Pedagogical Teacher Training for ALTs in Japanese Public Schools

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The current assistant language teacher (ALT) system of foreign teachers' team teaching with Japanese English teachers (JTEs) in Japanese public schools began in 1987. Since that time much has been written about ALTs and team teaching (e.g., Amaki, 2008; McConnell, 2000; Nishino, 2011; Tahira, 2012). In this paper I conclude that current ALT training practices could be more efficient in improving the quality of language education in Japanese public schools and supporting the working relationship between ALTs and JTEs. To reach these goals, I propose an online training and professional development system for ALTs. In the first section I critique ALT training methods and the teaching context to identify areas in need of more focus. In the second section, I address the key issues and outline a potential solution, namely an online training system currently under development.

現在の日本の公立学校における日本人英語教諭（JTE）と外国人講師によるチームティーチング、すなわち外国語指導助手（ALT）システムは1987年に始まった。ALTやチームティーチングについては、開始当初から様々に研究がされてきた (Amaki, 2008; McConnell, 2000; Nishino, 2011; Tahira, 2012)。本論文では、日本の公立学校での外国語教育の質やALTとJTEとの指導上の協力関係をより良いものにするために、現在のALTへのトレーニングを更に効果的に行うことができると帰結する。そのために、ALTへのオンラインでのトレーニングや能力開発システムを提案する。第1節では、ALTへのトレーニング方法や指導環境について、教育現場やALTの担う役割などの実情により焦点を当てて説明すべきであると批判する。第2節では、この重要な問題について取り組みと解決策、すなわち現在開発中のオンライントレーニングシステムについての要点を説明する。

The number of assistant language teachers (ALTs) in Japanese public schools increases yearly but there is evidence that the level of training they receive is insufficient. There were 847 ALTs when the current ALT initiative started in 1987, and by 2012 this figure had risen to 8,505, with the Japanese government aiming to increase it to 20,000 by the 2019 school year (Clavel, 2014a). ALTs receive 2-5 days of pre-service training and limited in-service training. Continued calls to improve the standard of training so as to raise the quality of education and improve working relationships have come from ALTs themselves, Japanese teachers of English (JTEs), and the boards of education (BoEs) that dispatch ALTs to the schools where they teach. The purpose of having ALTs in Japanese classrooms is to promote communicative language teaching (CLT), and raise JTEs' awareness of English as a communicative medium (Wada & Caminos, 1994). However, although communicative goals have become more of a focus in the courses of study (CoSs) supplied by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), no changes have been made to ALT training practices.

In this paper, I propose a potential means of raising the standard of ALTs' teaching skills, as well as increasing ALTs' knowledge of the educational culture in Japanese public schools, through a free training website. First, I evaluate current training practices and discuss them with regard to institutional barriers to effective teaching so as to situate the proposed training website in context; then I survey research-based suggestions and other initiatives that have attempted to tackle issues related to ALT teaching practices. Second, I describe the ALT training website, its course modules, and interactive features. Primary aims of the online training website are to provide a comprehensive extension of existing training, and a platform for ongoing professional development. It is hoped that ALTs completing this in-service teacher training will be better equipped to meet the communicative goals of the CoSs, and have a deeper appreciation of their teaching context, the JTEs they team teach with, and the learners they teach.

Hiring and Training
The hiring and training of ALTs is not implemented in a standardised or systematic way, and as such is in need of improvement (Clavel, 2014b). There are three different ways that ALTs in Japan are hired: by BoEs, the Council of Local Authorities for International

Relations (CLAIR), which oversees the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme, and private companies. Of the 8,505 ALTs working in 2012, 43% came from BoEs, 30% from CLAIR, and 27% from private companies (Aoki, 2014). According to my own research, which included semistructured interviews with ALTs representing each hiring body and a CLAIR official (Reed, 2015), hiring procedures and training differ considerably as a result.

Hiring

None of the organizations hiring ALTs require teaching qualifications or experience; prospective employees must have an undergraduate degree (in any subject) for work visa purposes only. BoEs recruit their own ALTs from within Japan, JET ALTs are hired from countries outside Japan, and private companies recruit from both within and outside of Japan. BoEs are the only hiring body to require any level of teaching ability at the recruitment stage in that prospective teachers write an essay on an aspect of language education or teaching in Japan and demonstrate a model lesson.

Preservice Training

Most BoEs offer no preservice training (Clavel, 2014b), an exception being Sendai's ALT training plan (discussed below). Preservice training offered by CLAIR lasts 2 days, and the largest private hiring company, Interac (whose training is considered representative of other private companies), lasts 5 days. The first day of CLAIR's 2014 preservice training included workshops on language education in Japan (45 minutes), team teaching (100 minutes), studying Japanese (50 minutes), workplace etiquette (50 minutes); the second day included four 50-minute communicative workshops on teaching speaking, reviewing vocabulary using games, grammar, and writing (JET Programme, 2014). The 5 days of initial training offered by Interac focuses on teaching the four skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing) using CLT, social etiquette, and (to those not already living in Japan) adapting to life in the country.

In-Service Training

Board-of-education ALTs receive some in-service training: Two to three peer observation classes are carried out annually, and some BoEs allow their ALTs to attend the 2-day inter-prefecture Skills Development Conference (SDC) organised by CLAIR, where JET ALTs meet and hold workshops. The SDC is the only stipulated in-service event that JET ALTs must attend. The 2015 Niigata SDC that I attended held workshops on com-municative activities, though most, including the keynote speech, focused on building relations with other staff. Interac ALTs commented that they watched model lesson demonstrations using the CLT approach at periodic meetings. They reported that these irregular meetings were more to inform them of changes to company rules and regulations rather than offering any effective pedagogical training.

Teaching

Once hired, an ALT's primary role is to teach using CLT. However, various institutional and socio-cultural forces make it difficult for them to do this effectively. The main reasons for this are unclear CoS guidelines, noncommunicative teaching approaches, JTE workloads, and private sector education. Two first-hand accounts from ALTs reported decades apart exemplify how these barriers are maintained: "We do not know what we are here for; I have not got a clue. Clearly we are not here to teach" (McConnell, 2000, p. 198), and "I feel like my job is akin to an English mascot and there is little value in what I do" (Reed, 2015, p. 1). Such reports indicate the realities of teaching in Japanese public schools and signal that training practices could be more effective in preparing ALTs for their work context.

Course of Studies

The CoS is the series of official guidelines for all subjects released by MEXT roughly every 10 years. The guidelines for language instruction provide the goals of language study and curricula at all levels: elementary, junior and senior high schools. Descriptions of language instruction in the CoSs since the 1980s have emphasised the development of communicative competencies in the four skills (Nishino & Watanabe, 2008). Reforms introduced to achieve this include more communicative classroom activities like speeches, presentations, debates, and discussions (MEXT, 2011, p. 3). The general roles of ALTs are to promote CLT in the classroom and to support the JTEs' use of English (Wada & Caminos, 1994); from the 2008 CoS, ALTs are "supposed to work along with school teachers for team-teaching" (MEXT, 2008, para. 2).

Research on CoSs, however, has found a lack of clarity concerning what the communicative goals are, how CLT is to be integrated into the classrooms, and the roles of ALTs. ALTs are to promote CLT and work in a team-teaching capacity, but how they are to perform these tasks has never been satisfactorily described. On reviewing the communicative goals in CoSs from 1947 to 2009, Tahira (2012) concluded that "expectations remain obscure," and maintained that after 2 decades since the introduction of CLT, MEXT is

still failing to act on "realities experienced by teachers and reported by researchers" (p. 7). The issues of unclear CoS guidelines and unclear teaching instructions have led to a mismatch between goals and classroom realities that Nishino and Watanabe (2008) refer to as a *policy-practice conflict*.

Grammar Translation

Once ALTs are in the classroom, the most obvious barrier is the grammar-translation (*yakudoku*) approach to teaching. *Yakudoku* is the practice of learners translating written texts from English to Japanese word for word and then reordering these words to match Japanese word order. In this approach, JTEs give grammatical explanations in Japanese, and the only time learners speak English is when they are repeating after the JTE. This approach to language learning has a 100-year history in Japanese public schools and its prolonged use is connected to wider institutional and sociocultural forces (Seargeant, 2009). The dominant explanation for the continued use of *yakudoku* is that JTEs are focused on teaching language with the aim of helping their learners pass high school and university entrance exams (Nishino & Watanabe, 2008). The purpose of these high-stakes exams is linked to wider sociocultural forces supporting university and company hierarchies (Seargeant, 2009). This cause-and-effect relationship of entrance exams reinforcing *yakudoku* practices, called washback, hinders the communicative goals of MEXT and ALTs' ability to teach CLT (Cook, 2012; Tahira, 2012).

ALT Roles

A key result of current training practices, vaguely defined roles for ALTs in CoS guidelines, and *yakudoku* practices is that when ALTs enter the classroom they are uncertain about what to do (McConnell, 2000; Reed, 2015). The problems this leads to have been widely discussed, including a spectrum of classroom practices from the "human tape recorder" (Ruston-Griffiths, 2012), in which the ALT is requested by the JTE to read a short passage of text for students in class but the JTE teaches the entire class, to solo teaching (Collins & Fine, 2015). The first may be seen as restrictive of the ALTs' ability to deliver the communicative lessons the CoS call for, whereas the second may permit ALTs to achieve MEXT goals depending on their ability and experience. These classroom practices are exacerbated by a system of intermittent school visitations by the ALT, termed the "one-shot" system, which also keeps ALTs from teaching effectively, whether they teach by themselves or not. Thus, vaguely defined ALT roles can limit effective teaching, hinder the development of positive working relations, and negatively impact learner outcomes.

JTEs

Teaching requires ongoing professional development as do other professions, but opportunities to support this and promote teaching skills through peer coaching are hindered by the JTEs' workload. In-service training in the CoS prescribes that ALTs are to provide a form of training for the JTEs by making them more aware of English as a medium of communication. The ALT is the assistant in the team-teaching relationship, however, and it is understandable that mutual training is more desirable for promoting professional development. Nishino (2011) also reported that learning from colleagues is important for overcoming the obstacles to using CLT in Japanese public schools. However, the level to which JTEs can support ALTs' professional development and spend time discussing and evaluating lessons is restricted by their nonprofessional work duties, which include the following: managing club activities, maintaining cleaning stations, attending numerous weekly meetings, and calling parents. As a result of these responsibilities, a JTE in O'Donnell's (2005) study stated that only 30% of his time was spent on teaching duties. In addition to this nonprofessional workload, a JTE at each school has the added responsibility of supervising the ALT that the school receives, a position that comes with no training. Team teaching is a primary goal for ALTs and JTEs, but as there is little time to discuss lesson plans and reflect on classes; peer support is obstructed by institutional constraints.

Shadow Education

The final barrier to communicative teaching is shadow education, which refers to private sector supplementary lessons outside of formal schooling. This industry, which was worth ¥2.46 trillion (£1.6 billion) in 2012, is a result of the pressure on students to pass exams and get into good high schools and universities (Entrich, 2015). The primary outcome of this is mixed-level classes. Learners' attending shadow education are likely to have higher levels of English proficiency than those that do not. This can in turn affect learner motivation and the teacher's ability to manage the class.

Shadow education reinforces the high stakes of entrance exams and social hierarchies in Japan and offers a window to understanding the social and economic forces underpinning classrooms. Greater appreciation of these sociocultural factors by ALTs could lead to more effective pedagogical approaches and an appreciation of the reasons behind their learners' linguistic performance and classroom behaviour.

Learning From Experience

Instead of seeing these institutional and sociocultural forces as barriers to teaching, it is more productive to see them as considerations to be used as a framework for teacher training. Training on how to achieve MEXT goals of using CLT and work more effectively with JTEs should stem from factors influencing education in Japan. Educational goals set out in the CoS would be more effectively targeted by assessing research findings and openly discussing how to teach effectively in view of those findings. For example, Tajino and Walker (2010) made the case that "team-learning," where teachers and learners learn from each other, is a better way to reach CoS goals and build professional relations between teachers. Amaki (2008) saw ALTs' views as offering valuable longer term suggestions on improving language education in Japanese public schools. Responses from the 282 ALTs she surveyed indicated that they were unclear as to how learner proficiency will improve in the face of *yakudoku* practices and the excessive amount of Japanese used by JTEs. Kushima and Nishihori's (2003) comparative analysis of a nationwide survey of JTEs and ALTs showed that ALTs lacked readiness for their jobs and practical training, leading the authors to conclude that in-service training is crucial. Underwood (2013) stated that for the CoS to be successfully implemented, in-service collaborative training that is context-specific needs to be adopted.

A current ALT training programme that reports success is the Hello World Plan by the Sendai BoE (Crooks, 2001). In response to the problem of ALTs receiving limited training and lacking professional qualifications, the Sendai BoE implemented and are constantly updating a detailed training system. The system supports the professional development of ALTs by providing a full week of preservice orientation and twice-monthly in-service seminars run by a teaching professional. Crooks concluded that it would be more gratifying to see issues related to the team-teaching partnership being practically dealt with, rather than studied, discussed, and reported on.

Finally, the degree to which all ALTs are connected to each other for peer support and professional growth was explored by Kushima, Obari, and Nishihori (2011), who developed an online forum for ALTs to ask and respond to questions relating to the job. The framework for their online platform was developed from their research, which found insufficient professional preparation for ALTs. Their results show that teachers using the platform demonstrated greater gains in professional development and a deepened sense of belonging to a community.

ALT Training Online

The online training course described here is aimed at to addressing ALTs' pedagogical skills and knowledge of educational culture. The entire project follows the models of the open access movement (Frosio, 2014) and massive open online courses (MOOCs), making all content (course modules and reading materials) freely available to anybody with an Internet connection. The website platform for the ALT training has five tabs: Course Modules, Resources, Blog, Forum, and Contact. The three primary goals of the website are as follows: to prepare teachers to teach based on the CoS supplied by MEXT, to improve the working relationship between ALTs and JTEs, and to build a community of ALTs.

The main part of the website—the course modules—is aimed at informing and encouraging discussion among ALTs on how to teach effectively in view of the considerations related to the ALT position described above. The interactive features (forum and blog) follow Kushima, Obari, and Nishihori's (2011) suggestions by providing a platform to connect ALTs and allow them to discuss module content and topics related to teaching in a mutually supportive atmosphere. Module content is updated according to social and educational developments, as well as ALTs' comments and emails, following Amaki's (2008) advice that ALTs can offer valuable suggestions for educational change. By linking research-based considerations affecting ALTs with experienced-based recommendations on how to effectively implement changes, the website provides training for ALTs in Japanese public schools.

Course Modules

There are, at the time of writing, 19 modules divided into three categories: contextual, training, and professional development. These interrelated categories address the core issues of effective teaching practices, meeting CoS goals, as well as cultivating team-teaching relationships. Contextual modules provide information on cultural, educational, and human factors influencing the ALT position. Training modules are more practical and focus on classroom practices. Professional development modules support professional growth by expanding on content from previous modules and examining ways for ALTs to move education forward and grow professionally as individuals. The module content overviewed below describes the learning goals of the modules. Goals are supported by periodic reflection tasks that ALTs may respond to in the discussion section at the foot of each module's page, as well as on the forum or blog.

Contextual

The first two modules, The Japanese Context and English in Japanese Public Schools, cover the sociocultural context, developments in English education in Japan, and the CoS. These modules are aimed at the development of socially and professionally astute teachers that the BoEs and JTEs have expressed a need for. Topics include factors influencing teaching practices—such as the entrance exam system and *yakudoku*—that the JTEs have an understanding of through social and professional experience. The module on JTEs encourages an appreciation of their training background and workload, thus encouraging ALTs to cultivate professional courtesy towards JTEs. This module, together with the Teachers Working Together module, is aimed at to supporting a more productive working relationship by discussing interpretations of team teaching and how it may be more productively carried out. The main purpose of the ALT module is to discuss the unclear descriptions of ALT roles in the CoS and examine the root causes of these discrepancies. In Content, the roles as suggested in CoSs are contrasted and research on classroom practices is presented, with the aim of opening discussion of how roles may be transformed in educationally productive ways. The Learners module draws on aspects of the previous modules together in discussion of how they affect the learners' educational experience, in addition to exploring how to teach in view of shadow education and demographic trends.

By providing ALTs with a deeper appreciation of the social and educational factors related to Japanese public schools, the online training may help ALTs develop a heightened awareness of their daily environment, in turn developing empathy for teachers and confidence in understanding their surroundings. These modules are aimed at promoting a more constructive discussion of contemporary classrooms, working relationships, and teaching practices.

Training

Training modules present teaching techniques framed on the descriptions in the Contextual modules. Content is sourced from teacher-training publications, workshops, and suggestions from practising ALTs. The Approaches and Methods module builds an understanding of the evolution of ELT practices and CLT approaches and discusses the current "post-methods" era (Brown, 2012). The six remaining modules focus on ways to teach the four skills, in addition to vocabulary and phonics, using primarily communicative approaches, as prescribed by the CoS.

The Phonics and Vocabulary modules are included due to their focus in the CoS. It is unclear how much of existing training includes phonics-related training (as no ALTs I interviewed made any mention of this), but MEXT has been promoting its use since 2009 (MEXT, 2008). The Vocabulary module provides an introduction to words, meaning, and storage, before introducing ways to support vocabulary acquisition in team-taught lessons.

Professional Development

Professional development modules are designed to encourage ALTs' on-going professional growth through self-reflection, expansion of knowledge of contemporary ELT practices, and ability to do research and report on classroom experiences. These modules are written following two principles: ALTs can identify the needs of their learners' and attempt innovative techniques (Brown, 2012), and teacher education is an on-going process (Richards & Farrell, 2005).

The Materials Development module is aimed at guiding ALTs to develop and critically reflect on teaching materials based on their own learning and teaching principles. Primary contextual considerations for this module are CoS goals and the needs of learners. Through developing their own materials and sharing them, ALTs using this module develop useful skills that work to enable the people actually using the materials to improve them. The CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) and Teaching with Technology modules are an extension of the training modules in that they discuss two contemporary teaching approaches. There is a body of work describing the restrictive nature of using a single methodology on teacher development (Brown, 2012). Accordingly, current training, in its focus on CLT, is seen as limiting professional growth and hindering the accomplishment of CoS goals. These three modules target the CoS in contemporary ways whilst acknowledging the teaching context.

The Multiculturalism module discusses a topic not included in current training, but prevalent in contemporary literature on ELT in Japan. The aims here are to generate a deeper appreciation of contemporary multicultural Japanese classrooms and how to adapt teaching practices to deliver equal opportunities in education. The information and reading presented in this module is central to the content of all modules as the effects of changing demographics and globalisation impact all areas of school life. For instance, learners may speak languages other than Japanese and face challenges in an education system designed only for Japanese speakers (Castro-Vásquez, 2014). Through constructive discourse, ALTs may consider how to teach in view of evolving youth culture and shifting cultural patterns.

The final modules (Doing Research and Writing Articles) focus on continued professional development by providing the tools to enable ALTs to conduct classroom research and guidance on publishing it, as is standard in teacher training courses. These modules encourage active self-reflection on teaching practices and provide ways to share findings more officially, beyond blogs and forums. These modules evolved from my researching on ALTs and discovering the small amount of literature actually written by them about their teaching experiences. Research articles that report on and discuss ALT team-teaching practices mostly come from analyses of surveys of ALTs by researchers who are not ALTs themselves, including the publications referred to in this paper. By helping ALTs move beyond anecdotal accounts and report more formally on their teaching experiences and practices from their own perspectives, these modules provide another direction for advancing language education and team-teaching practices so as to more readily address the requirements of any future CoS.

Conclusion

Assistant language teachers have the potential to improve language education in Japanese public schools beyond what current training practices prepare them for. An exploration of the ALTs' working environment reveals many factors influencing their position that are either omitted from existing training practices, or covered only in short workshops. These factors mostly centre around the lack of clarity surrounding the status of ALTs in the Japanese education system (the CoS, CLT approach, job roles, and team-teaching), and issues preventing ALTs from teaching effectively (exam and *yaku-doku* practices, minimal training, the one-shot system, information concerning learners, and social influences). In-service training framed on how to teach in consideration of these wider influences will lead to improved teaching standards and more effective team-teaching relationships. In view of these goals, a free grassroots ALT training program has been designed based on experience and research to provide ALTs with contextualised training. The training site expands on content from existing training and supplies a platform for ongoing professional development through critical reflection of teaching practices. It is anticipated that future research may discuss the outcomes of this initiative and direct it in more purposeful ways.

Bio Data

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