class rather than to be bothered by their chatting. I interpret this out of *tatema* and *honne*, a double standard: sleepers are accepted because they don't disturb others or the teacher. Similarly, wearing jewelry against school rules is overlooked as long as it is hidden. The act of hiding shows the students' awareness of their position. JTEs accept this act, but I cannot do so since rules are rules and sleeping is a sign of rejection and of disrespect to teachers in the West. (AET3, 7 Mar 2002)

Moreover, two AETs revealed their hesitation to take initiative in student discipline because of their status as assistants. The AETs negatively perceived the Japanese students' learning attitude but could not correct their misbehavior because of their lack of political power.

Teaching Styles: JTEs' Lectures vs. AETs' Group Activities

AET2 commented that English classes in Japan were mostly conducted in lecture style and pointed out the formal seating arrangement. AET6 showed surprise at Japanese students' toler-

ance of the traditional teaching style. In fact, the students in one of the more competitive high schools in the district were not keen on group activities. Even when the team teachers encouraged the students to work in groups, they worked on their own and did not share their answers.

Several JTEs advocated their traditional teaching and negatively perceived the AETs' preference for group activities. They said that due to the emphasis on passing entrance examinations, they considered group activities to be just a time to play, not for serious study, especially in competitive high schools.

Perceived Evaluation Standards: Strict JTEs vs. Lenient AETs

AET6 mentioned the JTEs' strict evaluation of students:

In general, I guess Japanese people are less likely to say, "OK. You didn't do so well, but you'll do better next time." . . . the American approach is more lenient, more congratulatory, even though you've done poorly. (AET6, 15 October 2003)

I observed this when AET6 asked the class about the results of the mid-term exam. Many students answered, "not good," and AET6 encouraged them: "You have another chance at the end of the term." In contrast, JTE7 said in Japanese afterwards, "The thought of 'I have another chance' will not improve you. Work harder next time." AET6 further commented that Japanese teachers have a higher evaluation scale:

I notice here that . . . the average is at 60 or lower. Compared to an American scale, this is much harsher. In America . . . 80 percent would be average. (AET6, 15 Oct 2003)

AET7 showed her surprise when the names of the students who scored higher points on the midterm exam were announced in class:

Maybe I would announce top scores, but I don't think I would say the names . . . it feels like, I am kind of singling those students out and saying, "Look, these students are better than the rest of you" . . . maybe they think that will somehow motivate the other students. (AET7, 15 Dec 2003)

Issues Outside the Classroom

The following three issues are about cultural struggles outside the classroom: professionalism, cultural dynamics of *enryo* and *sasshi*, and cross-cultural experiences.

Professionalism

Several JTEs mentioned a lack of professionalism among AETs. JTE7 said:

Some AETs said, "The class is over, so why do I have to be at school?" . . . Young university graduates often lack a sense of professionalism and regard this job as half leisure. (17 Dec 2003)

JTE3 complained that AETs do not understand the Japanese sense of professionalism, that teachers should have a mission of doing things only for the sake of students. JTE1 remarked about AETs' unwillingness to do extra work:

AETs don't want to sacrifice their vacation time for student club activities and school duties. I feel they lack a sense of professionalism. Besides, they have good working condi-

tions. Most of them are only new university graduates in their early 20s, but they get paid about 300,000 yen per month plus housing allowances. (JTE1, 27 Feb 2002)

In fact, quite a few JTEs criticized the AETs' light workload, while the JTEs had heavy responsibilities. JTE8's workload included various administrative tasks and coaching club activities:

I stay at school from 8 a.m. to 7 p.m. Right now I have to help with the English speech contest, so I stay at school until 8 or 9 . . . I just don't have enough time to sleep. I have two small children and I feel that I'm sacrificing my family life. (JTE8, 28 Oct 2003)

Three JTEs also referred to the JTEs' role as AET caretakers in and outside the school. JTE2 said,

For example, we sometimes need to do things such as taking them to the hospital when they are sick, cleaning their apartment before and after they move, etc. . . . We think it's not fair for only us to have the additional duty of taking care of AETs. (15 Mar 2002)

In contrast, the AETs had much easier work schedules. AET6 said,

I have no obligation to attend staff meetings or do extra administrative work. I just need to stay at school from 8:20 to 4:20. (10 Nov 2003)

The JTEs, who had a sacrificial sense of duty, perceived the AETs' work motivation as lower than their own. However, AET1 objected:

JTEs' overworked conditions make them feel jealous about AETs and their irritation became targeted at us. Japanese society requires JTEs to devote their lives to students, sac-

rificing their own families, private time, and even health. I don't believe the professionalism of the AETs should be based on the sacrifices. I think the differing interpretations of professionalism are indication of difference in societal and cultural expectations. (AET1, 27 Feb 2002)

AET3 presented a similar idea:

If the unwillingness of AETs to make these sacrifices is interpreted as lack of professionalism, things will never be solved. (AET3, 7 Mar 2002)

It is apparent that the JTEs' busy schedules, which presumably reflect a societal expectation towards native teachers in Japan, result in their sacrificial professionalism. Using this standard, the JTEs tended to view the AETs' work attitude critically.

Japanese Cultural Dynamics—Enryo and Sasshi

The two major Japanese norms of *enryo* and *sasshi* seemed to be obstacles to communication. *Enryo-sasshi* communication has been called the predominant mode of Japanese communication (Ishii, 1984), and Bowers (1988) regarded *enryo* and *sasshi* as signs of maturity that are highly valued in Japanese culture. *Enryo* means "thoughtful consideration in the literal sense of the two characters with which it is written *en*, distant, and *ryo*, consideration" (Doi, 1973, p. 38). *Sasshi* means empathizing with and making allowances for others (Nishida, 1979).

The JTEs' *enryo* was observed in different ways. For instance, even the JTEs with high communicative English abilities took a passive role in TT classes, doing assisting work and classroom chores. The JTEs seemed to be passive about giving direct opinions as well. AET3 said that the JTEs seldom gave negative opinions about their TT classes and when they did, it was done

so subtly that it was hard for the AETs to understand.

Furthermore, *sasshi* was not interpreted correctly by the AETs or they were unaware of it. JTE2 told a story about misunderstandings with AET2:

At the beginning of TT with [AET2], I did all the preparation, because I did not want to burden her. She had just . . . started her career as a new AET. But I came to notice her bored face in class and I first interpreted this as a lack in work motivation. After a while, I found out that she actually had a desire for teaching and planning more actively and that my actions, which I thought considerate, just demotivated her. (JTE 2, 15 Mar 2002)

Thus, *enryo* and *sasshi* can be transmitted correctly in the Japanese culture, which has more collectivistic and indirect features, but the AETs misinterpreted the acts negatively based on their individualistic and direct cultural standards. Furthermore, the AETs' preference for being treated as independent individuals was apparent. JTE6 said,

AETs do not like to be told to do something without discussing the reasons for that. AETs tend to see things with reasons and need to be convinced, while JTEs do things with feelings. In other words, AETs want to be treated as independent colleagues, not obedient subordinates. (20 Oct 2003)

AET4 also related an anecdote illustrating the Japanese teachers' tendency to treat him as a helpless foreigner:

One time I asked for a key to enter a room, and the Japanese teacher insisted on going to the room with me He kindly showed how to open it with the key. But it was just a regular simple key, you know. . . . Assisting and depending on each other can be welcomed in Japan for har-

monious relationships, but I almost felt that the JTE was going through all the trouble not because of kindness, but because he considered me a helpless guest from overseas. . . . I am incapable of being a responsible colleague. (AET4, 12 Mar 2002)

This episode indicates that the JTE's warm consideration for and interest in the AET were interpreted negatively as an insult or the treatment of a subordinate. The Japanese indirect communication style supported by the preference for mutual dependence was negatively evaluated due to the AET's value of being treated as an equal independent individual.

Cross-Cultural Experiences: JTEs as Native Insiders vs. AETs as Cultural Outsiders

AET7 said that her foreign appearance attracted people's attention outside the school, which made her realize that she was a minority in the rural community. AETs are also minorities linguistically and culturally. AET5 said,

Japanese people are kind, but I feel some distance. . . . they won't accept me in their family-knit circle. (20 Oct 2003)

AET7 confessed to her isolation in the school:

Every once in a while, when I hear all the other JTEs talking in Japanese and . . . I wish I knew what they were saying, I feel sometimes left out. (AET7, 10 Nov 2003)

As a result, some AETs came to perceive themselves as temporary sojourners to avoid isolation as a cultural minority. AET5 and AET6 used the phrase "I'm not Japanese" several times when they discussed cultural differences. AET5 said,

After 6 months, I started to realize that I'm here to represent my culture, not to become Japanese. . . . I'm happy being an American. . . . I don't feel any need to leave my culture. (AET5, 20 Oct 2003)

AET3 elaborated on his frustrated feelings, pointing out the JTEs' lack of cross-cultural experience:

Besides, there are only a few foreigners here, so we are watched for curiosity for 24 hours by Japanese. . . . They don't understand our difficult situation, because most of them have never been abroad. (AET3, 7 Mar 2002)

Among the eight JTEs, only two of them had more than 6 months of overseas experience. Moreover, the JTEs reported that they did not notice any major cross-cultural misunderstandings with the AETs. The fact that the JTEs had encountered new AETs every 2 or 3 years seemed to lessen their focus on cross-cultural issues. JTE1 said,

We've gotten overall information about the characters and inclinations of Americans through our TT experience over the years. . . . Now I can anticipate what type of person my new partner is after teaching several classes with him/her. (27 Feb 2002)

In contrast, most AETs have had no extensive contact with Japanese people and have to work with multiple JTEs all at once. Presumably, the JTEs' extensive contact with AETs has increased their knowledge about AETs, but not given them an understanding of the AETs' feelings and difficulties as cultural minorities. This may result in the JTEs' understanding of these cultural differences as individual personality differences.

Discussion

The interviews showed that the JTEs accepted the status differences while the AETs preferred more equality between teachers and students. The JTEs' authoritarian figure, lecture-style teaching, and strict evaluation standards were all affected by the Japanese cultural norm of accepting status differences between teachers and students. The expectation that the JTEs be respectable knowledge providers helped to create their perfectionist image.

In contrast, the AETs valued active learners, the teacher role as a facilitator, and interesting classes, which indicated more closeness or equality between students and teachers. However, their classroom actions were criticized by the JTEs due to the responsibility of preparing students for entrance exams. The JTEs questioned the validity of the AETs' fun classes with group activities and were skeptical of students' actual educational development in TT classes, which has contributed to a loss of legitimacy vis-à-vis team teaching (Samimy & Kobayashi, 2004). Cross-cultural discrepancies in teacher beliefs, which are influenced by socio-cultural norms, seem to make it difficult to change pedagogical principles in TT settings.

Student discipline was the most controversial issue. In spite of the JTEs' authoritarian image, their mild attitude to student discipline was severely criticized by the AETs. Miyahara (2004) remarked that the JTEs show a "disciplined" teacher image on one hand and closeness and intimacy with students on the other as Japanese cultural practice (p. 132). As one JTE stated, JTEs need to treat the class as a whole because of the large class size and overlook individual misbehavior in class in order to save time and energy. However, the most possible interpretation might be that the JTEs' discipline style is the result of their support of educational egalitarianism in which they avoid direct confrontation with students because they are reacting to a history of a militaristic style of education (Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989).

Nonetheless, differences outside the classroom are more complicated and subtle. For instance, understandings of professionalism were different, an indication of different societal and cultural expectations toward teachers and education. It turned out that the JTEs felt an enormous pressure to make sacrificial devotion to students, which obliged them to bear a heavy workload. This seemed to lead to the JTEs' envy of the AETs, who were free from the same societal pressure. The JTEs' sacrificial professionalism, which was accepted as common sense in the Japanese collectivistic culture, clashed with the AETs' different perceptions of professionalism, influenced by a western individualistic culture. Without understanding the AETs' different interpretation of professionalism and using their own standards, the JTEs had a low evaluation of the AETs' work attitude.

As for the JTEs' *enryo* and *sasshi*, Bowers (1988) observed that those values create difficulty in classroom communication in English teaching settings in Japan. However, the JTEs' *enryo* can also be seen as a power issue between NSs and NNSs. JTE2 tried to convince himself to become AET2's assistant because of the students, in spite of the fact that the AET's official status was only that of an assistant. Due to NS language superiority and high sociopolitical image, the Japanese students and the JTEs themselves tended to believe in the native speaker fallacy. The AETs' socio-cultural power, which is derived from Japanese society's support of the supremacy of NS English and its speakers (Butler, 2005; Samimy & Kobayashi, 2004), also induces Japanese people's special treatment of AETs as exotic guests from overseas, which was not appreciated by the AETs. As was seen in AET4's anecdote about the room key, the AET's sense of independence was infringed upon by the JTE, who might have regarded dependence on one another as cooperation for creating harmonious relationships.

Concluding Remarks and Suggestions for Further Study

TT is challenging for teachers because of the complexity of TT relationships. Although many other issues such as power-sharing between AETs and JTEs were involved in the TT relationships, cross-cultural misunderstandings contributed to the complexity.

The major limitation of this study is that I collected the data 10 years ago and JTE-AET relationships may have changed over the years. However, my audience at the JALT2012 conference agreed with and supported the results of this study, probably because fundamental cultural norms and inclinations rarely change in a decade or so, and therefore, the intercultural and interpersonal relationships between JTEs and AETs have not changed much. Nonetheless, for further research, more recent data should be collected in order to assure the validity of my assumptions.

It is recommended that local boards of education provide on-the-job training programs on intercultural communication and conflict solution for both parties, AETs and JTEs, to reduce unnecessary conflicts. Although efforts to improve the problems have already been made by the Council of Local Authorities for International Relations (CLAIR) by offering JET seminars and publications as well as a counseling service for AETs called “JET Line” (CLAIR, 2013), there are still difficulties for both parties. It is also suggested that JTEs and even Japanese teachers in other subjects should be given the opportunity of extensive overseas experiences, which would provide JTEs the experience of being a linguistic and cultural minority as well as help increase their self-confidence in their communicative English abilities. Even if AETs come to Japan with a full sense of their international exchange duties, they will not get psychological support from people of the local culture. Having JTEs with overseas experience and more encounters with different cross-cultural values might

lead to a better understanding of AETs’ struggles in adapting to Japanese culture as foreigners and outsiders, which could thus help to build positive TT relationships.

Bio Data

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