

2015 JALT Membership Survey: Trends, Issues, and Solutions

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The Japan Association for Language Teaching (JALT) is a not-for-profit organization run by volunteers, whose purpose is to improve and promote the teaching and learning of languages in Japan. The avowed purpose of JALT's chapters and special interest groups (SIGs) is to serve their

membership to those ends, but the attitudes, wants, and needs of this membership have been understood only anecdotally. This qualitative study is an initial attempt at surveying members, giving them the opportunity to discourse freely about JALT. Although the main finding is that 95% of respondents are in JALT for professional reasons, of considerably more interest is the increased understanding of the great breadth of members' professional interests, their opinions about JALT, and the wide variety of personal concerns, such as gender issues and Japanese participation. Recommendations are given regarding possible ways JALT members, as well as the organization itself, could address such issues.

全国語学教育学会 (JALT) はボランティアの運営による非営利団体であり、その趣旨は日本における語学教授と学習の発展と推進である。地域支部および分野別研究部会は全会員に寄与することを公然の目的としているが、これまで会員のこれらに対する考え、要望、需要を示す確たるものはなかった。この質的研究は、会員にJALTについて自由に発言してもらう機会を設けることで、問題点と解決策を見出そうとしたものである。主に明らかになったことは、回答者の95%が職業上の理由からJALTに属していることであるが、それ以上に興味深いことは、会員の職業上の興味、JALTに対する意見、そしてジェンダー問題や日本人会員の参加など非常に多岐に渡る会員個々のJALTへの関心事に関連していることである。今後JALTおよびJALT会員から提言できる妥当性のある解決策についても提案する。

JALT traces its origins to 1976, when 50 teachers from the Kansai region got together to discuss and share teaching methodologies within a Japanese educational context. At that time, Japan was experiencing post-World War II economic growth, and its educational policy reflected an opening up towards the hiring of native speakers of English to teach in Japanese schools (Stewart & Miyahara, 2016). Since then, JALT has become a formally registered not-for-profit organization with members' creating more than 50 local chapters and special interest groups (SIGs) to meet the specific needs of members; organizing international and local conferences and events; and disseminating professional information through publications such as *The Language Teacher*, *JALT Journal*, and *JALT PostConference Publication*. Although JALT membership had grown at its peak to approximately 3,000 members, similar to other language teaching associations around the world, it has been struggling to increase the size of its membership base (Thorkelson, 2016) and diversify its membership to include more Japanese teachers of English (Seilhamer, 2013; Stewart & Miyahara, 2016), other nonnative speakers of English (Kamhi-Stein, 2016), and women (Nagatomo, 2014, 2016).

The size of an association's membership base should not determine its overall success, given that the spread of practical and theoretical scholarship through membership in professional associations cannot be easily assessed (Aubrey & Coombe, 2010). After all, every association must “employ different strategies in order to support the professional development of their [sic] membership” (Gnawali, 2016, p. 170). Moreover, language teachers might join professional organizations for various reasons—the most obvious being for professional development (Gnawali, 2016) and constructing a professional identity (Lamb, 2012) to raise their social and professional capital (Sobkin & Adamchuk, 2015). However, Warrington's (2014) study of the motivation of language teachers' membership in English language teaching (ELT) associations in Japan found that membership was perceived by participants as an occupational obligation in order to find employment in an increasingly competitive job market. Warrington also unearthed challenges within ELT associations in Japan, including unmet continuing professional development needs, undemocratic leadership, opaque professionalism, and unclear professional standards and guidelines (p. 41). Consequently, Warrington posited that ELT associations must ascertain how to overcome these challenges so that a positive environment of camaraderie, instead of an atmosphere of accountability and competition, could emerge in ELT associations in Japan. Without investigating these challenges, these associations will continue to “use membership to dress up professionalization as professionalism despite there being issues with their membership quality” (p. 144). Professional associations must address the ongoing needs of their members if they are to create a positive environment of camaraderie and remain robust entities that can instigate change both internally and externally (Lamb, 2012; Smith & Kuchah, 2016). In response to these issues, we sought to conduct an initial qualitative investigation into what members want from JALT.

Research Questions

As this was a pilot study, the researchers used open-ended questions to gain as wide a range of responses as possible regarding the wants and needs of JALT members. The main questions guiding this study were as follows:

- RQ1. Why do people join JALT?
- RQ2. What does JALT do well?
- RQ3. What issues still need to be addressed by JALT?
- RQ4. What can JALT do in the future?

Methodology

Data Collection and Participants

Data collection was undertaken by nine volunteer JALT chapter or SIG membership chairs who were allowed to freely select participants from any chapter or SIG membership list. However, they were specifically encouraged to contact what we called *mystery members*. These are people who, while holding JALT membership, are not active in their groups and about whom little is known. Data collected consisted of responses from 86 JALT members, although not all respondents answered all questions. Fifty-four participants were men and 32 were women. Of these, 60 were non-Japanese and 24 were Japanese; the nationality of two respondents was not recorded. The majority of non-Japanese participants were men, and the majority of Japanese participants were women. The ratios of men to women and Japanese to non-Japanese roughly correspond to those of the entire JALT membership.

Instrument

All data was collected between June and November 2015. In the original design, interviews were to be conducted with members either in person or by phone. This method was chosen for several reasons. First, although many chapters and SIGs have surveyed their members over the years using written instruments, the researchers were not aware of any such studies having produced more than a few scattered responses, and those most likely came from the more active members. It was hypothesized that more people would respond more positively to being asked for a personal interview and the subsequent collegial exchange of information. The writing would be done by the interviewer, so the member could just talk. Second, researchers were specifically encouraged to contact their group's mystery members who did not attend chapter meetings or SIG events. This is the group whose opinions have been most sought after by group leaders (chapter presidents and SIG coordinators) precisely because their opinions are so little known. Finally, the nature of a face-to-face interview or phone conversation was thought to be more conducive to the production of more casual, informal responses.

However, some researchers were not comfortable calling members on the phone, so they were allowed to seek written responses. This was a big change for a survey originally designed to be done by interview. Despite group and individual invitations and even attempts to contact all 59 chapter and SIG membership chairs by phone, it proved difficult to attract enough volunteers to conduct the survey for two main reasons. First, many membership chairs thought there would be too much work involved; second, there

was a great deal of resistance to calling people on the phone. Some membership chairs refused to make such cold calls. Others would participate only if allowed to send the survey in written form. Some of the researchers were able to make written surveys work, possibly at the cost of focusing on the more dedicated members, such as JALT officers. On the positive side, the written responses tended to be longer, more detailed, and more thoughtful.

Data Analysis

A form with space for notes on the main areas (see Appendix) was disseminated to researchers. After conducting an interview-based prepilot study, an Excel sheet was designed to record any relevant matters members might want to discuss. It consisted of a total of 73 fields for personal data, professional interest areas, preferences concerning JALT events and publications, and responses to the main research question, “Why are you in JALT?” The first 14 fields were descriptive and data were taken primarily from JALT membership lists. Because the survey was designed to be led by the concerns of members themselves, it was not considered necessary that all respondents answer all questions.

Following the interviews, five researchers combined the participants’ narrative responses from seven areas into one document, yielding 21 pages of comments. From these, 29 major themes were identified and categorized. In this way, we were able to identify the major patterns characterizing members’ opinions about JALT. The information will be presented in tables, in summaries, or in narrative form.

Results and Discussion

As can be seen in Table 1, the majority of respondents were working at the tertiary level at the time this study was undertaken. Results showed that of the non-Japanese respondents, more men worked at the tertiary level than did women, and of the Japanese respondents, more women worked at the tertiary level than did men. Because more men than women answered the questionnaire overall, this may be unsurprising, but it does reflect the fact that 75% out of all non-Japanese English-language tertiary faculty in Japan are men (Nagatomo, 2016).

Field of Work by Gender and Nationality

Table 1 shows where survey respondents were teaching, their genders, and their nationalities—ordered by the frequency of responses. The vast majority of respondents, 74.5%, worked at the college or university level; only 7% worked in language schools, in which

they frequently taught all ages, often focusing on younger learners; and 5% worked in multiple fields or in nonteaching areas or were not asked. The field of work of two respondents was not recorded.

There were not many differences among women and men in most settings, but there was a marked difference between the numbers of women and men working at the tertiary level—almost twice as many men as women. Among the Japanese teachers of English, however, more women than men reported working at the university level. It must be noted, though, that there are more Japanese female than male members of JALT (619 female members and 309 male members, according to JALT statistics for March, 2017).

Table 1. Participants’ Field of Work by Gender and Nationality (N = 86)

Field	Male			Female		
	Non-Japanese	Japanese	N/R	Non-Japanese	Japanese	N/R
College/university	34	5	1	13	7	3
Children	1	--	--	--	2	--
Junior high school	1	--	--	--	--	--
Senior high school	--	2	--	--	1	--
Language school	3	--	--	1	2	--
BoE teaching	2	--	--	--	--	--
BoE non-teaching	--	--	--	1	--	--
Multiple fields	3	--	--	1	1	--

Note. BoE = Board of Education; N/R = not recorded; the field of two respondents was not recorded.

Question 1: Why Do People Join JALT?

Table 2 summarizes the most common responses. The majority (95%) of respondents had joined JALT for professional reasons. There was a wide range of other reasons offered, not all of which could be listed here due to space limitations. In order to determine which issues were of utmost importance to JALT, we relied on several factors, such as the

number of related responses, the apparent intensity of the response, and our knowledge of the kinds of issues frequently raised by group leaders in JALT. Responses were broadly similar for male and female, Japanese and non-Japanese participants.

Table 2. Participants' Reasons for Joining JALT (N = 86)

Reason for joining	Number of respondents	Percent
Professional development	82	95
Networking	49	57
Keep up with trends	43	50
Academic reasons	32	37
Research	23	27
Social reasons	21	24
Jobs	15	17

Note. More than one answer was possible.

Question 2: What Does JALT Do Well?

Making Connections

Thirty-nine respondents (45%) chose to answer this question. These respondents gave generally positive comments about many aspects of JALT, saying such things as “[It] covers all possible interest groups” and “It connects Japan. I have colleagues from Hokkaido to Okinawa.” Others complimented JALT for “listening to its membership” and for being “open, friendly, and responsive.”

Having an “International” Feeling

For the Japanese participants, JALT provided opportunities to share the latest information on English language education and teaching tips. When asked, “Why are you in JALT?,” one Japanese respondent said, “JALT is not Japanese. I can feel I’m an international communicator.” One Japanese female member said it was in JALT that she could “learn [the] latest technical skills, share ideas, and have speaking practice.” In addition, six Japanese members commented that JALT gives them an opportunity to interact in English.

Offering Useful Publications

Participants were asked how they felt about JALT publications. They responded that JALT publications served the following positive purposes: continuing professional development to stay abreast of changes in ELT, fostering of personal interest in specific areas, providing publishing opportunities, and gaining insight into research of Japanese education. By reading the publications, members felt that gaps between theory and practice could be narrowed; they felt more empowered as language-teaching research-practitioners.

Question 3: What Issues Still Need to Be Addressed by JALT?

Different Foci

We found that there also appeared to be two groups of roughly equal size who wished for opposite approaches in JALT. This divide was most evident in the events section of the survey. On one side were those who wanted more focus on practical teaching ideas for the classroom and less focus on publications and research (42 respondents, 49%); on the other side were those who preferred a more academic approach (33 respondents, 38%). One respondent said, “[JALT] needs to focus more on teaching in the classroom and less on publications.” Another said, “Promote more workshops geared at research development, not simply teaching.” Others liked variety: “balance between academic and practical.”

The Language–Culture Divide

The Japanese participants felt that the “language barrier” or “cultural barrier” gives Japanese members challenges, too. In speaking about events, one respondent said that although chapter meetings are “really great,” he also found them to be “sometimes too hard.” Another agreed, saying that “meetings [are] a challenge,” and yet another, expressing an opinion about the meeting content, said that she “can’t adopt native speaker techniques.”

Perceptions of Gender Inequality

Three female respondents brought the issue of gender to the forefront in their answers. One in particular strongly stated a belief among some female members that JALT does not serve its female population as well as it could:

I am deeply concerned about the gender ratio in terms of membership and even more concerned about the obvious lack of female involvement in presentations, publications, positions held . . . there seems to be a regular “boys club” that maintains power throughout JALT . . . There are now many passive female members because they feel unwelcome at events.

In fact, in 2015, women constituted 41% of JALT membership and men constituted 58%. However, the perception that JALT is a “boys club” may stem from a very particular cause. According to Nagatomo (2016), 75% of non-Japanese university English language faculty are men. The majority of teachers who attend JALT conferences are university faculty members and this could account for the perception of a lack of participation by female members, who more likely are teaching in pretertiary settings or own their own schools. They may therefore be more likely than male members to be working on weekends and unable to attend chapter meetings or weekend-long conferences. In addition, teachers not working at the tertiary level probably do not receive funding for research. Without such funding, female members may be financially less able to attend conferences.

Criticisms About Publications

JALT publications received criticism from participants who believed that the publications should go paperless, should serve those readers who wanted to gain professional insight instead of writers who needed opportunities to publish, or should have more “salience and relevance for a wide audience.” Moreover, members who were often pressed for time wondered about the net value of JALT publications that were “part of the package.” One member pointed out, “Publications always face a challenge between appealing to long-term and more recent/newer members. I think that they do this pretty well and are only as good as the material submitted.”

Problems With Communication at the National, Chapter, and SIG Levels

Effective communication, including the goal of administrative transparency, has long been one of JALT’s biggest challenges. The JALT website and *The Language Teacher* are rich sources of information but need to be read to accomplish their mission. There is also the monthly email *Announcements* with resources and short news items of things people can act on. Starting in 2016, all joining or renewing members began receiving a welcome message that includes a link to *Getting Involved in JALT*, a document that provides a snapshot of all of JALT, with the emphasis on communications and activity. Despite such efforts, it seems some members still feel JALT needs to communicate more effectively.

One problem mentioned by several respondents is that SIGs and chapters are “terrible at communicating with members.” One member expressed a belief that “JALT is too top down, not enough open debate because channels are not open.” Although networks exist, perhaps these need to be made more explicit to members.

Other comments, also revealing problems with communication, showed that members did not know what JALT was already doing. For example, several commented that JALT should engage in “more/additional networking with other organizations,” apparently without realizing how many such partners JALT has or how the groups work together. Yet this information, along with links to JALT’s 18 domestic and international partners, is available on the website. Another member commented that JALT needs more “transparency of selection of presentations of [inter]national conference.” This comment also appears to be a case of a lack of information about JALT’s rigorous conference vetting guidelines, which are published on the website, or possibly a lack of understanding of the practical limitations of personal feedback in a conference the size of JALT’s.

Question 4: What Can JALT Do in the Future?

A remarkably wide range of suggestions was offered by 56 participants, such as addressing problems teachers face with short-term contracts or gender inequality; offering short courses for teachers, possibly including certification; creating a library of digital resources; becoming more involved in the education system in Japan or challenging the status quo; reorganizing or otherwise altering the international conference, Pan-SIG conference, or Executive Board Meetings; and offering alternatives that ranged from lowering the number of SIGs to increasing their effect and improving their funding to getting more Japanese teachers involved. Some called for increased focus in certain areas such as networking; getting new speakers; getting inspiring speakers; having a greater variety of meetings and conferences, scholarships, or job opportunities; and focusing on content-based learning, study abroad, or CALL in the classroom—although one member commented that there is already “an overemphasis on CALL.” In summary, JALT members have a lot of opinions, sometimes contradictory, of what JALT should do and how it should do it.

Conclusions, Current Actions, and Recommendations

The nine researchers involved in this study gathered data on the interests and attitudes of 86 JALT members, which we believe will be useful in helping to guide the direction of the organization and understanding what is being done well and what concerns need

to be addressed. Teachers' interests, workplaces, and identities (such as being a woman, having Japanese nationality, or both), were important findings.

It is possible that the design of the survey, which encouraged an exchange of information (some members did ask questions about JALT during these interviews), helped deepen personal relationships between researcher and subject, both of whom are, importantly, colleagues in JALT. For example, it was only in the personal interviews that the question "Why are you in JALT?" prompted such responses as "because you [the interviewer] asked me" or "because of my wife." It appeared that people said things of a more personal nature during an oral interview that may not have survived the further reflection occasioned by the usual writing process in written surveys.

This study showed that more effort needs to be made to make women more visible in JALT. Many JALT members are women, but they may have difficulty attending meetings, engaging with publications, and finding time to work on chapter or SIG executive boards. One initiative JALT could consider for attracting more active female members would be to provide childcare services at local and national meetings. More importantly, in order to encourage more women to participate in all aspects of JALT, a peer mentoring service for women could be set up through which successful women who have a solid background in publishing and presenting could provide mentoring services to women who wish to do more but might be hesitant to do so.

Many comments were pleas to more successfully address issues that have challenged the organization for years, such as "bridging the gap between native speaking teachers of English and Japanese teachers of English in public schools." A great deal of thought and effort has been put into these kinds of issues over the years, such as how to work more effectively with Japanese teachers, assistant language teachers (ALTs), and English conversation (*eikaiwa*) teachers. The lack of representation of these members in this survey indicates that more should be done to involve them in the future. Ultimately, the answers to these and many other questions lie with the members themselves. JALT is, after all, a volunteer organization. We hope that people who want something done will be encouraged to take the initiative.

JALT is constantly changing and between the time the survey was conducted and the time this paper was written, steps to address some of the concerns expressed by members had either already been taken or were in discussion. For example, several respondents called for "more regional events across Japan." The Regional Professional Activities Committee (RPAC) has been created to do just that. In addition, as wide-ranging comments from members indicated, there is some controversy about how JALT should respond to rapidly changing technology. One respondent recommended that JALT publications

go paperless. Another said, "JALT, to survive, has to become a virtual organization. No head office." Recognizing these challenges, the Technology Advisory Committee (TAC) was created in November 2016, with a mission to proactively evaluate, advise, and make recommendations to JALT on all matters relating to technology, particularly ICT (information communication technology). The members of RPAC and TAC are just beginning their work. These new initiatives, however, when added to the continuance of doing what JALT has traditionally done well while also simultaneously increasing the breadth and depth of communications, represent a significant increase in the workloads undertaken by JALT's volunteers.

We recommend further research into all of the areas outlined by this study, with particular emphasis on the exploration of identity issues and how to improve communications. A larger study is also recommended for greater generalizability. Such data could be analyzed to determine whether perceptions of JALT vary depending on field of work. Future studies would probably be better served by choosing either the flexible, personal approach of the interview or the written survey with its greater potential to yield longer, more detailed information, if it is possible to gather enough responses to make this latter method feasible.

Limitations of This Study

The generalizability of this pilot study was limited by having fewer than 100 participants and by the selection process: Individual researchers did not always choose to contact JALT's many mystery members. In addition, data collection was often incomplete for reasons noted above.

Bio Data

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Appendix

Notes for Member Survey

This form was supplied to researchers for use during interviews.

Use this form to take notes during the interview. Only main points are listed. Transfer the detailed information to the survey form after the interview.

1.	Name	
2.	Male/female	
3.	Chapter	
4.	Japanese/Non-Japanese	
5.	Teaching area	
6.	Joined JALT in (year)	
7.	Time of interview	
8.	Why are you in JALT?	
9.	Events	
10.	Publications	
11.	Professional development	
12.	Research	
13.	Networking	
14.	Interests	
15.	How can JALT best contribute to your professional development?	
16.	What does JALT do well, in your opinion?	
17.	How can JALT improve services to its members? (Events, publications, etc.)	