The Special Program Visa and Assistant Japanese Programs in Tasmania

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This paper is a report on the administration of Japanese assistant language teacher schemes in Tasmania, run under the Special Program visa (416). Data was collected from interviews with 5 Japanese language teachers (JLTs) who had experience with coordinating and managing assistant teachers and revealed that these programs are beneficial to all parties involved. However, there are a number of areas in regard to the administration of these programs that need to be addressed to fulfill the aims of the Special Program visa, the sponsoring schools, and the participants. In this paper are put forward several proposals that would improve the administration of these programs, standardize the working conditions and expectations of both participants and schools, and help select and better prepare the participants before they leave Japan.

本論文では、特別プログラム用ビザ（416）のもと、タスマニアの日本語授業で行なわれた、日本語補助教員（ALT）計画の運営方法について報告する。本論文のデータは、補助教員制度を企画・運営した経験をもつ5名の「日本語教員（JLT）」に対して行ったインタヴューから得られた。それらの教員は、授業内でALTと一緒に教えており、JLTに配布された最初のサーベイ（Otlowski, 2012）の中に記述されている。データから明らかなのは、これらのプログラムが参加者すべてにとって有益だということである。しかし、これらのプログラムは運営の面で、特別プログラム用ビザ、主催学校、参加者など、それぞれの目的を達成するために取り組むべき課題が多くある。本論文では、これらのプログラムの運営を改善するため、プログラム展開前によりよくALTを選出・準備するため、また、参加ALTと学校双方の労働条件を標準化するために、いくつかの改善案を提示する。

The use of native-speaker teaching assistants (NSAs) in foreign language classrooms is a well-established practice in a number of countries (Bevan, 2011; Carless, 2006a; Tajino & Tajino, 2000). Japan, South Korea, China, and Hong Kong all have implemented schemes that recruit teachers or university graduates from overseas to work on contract in their country's language programs. Research on these programs has shown that native speakers bring an element of authenticity into classroom language practice, as well as being cultural ambassadors for the target language (Carless, 2006a; Hasegawa, 2010). The benefits of these programs also flow in the opposite direction: The NSAs are exposed to other cultures and educational environments, commonly quite different from their own. Their interaction with the system, the teachers, and the students helps to further not only their linguistic ability, but also their cultural understanding of the host country and its people.

However, notwithstanding the positive effects these programs have on students, teachers, and NSAs, all these programs share common problems with recruitment, implementation

of teaching strategies, and fulfillment of the expectations of both the hosting institution and the participants (Bevan, 2011; Crooks, 2001; Hasegawa, 2010). When changes have been implemented in these programs, there can be "a failure to acknowledge and build on what has taken place previously"(Carless, 2006a, p. 2). If NSA programs are to be successful, all stakeholders need explicit information on the expectations each has for the other in regard to their roles and duties (Hasegawa, 2010).

This paper is a report on preliminary research findings into the organization and implementation of NSA programs currently running in Tasmania, Australia. The results show the need for better management of these programs both predeparture and *in situ*. The proposals put forward in this paper are intended to improve predeployment training and clearly define the roles expected of both the participating students and the sponsoring institutions.

Background of the Study

In contrast to assistant teaching programs established in Japan, Korea, and Hong Kong (Carless, 2006b), the placing of NSAs in Australian schools is carried out by an ad hoc collection of state education departments, international teaching recruitment agencies, and individual private agents. This has resulted in programs with different recruiting policies, preservice training sessions, placement policies, and costs. Rather than being a government policy directive, the programs for placing Japanese assistant teachers derive from a visa subclass: Special Program visa - 416. The purpose of this visa is "to enhance international relations and cultural exchange by allowing people to share cultural and social experiences and knowledge in the Australian community through approved programs" (Australian Government Department of Immigration, 2011, p. 1). This Special Program visa is the common element of all NSA schemes.

All sponsoring institutions, though, share similar expectations of NSAs in the classroom and in the school. Basically there are three roles: (a) cultural representative of the target culture; (b) linguistic model and interlocutor for students to practice the target language; and (c) general assistant to the teacher in the preparation and running of language classes. But in some cases specialized knowledge, skills, or familiarity with an academic subject or profession is required (Hasegawa, 2010) and these NSAs need training or prior experience to carry out the tasks expected of them (Australian Government Department of Immigration, 2011, p. 1). This means that without predeployment sessions or in-service training, the possibility of a successful program is likely to be low (Hasegawa, 2010).

Research Outline

Although many Japanese language teachers (JLTs) in Tasmania have had experience working with NSAs in the classroom, very few of them have been involved in actual day-to-day management and support of the NSA. For this study, teachers who had been involved in all stages of the Japanese Assistant Teacher program were preferred. Therefore a two-step process was adopted. First, a survey was used to identify Japanese language teachers who had extensive experience in preparing for and working with NSAs; then they were interviewed.

Survey

The survey (see Appendix B) had four parts covering teaching background, teaching assistant situation, working with a teaching assistant, and overall impression of the teaching assistant program. Each part contained a mix of questions that required the respondent to either select one of five possible choices or write a short response to the question. Space was provided at the end of each part for participating JLTs to write more detailed

comments on particular questions. These surveys were distributed to 11 JLTs with NSA management experience and seven were returned. Five of these teachers were available for follow-up interviews and classroom observations.

Interviews

The five teachers (four female and one male) were all full-time teachers of Japanese (see Table 1). Four were employed at private schools, teaching primary school classes 3 days a week and high school classes 2 days a week. The other teacher taught at two primary schools.

Table 1. Background Information of Interviewees

Teacher	School	Experience	
		Japanese teaching	Assistant teacher program
A	private	20 years	8 years
B	government & private	3 years	2 years
C	government & private	20 years	9 years
D	private	23 years	17 years
E	private	3 years	3 years

Face-to-face interviews were carried out at each teacher's school. In the interviews teachers were asked to comment on (see Appendix B)

1. the expected role of the NSA within their institution;
2. the benefits of the program to them, their language program, and the school;
3. problems they had experienced with the program; and
4. possible ways to improve the program.

Discussion of Survey Results

Expected Role of the NSA

Although the Special Program Visa guidelines are nonspecific—"to share cultural and social experiences" (Australian Government Department of Immigration, 2011, p. 1)—the expectations of each of the participating institutions and JLTs were very similar. Broadly stated, the hosting institutions expected the NSA to be a cultural ambassador of Japan within the school and the classroom. As Teacher A succinctly expressed, the NSA is "Japan incarnate." As such they are expected to actively take part in the preparation and teaching of Japanese language classes as well as becoming engaged members of the school community. All schools expected the NSA not only to be active in Japanese language classes, but also to participate alongside students in activities such as sports day, music events, and excursions. To promote integration within the school, the NSAs are encouraged not only to participate in school activities and events, but also to attend regular classes.

On a day-to-day basis, NSAs are expected to work alongside the JLTs as assistants. They help with pronunciation, modeling language, assisting with cultural information, and acting as conversation partners for students. Depending on the language program and the grade of the students, NSAs may also be asked to help students with *kanji* and Japanese composition as well as prepare students for speech contests. Teachers A and D both mentioned that having an NSA work with students studying year 12 Japanese was very beneficial because the students are required to take both oral and written exams. Both teachers saw the opportunity for students to practice their communication skills with an NSA before sitting the exam as one of the more

important roles the NSA has in a high school language program. The NSAs also help students prepare for the written section of the test, and both teachers said the NSAs added authenticity and grammatical accuracy to the students' written work.

NSAs are also expected to help with preparation for classes, and this may include preparing flash cards, picture cards, and origami paper, or more involved tasks such as creating worksheets and checking students' work. All five teachers expected the NSAs to actively participate in the planning of classes. As the NSAs gain confidence and experience with the students, course content, and instructional method, Teachers A and D encourage NSAs to teach the whole class. Teacher A and D both see this gradual expansion of the NSA's role from one of just assisting within class to a more active teaching role—while under the constant supervision of the JLT—as a natural progression for the NSAs.

Program Benefits to Teachers and Schools

All teachers strongly believe that the teaching assistant program brings enormous benefits to not only their students, but also to teachers and the whole school community. Teacher A stated that the NSA "is a living, breathing example that Japanese people are just like us—common humanity." For Teacher D the program provides the "opportunities for students to broaden their knowledge and understanding of the world—make them better global citizens." Clearly, having an NSA in the school who is assisting in classes and participating in school events allows all members of the school community to interact with the NSA, providing an intercultural experience that may not be readily accessible in the local communities. An example of this is Teacher D's school: It is located in a small city with a population of 20,000 in the northwest of Tasmania. Teacher D described her area as "very monocultural." Having an NSA working at the school gives students a firsthand experience of being global citizens: accepting, including, and understanding others from different societies. Not only do students benefit, but host families also share their lives with the NSAs, further reinforcing the overall aim of the program "to share cultural and social experiences and knowledge in the Australian community" (Australian Government Department of Immigration, 2011, p. 1).

A further benefit of having an NSA in the classroom is that the JLT has the opportunity to use time more effectively. Teacher D is in charge of classes that effectively have three syllabuses concurrently being taught. In the upper years of senior high school the number of students taking Japanese decreases as it is an elective subject for the final 2 years of high school. To maintain class sizes and reduce the teaching load, classes are combined. There are also students who have returned from an exchange to Japan whose needs are much higher than other students in the class. Teacher E said that having an NSA "means we can do smaller group work." For teacher D, having an NSA in the class allows her to spend more time working at the appropriate level with other groups while the NSA works with higher level students, allowing them to study at a level suitable for their ability. Teacher D believes having an NSA "adds flexibility to the teaching program. [It] enables a range of macro skill tasks to be delivered in one lesson."

Problems Encountered With the Program

The NSAs need to have a functional communicative ability in English. Their primary role is to work alongside the JLT, helping students with oral communication, pronunciation, and writing activities, and providing cultural background for classroom activities; but an ability to communicate effectively with the JLT and, more importantly, the students is a fundamental attribute NSAs must have to successfully fulfill their expected role within the school. Without the ability to converse with students independently, the NSA becomes less a benefit and more a liability

for the JLT. Teacher B said she had to "babysit" an NSA whose lack of English prevented her from establishing rapport with the students and becoming an effective assistant in the class. Teacher B went on to say that she had to prepare tasks her NSA was capable of doing on the days she visited her school. NSAs who lack the ability to communicate effectively negatively affect the experience of all parties in the NSA program (Hasegawa, 2010).

Another issue raised by all five JLTs was the personality of the NSAs. Many of the less successful NSAs were introverted and unwilling to establish relationships with students and other teachers within the school. Teacher D remarked that sometimes an NSA's personality "restricted their usefulness in the classroom . . . the TA [teaching assistant] refused to teach whole class activities, even culture." Teacher B had experienced NSAs "who have stood back and not participated in the class." Teacher C had NSAs who found it difficult to establish rapport with the students and so she "needed to encourage the TA to interact with students." All interviewed JLTs realized a period of adjustment is required for newly arrived NSAs and as such adjust their initial teaching load. However, the role of the NSA is a communicative one and all applicants are expected to talk with the students.

A term frequently used by all JLTs when referring to qualities they expect in their NSA was *initiative*. The JLTs deemed initiative to be one of the key qualities NSAs need to establish bonds with their teachers and to have a successful experience in Australia. Initiative, combined with a real interest in teaching, is a quality that all JLTs felt was essential. At the same time, the JLTs stressed that they do not require professional teaching experience, but instead curiosity and eagerness to participate and learn alongside the students. Teacher C remarked that most of her NSAs were "active in class and in the teaching of each lesson." She felt these NSAs were more beneficial to her students, in contrast to those who needed explicit instructions about what they should do. Teacher B, on the other hand, wanted her NSA to "participate in planning" but had had a "very limited response," probably as a result of the NSA's "lack of English ability or a lack of enthusiasm for teaching." Teacher B felt one reason for this is the NSAs' lack of knowledge about "how a language class operates." All five teachers expected their NSA to be interested in teaching and willing to be active in and outside of the classroom.

The success of a program is not determined solely by the personality and communicative ability of the NSA though. Teacher A outlined a past situation in which "workaholic teachers" abused their position by having NSAs mark exams and take whole classes on a regular basis, completely ignoring the NSA's age and experience. As Teacher A correctly pointed out, these "unrealistic expectations" can cause the NSA undue stress and confusion and ultimately lead to the NSA having a negative experience. Teacher A commented on one such situation: "No investigation was made, no objective investigation was made, of the suitability of the teacher to actually host a [Japanese Assistant Teacher] for the year." Incidents such as this indicate that there is a need for the institutions or agents placing NSAs in schools to have discussions with the teachers about the role of the NSA and appropriate expectations of them. At present the responsibilities of the NSA are decided by the host institution in lieu of any standard guidelines or commonly agreed upon practices, thereby leaving the NSAs without recourse in situations where they feel they are being asked to perform tasks outside of their duties or even outside the Special Program visa.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The information collected from the interviews clearly indicates that there are a number of areas where NSA programs can be improved. Firstly, in line with other countries that have NSA

programs—notably Japan, South Korea, and Hong Kong—establishing an overriding authority to help manage the programs is essential. Whether such a body should be a national or state body, or the relevant Education Department, needs to be explored further. The findings of this research concur with the report commissioned by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) into the possibility of establishing a program along the lines of the JET program in Japan. The report concluded, "The recommended structure of the administrative arrangements is for DEEWR to have overall responsibility for liaison with other Australian Government departments (most importantly, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade . . .), program funding, branding and communication" (Allen Consulting Group, 2012. p. 101). As well as designating an overriding body to manage NSA programs, there is also a need to establish guidelines that outline the expected roles and obligations of all invested parties. Although there is a tacit understanding of the role of the NSA in the programs researched, it is questionable whether this informal agreement sufficiently protects the NSA from an overzealous JLT or provides a practical reference for each party's obligations within the program.

Without a managing body, NSAs are coming to Australia for periods up to 10 months to work in unregulated programs that have no overlying framework regarding the expected roles of the NSA or the school. If a problem occurs, NSAs have little recourse to mediate with their sponsoring institution as some programs have no written agreements outlining their duties or have such generic descriptions that the sponsoring institution has ample room to interpret the NSA role in any way they see fit. In his study of similar native speaker programs in Western Australia, Hasegawa (2010) noted the "absence of working contract" as a key concern (p. 5). Similarly, the DEEWR commissioned report also recommended the need to establish a position "to resolve disputes which cannot be dealt with directly between the assistant and the school" (Allen Consulting Group, 2012, p. 101). The JLTs who agreed to be interviewed believed they had all set up programs that took into account the needs of the school and its Japanese language program and, just as importantly, the needs of the NSAs. But, if problems occur, without a body to mediate, the NSA may be put in an untenable position, further complicated by a lack of linguistic ability and cultural knowledge. It would be prudent for a governing body to be established on either a national or state level through which working conditions are set and to which grievances could be referred.

Institutions involved in the selection process of NSAs should consider carefully the JLT concerns in regard to personality, language proficiency, and motivation. The screening process should pay special attention to the reasons why the candidate has applied for the program and whether the candidate's personality would be suitable for the position. Although the Special Program visa has no stipulated language requirement, or for that matter any requirement other than a willingness to share one's own culture, the selection process should have language competency as one of the major components. The majority of JLTs have had only positive experiences with their NSAs but when there has been a problem, the underlying cause in many cases was usually the NSAs' poor language ability, social skills, or lack of motivation to perform the duties expected of them.

The Special Program visa and the NSA programs that are derived from this visa are highly valued by JLTs and their sponsoring schools in Australia. These programs provide Australian students the opportunity to converse and interact with native speakers of Japanese on a regular basis, providing them with authentic language and cultural learning opportunities. For those schools and students far from the multicultural urban centers that are popular with Japanese visitors, programs such as these may well be the only opportunity for students to meet

with a native speaker of Japanese. However, due to the lack of specific details outlined in the Special Program visa, programs have been established without formalized guidelines or agreements that quantify the role and expectations of all parties involved. Although most of the mainly young Japanese participating in these programs have had successful, culturally rich experiences, the lack of recourse for those who had grievances is worrying.

With the push by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Sports, Science and Technology for overseas study and exchange programs (MEXT, 2012), in my view and that of the DEEWR report (Allen Consulting Group, 2012), the Australian Department of Immigration or relevant state education departments would be well advised to have a more active administrative role in native-speaker programs, similar to the organizational structure of native-speaker schemes established in other countries. Furthermore, institutions and organizations involved in placing or recruiting NSAs should consider more stringent selection criteria for potential candidates, provide more detailed information regarding their expected role in the school, and improve their predeployment training.

Bio Data

Marcus Otlowski is a member of the Department of International Studies at Kochi University. His research interests are study abroad programs, content-based language teaching, and material development.

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Appendix A

Japanese Language Teacher Survey

Section 1: Teaching Background

How long have you been a teacher? ___ years ___ months

How long have you been teaching English/Japanese (E/J) in elementary school? ___ years ___ months

Are/were you responsible for E/J in just your class, or the whole school? ___ class ___ whole school ___ both

Please give details of your responsibilities in regard to E/J classes and E/J in your school.

Did you study E/J at university? _____ YES _____ NO

How many years? _____ years

Was your major "teaching E/J as a foreign/second language"?

_____ YES _____ NO

Was your major in education? _____ YES _____ NO

If your major was E/J, how would you describe it?

____ grammar ____ literature ___ culture

____ language _____ ALL

What are your E/J qualifications? (degrees, diplomas, certificates, Japanese Shiken, etc.)

Did you study how to teach E/J in elementary/high school at university?

____elementary _____ high school ___ YES ___ NO

If yes, please describe the course/seminar etc. (content, times, length)

Have you participated in any professional development (PD) courses for E/J teaching?

_____ YES _____ NO

If yes, please describe the course/seminar etc. (content, times, length)

How confident do you feel teaching E/J in the classroom?
(1 very little – 5 very confident) ___ 1 ___ 2 ___ 3 ___ 4 ___ 5

Please explain why you think so.

Have you participated in any PD courses on how to use a teaching assistant (TA)?

_____ YES _____ NO

If yes, please describe the course/seminar etc. (content, times, length)

Does the education department or your school provide guidelines on how to utilize a TA? _____ YES _____ NO

If yes, please briefly describe the guidelines.

Have you been overseas /to Japan? If yes, please describe in what capacity (study, exchange etc.) and for how long.

Section 2: Teaching Assistant Situation

Have you taught E/J with a teaching assistant?

_____ YES _____ NO

How many years have you taught with a TA?_____ years

How many different TAs have you worked with? _____

What was the standard length of TA position?

What was the longest serving TA at your school?

_____ years _____ months

What was the shortest serving TA at your school?

_____ years _____ months

What were the approximate ages of your TAs?_____ years old

Did your institution provide home-stay accommodation?

_____ YES _____ NO

If yes, was the home-stay with families connected with the school?

_____ YES _____ NO

If no, what accommodation did the TAs have?

Were the TAs based at your school, or did they rotate among several schools?

_____ Based _____ Several

If they rotated, how often did you work with TAs?

_____ a week / ____ a month

How would you rate having TAs based in schools? *(1 low – 5 high)*

___ 1 ___ 2 ___ 3 ___ 4 ___ 5

How would you rate having rotating TAs? *(1 low – 5 high)*

___ 1 ___ 2 ___ 3 ___ 4 ___ 5

Does having a TA increase your workload at school? *(1 low – 5 high)*

____ 1 ___ 2 ___ 3 ___ 4 ___ 5

What responsibilities did you have for the TA? Please give details.

Does your institution see the TA as an integral part of the language program?

_____ YES _____ NO

How would you rate your institution's importance of the TA program? *(1 low – 5 high)* ___ 1 ___ 2 ___ 3 ___ 4 ___ 5

How would you rate your institution's support of the TA program? *(1 low – 5 high)* ___ 1 ___ 2 ___ 3 ___ 4 ___ 5

How would you rate your institution's support of the TA? *(1 low – 5 high)* ___ 1 ___ 2 ___ 3 ___ 4 ___ 5

Section 3: Working with a Teaching Assistant

How many classes a week/month did you work with a TA?

____ a week / ____ a month

Did you meet with the TA before each class?

_____ YES _____ NO

Did you plan each class with the TA?

_____ YES _____ NO

Was your TA active in planning classes?

_____ YES _____ NO

How would your rate your TA's participation in planning? *(1 low – 5 high)*

___ 1 ___ 2 ___ 3 ___ 4 ___ 5

Was communication with the TA in the TA's native language? YES / NO native: ____ English ____ Japanese

How would you rate your TA's communication level? *(1 low – 5 high)*

___ 1 ___ 2 ___ 3 ___ 4 ___ 5

How would you rate your TA's participation during the class? *(1 low – 5 high)*

___ 1 ___ 2 ___ 3 ___ 4 ___ 5

How would you rate your TA's interaction with students? *(1 low – 5 high)*

___ 1 ___ 2 ___ 3 ___ 4 ___ 5

How would you rate your satisfaction level with your TAs? *(1 low – 5 high)*

___ 1 ___ 2 ___ 3 ___ 4 ___ 5

How would your rate your TA's suitability for this program? *(1 low – 5 high)*

___ 1 ___ 2 ___ 3 ___ 4 ___ 5

Did you and your TA share the same idea of the TA's role? *(1 very different – 5 very similar)* ___ 1 ___ 2 ___ 3 ___ 4 ___ 5

What role do/did you want the TA to have in your class? Please give details.

What do/did you expect the TA to do before the class? Please give details.

What do/did you expect the TA to do during the class? Please give details.

What do/did you expect the TA to do after the class. Please give details.

Positives of having a TA

Please describe in detail the benefits you found of having a TA. Where possible please give a specific example.

Negatives of having a TA

Please describe in detail the problems you found of having a TA. Where possible please give a specific example.

Section 4: Overall Impression of the Teaching Assistant Program

Do you think the TA program assists teachers in teaching E/J? *(1 low – 5 high)*

___ 1 ___ 2 ___ 3 ___ 4 ___ 5

How would you rate the TA program? *(1 low – 5 high)*

___ 1 ___ 2 ___ 3 ___ 4 ___ 5

Do you think the TA program should continue?

____ YES, BUT MODIFIED ___ YES ___ NO

How would you rate the TA's preparation for this program? *(1 low – 5 high)*

___ 1 ___ 2 ___ 3 ___ 4 ___ 5

How would you rate the value of the TA program to your school? *(1 low – 5 high)*

___ 1 ___ 2 ___ 3 ___ 4 ___ 5

How would you rate the value of the TA program to your community? *(1 low – 5 high)* ___ 1 ___ 2 ___ 3 ___ 4 ___ 5

What suggestions/comments would you like to make about the TA program?

Appendix B

Japanese Language Teacher Interview Questions

1. How long have you been a teacher?
2. How long have you been a Japanese teacher?
3. Please give details of your responsibilities in regard to Japanese at your school?
4. Have you taught with a native speaker assistant (NSA)?
5. How many years have you taught with an NSA?
6. How many NSAs have you taught with?
7. Are you involved in the management of the NSA program?
8. Please explain your role and duties.
9. How does your school view the NSA?
10. Does your school actively support the NSA program?
11. What are some of the issues in regard to running the NSA program?
12. What are the benefits of having an NSA in your school?
13. How do you use the NSA in your classes?
14. What are your expectations of the NSA?
15. What role does the NSA have in your class, school and community?
16. What are some of the issues with the NSA program?
17. Have you had any problems with NSAs in the past?
18. What suggestions do you have to improve the NSA program?