Assistant Language Teachers in Junior High School: Do Programs Stressing Their Inclusion Produce Better Listeners?

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Recently, most secondary schools in Japan have been employing native speakers as assistant language teachers (ALTs) in their English programs. However, the frequency of such classes may vary from school to school. In spite of the resources invested in this program, little empirical research has been done that directly tests its effectiveness. This paper reports an empirical study which compared the listening comprehension ability of graduates of junior high schools which frequently employed ALTs with graduates of programs that employed them less frequently or not at all. It was found that mean scores on a listening test varied significantly among graduates of high, average, and low ALT utilization programs.

最近ではいわゆるＡＬＴの英語授業への導入は一般的になってきたが、授業の行われる頻度は学校によりまちまちである。ALT プログラムには多くの費用と努力がそそがれてはいるが、その効果を実証的に研究した例はあまりない。本稿は中学校段階で頻繁にＡＬＴ導入授業を受けた者とそうでない者がリスニングにおいて発揮する能力を比較検証したものである。その結果、中学校段階でＡＬＴ導入授業を頻繁に受けた者、平均的回数を受けた者、あまり受けなかった者，この三つのグループ間にはリスニングテストの結果においてあきらかな差異が認められた。

Since 1987, most junior and senior high schools in Japan have begun using native speakers as assistant language teachers (ALTs) in EFL classrooms. While the practice has now achieved a wide degree of acceptance, it has not been without its critics (cf. Inoue, 1992). Do language programs which make frequent use of ALTs offer any advantages over those which do not? Do they, for instance, produce better speakers or better listeners? Considering the resources that have been invested in these programs, there is little empirical research that directly addresses this question.

In the high school where I teach, all first-year students are required to take Oral Communication B, a class which is team-taught by a native-speaking teacher and a Japanese teacher of English (JTE) using English as the primary language of instruction and classroom communication. Entering students, though otherwise a very homogeneous group, differ in their ability to understand spoken English. This can be observed in their responses to instructions and direct questions during classroom activities, as well as their performance on the listening portions of mid-term and final examinations. At a teachers' meeting, it was suggested that this variation was due to students' previous exposure to native speakers: Some had attended junior high schools which made frequent use of ALTs, while others had had few or even no classes with an ALT in junior high school. While it seemed dubious that the amount of exposure to ALTs could be the whole story, the school does draw its students from a large number of junior high schools. Perhaps those schools whose language programs stress the inclusion of ALTs differ in a number of ways which ultimately produce better listeners.

The inclusion of native speakers as ALTs in secondary schools is largely a result of the Ministry of Education's efforts to promote a more communicative approach to foreign language teaching. Though goals are not always stated in educational terms, in general they include exposing students to native speech and accent, increasing student motivation by providing opportunities to listen to and interact with native speakers, enhancing cultural awareness, and inducing JTEs to improve their own spoken communication skills. ALTs in Tokyo public schools are recruited from a variety of sources. Some are resident foreigners hired directly by local school boards. Others are recruited abroad as part of the Japan Exchange Teaching (JET) program, a joint project by three Japanese government ministries with the goal of promoting internationalization at the local level (CLAIR, 1996) and assigned to schools by a joint council. Due to diverse backgrounds, ALTs probably vary in training, experience, and commitment to education. In addition, there seems to be no official guidelines specifying how they should be used. While their role no doubt varies from classroom to classroom, there are indications that the presence of ALTs is often accompanied by more spoken input, authentic texts, and communicative activities (Garant, 1992; Yukawa, 1992).

According to Minoru Wada, a former curriculum specialist at the Ministry of Education, junior high schools vary in the degree to which they employ ALTs for logistical and economic reasons, and there are not enough ALTs to assign one to each school, even if every school wanted

one (Cominos, 1992). It seems that in some cases schools with strong language programs are given preference in ALT assignments (Kageura, 1992). In general, ALT assignments falls into one of three categories. In the "one shot," or occasional-visit system, ALTs make irregular visits, usually once or twice per year, to each school in a local district. In the regular-visit system, ALTs are assigned to more than one school, but make regular and more frequent visits, usually once a month. In the base-school system, a school has its own ALT(s) who teach regular classes, generally once a week or twice a month. There are also indications that ALT utilization may vary within a single school as the question of when and how to use an ALT is left to individual teachers who call on ALTs' services when and if they desire them (Iwami, 1992).

There are thus reasons to expect variance in both how often ALTS are used as well as how they are used. This study examines the relationship between the degree to which junior high schools include ALTs in their classrooms and their students' listening comprehension ability upon graduation. Since there are so many variables in the way ALTs can be utilized, not to mention factors that could lead a school or teacher to seek their services, causal variables cannot be inferred. Rather, it will be assumed from the beginning that programs making frequent use of ALTs vary from those that do not in myriad ways, any or all of which might contribute to the development of better listening skills. The research questions are:

1. Do junior high schools in the Tokyo area vary in the degree to which they incorporate ALTs in their language programs, and if so
2. Do graduates of programs making frequent use of ALTs have better listening comprehension than graduates from programs making average or infrequent use of ALTs?

The Study

Subjects

The subjects were 192 first-year high school students in an all boys private high school in Japan. The school is affiliated with a well known university, and the students are high academic achievers: usually placing around the 95th percentile on academic aptitude tests administered by *jukus* (privately run examination preparation schools). In all, they had been drawn from 154 junior high schools, primarily public, in the Tokyo area. Approximately one-third were admitted to the high school through direct recommendation from the junior high schools, and two-

thirds after passing a rigorous entrance examination which did not include a listening test.

Materials

Data for this study were drawn from two sources: a survey in which subjects were asked to report the frequency of classes with an ALT during each of their three years of junior high school, and a set of 11 listening proficiency items which were included on the first mid-term examination of the Oral Communication B class.

ALT Frequency Survey: The ALT frequency survey was written in Japanese and administered during a regular class period, under the direction of a Japanese teacher. For each of their three years of junior high school, subjects were asked to select one of five categories which best described the frequency of classes with an ALT. For the analysis, each category was assigned a numerical score. The five categories and their scores were:

1) none at all	(0 points)
2) a few times a year	(1 point)
3) once a month	(2 points)
4) twice a month	(3 points)
5) once a week or more	(4 points)

In addition, subjects were asked to report time spent living abroad and/or any English instruction from a native speakers they may have received outside of school, such as at a *juku* or conversation school. As I wanted to examine only the effect of ALTs in the regular school system, subjects who reported extracurricular instruction with a native speakers, or who had lived abroad for more than three months, were eliminated from the study. This reduced the total number of subjects to 183.

Listening Comprehension Test: Each subject was given a listening comprehension score based on the 11 proficiency items which were part of the first mid-term examination in Oral Communication B. As this study was carried out in a functioning EFL class, some compromises were necessary. We were unable to devote a full class period to a listening proficiency test. It was also considered undesirable to make their first high school listening test discouragingly difficult. Thus, 11 listening proficiency items were prepared and inserted in what was otherwise a criterion-referenced achievement test. The proficiency items, chosen because they had been used in previous tests with similar students and were known to have good item discrimination values, involved selecting an abstract figure from among four choices after listening to a dialogue discussing it (see Heaton, 1988, p. 73 for a prototype).

Descriptive statistics for the listening comprehension test are given in Table 1. It should be noted that when the scores were plotted and examined, a ceiling effect could be observed, with about 26% of the subjects receiving a perfect score. Also, reliability was low (Cronbach alpha = .63), probably due to the small number of items.

Table1: Listening Test Descriptive Statistics

Variable	*n*	K	*Mean*	*SD*	Minimum	Maximum
Value	183	11	82.0%	17.1%	27.3%	100%

Reliability (Cronbach alpha) a = .63

The mid-term test was administered after four classroom hours of Oral Communication B. These four hours of instruction could be significant as in a few cases, they constitute more exposure to a native speakers than subjects received during all three years of junior high school.

Analyses

Results of the survey were tabulated for differences in how frequently the various junior high schools had utilized ALTs. Next, a total frequency score was computed for each subject by totaling his points for three years of study. Total scores ranged from zero (no classes with an ALT during junior high school), to twelve (once a week or more during each of three years). Subjects were then divided into three groups based on their total scores, identifying the junior high school programs as having high, average, or low utilization of ALTs. A mean score on the listening comprehension test was calculated for each group, and a one-way ANOVA used to test for differences among the groups. Since the majority of subjects fell into the average ALT utilization group, an additional analysis was done which focussed on students from high utilization versus low utilization programs. A two-way chi-square analysis was used to see if the frequency of "good listeners," those scoring 90% or above on the listening test, versus "poor listeners," those scoring below 65% on the listening test, differed significantly between subjects from high and low utilization programs. Null hypotheses of no difference between group means or frequency of good listeners/bad listen-

ers were adopted and a significance level of alpha < .05, one directional was accepted for the study.

Results

Responses to the ALT frequency survey are summarized in Table 2. As can be seen, most subjects (about 60%) reported having classes with ALTs a few times a year for each of their three years, indicating that most public junior high schools have only occasional visits. There were sizable minori-

Table 2: Responses to ALT Frequency Survey

Frequency of Classes using an ALT	1st-year	2nd-year	3rd-year
none at all	11%	7%	14%
a few times per year	63%	60%	55%
once a month	11%	14%	15%
twice a month	8%	11%	9%
once a week or more	7%	8%	7%
Total (n = 183)	100%	100%	100%

Table 3: Distribution of total frequency scores and division of subjects into utilization groups

Total score	n	ALT Utilization Groups
12	9	
11	1	
10	0	High Utilization Programs
9	11	n = 46
8	6	
7	3	
6	16	
5	11	Average Utilization Programs
4	10	n = 110
3	89	
2	18	Low Utilization Programs
1	5	n = 27
0	4	

ties, however, with very high or very low utilization of ALTs. It's also worth noting that the number of schools offering no classes with an ALT increased slightly during the third year, perhaps due to an increased focus on grammar as students prepared for high school entrance examinations.

The distribution of total ALT frequency scores is shown in Table 3. The most common score was three (n = 89), which could indicate occasional visits during each of three years, but could also result from other combinations; for instance, occasional visits during the first year, once a month during the second, and no meetings during the third year. Scores of three, four, or five accounted for about sixty percent of the subjects and were designated as "average utilization" programs. A score of six or more, which would indicate that the school probably had a base school ALT, was designated high utilization, and below three, a low utilization program. The distribution of these three groups is also shown.

The mean listening test scores for the high, average, and low utilization groups are given in Table 4. The means varied from 87 to 73 percent, in the expected order. Table 5 gives the results of the one-way ANOVA. Since the overall F value was 5.61 ($p < 0.005$), post hoc comparisons were performed using the Scheffe procedure. The high utilization and low utilization groups, as well as the average utilization and low utilization groups, were found to be significantly different at the .05 level (Table 6).

Table 4: Mean Scores of ALT Utilization Groups

Group	*n*	*Mean*	*SD*	*SE*	Minimum	Maximum
High	46	86.6%	14.0	2.1	45.5%	100.0%
Average	110	82.2%	16.5	1.6	27.7%	100.0%
Low	27	73.1%	20.9	4.0	27.3%	100.0%
Total	183					

Table 5: Results of One-Way Analysis of Variance

	df	*SS*	*MS*	F	*p*
Between Groups	2	3118.8	1559.4	5.61	.004
Within Groups	180	50017.7	277.9		
Total	182	53136.7			

Table 6: Multiple Range Test: Scheffe Procedure

Score	Group	High	Average	Low
86.6%	High			
82.2%	Average			
73.1%	Low	•	•	

• $p < 0.05$ level

Finally, while the analysis of variance indicates a relationship between ALT programs and listening proficiency, the actual effect on individuals is somewhat obscured. Do language programs that make frequent use of ALTs really produce more good listeners and fewer poor listeners? Table 7 shows the relative frequencies of good versus poor listeners in the high versus low utilization groups. A chi-square analysis was used to test for differences. Since the expected frequencies in two cells fell below 10, Yates' correction formula was applied. The results, chi square = 6.05, df = 1, indicate a significant difference at $p < 0.05$. Differences between observed and expected frequencies were greatest in the number of failing students, in both the high and low exposure groups. This may be partly due to the ceiling effect on the listening test. That is, the test was more effective at discriminating between low scorers and average scorers than it was at discriminating between high scorers and average scorers.

Table 7: Frequencies of good listeners versus poor listeners in high and low utilization groups

	Good listeners	Poor listeners
High utilization	26	3
Low utilization	9	8

chi sq. = 6.05, df = 1, $p < 0.05$

Discussion

The analyses allow us to reject the null hypothesis that there is no correlation between the degree to which junior high schools use ALTs and their graduates' listening proficiency. There are a few caveats, how-

ever. First, the homogeneity of the group calls into question the generalizability of the results. The subjects were all male, motivated, high achievers, and very test-wise. The results could be quite different for a group with different attributes. Second, since there was no follow-up test it is not clear whether the subjects' head start in listening was momentary or long lasting.

This study did not attempt to determine specifically what it is about these programs that creates better listeners. Rather, it was assumed from the beginning that programs making frequent use of ALTs may differ in a variety of ways that contribute to better listening. It is, however, worth speculating on what some of those differences might be.

Perhaps the most obvious possibility is that ALTs provide more spoken comprehensible input. Since speaking English is what they do best, lesson plans often have ALTs speak to students about themselves, their countries, their reactions to Japan, etc. Moreover, ALTs at base schools probably establish routines, such as leading certain classroom activities. The input they provide in those circumstances could be more comprehensible because it is contextual and familiar.

Another possibility is that ALTs in the classroom increase learner motivation. Survey data often report favorable attitudes by learners to ALT classes (Miyashita, 1994). Having an opportunity to listen to or speak with a native speakers may induce learners to focus their study on understanding English as opposed to memorizing material for the next exam. It may also trigger other behaviors such as listening to English radio broadcasts, watching English videos, and writing to a foreign pen-pal.

The inclusion of ALTs in a program may lead JTEs to experiment with new teaching methods, although the converse may also be true. The literature suggests that JTEs have looked for creative ways to utilize ALTs as part of regular lessons, have developed communicative lessons as supplements to regular instruction, and, in some instances, have adopted communicative coursebooks published from outside Japan (Iwami, 1992; Kawamura & Sloss, 1992). Schools with a base ALT may be more likely to incorporate full-fledged courses in communicative English. They may also go to the trouble of incorporating a listening component in mid-term and final exams. Communicative methods may filter out to non-ALT classes as well-focussed listening exercises in a reading lesson or communicatively oriented grammar tasks, for example.

Finally, Wada remarked that he felt the most significant achievement of the JET program was its effect on JTEs (Cominos, 1992). With widespread inclusion of native speakers in the education system, more JTEs have come to regard communication in English as central to their work. Schools with

high utilization programs may have JTEs who perceive the need for practical, communicative skills, and their regular contact with native speakers provides them with opportunities for self-improvement. Daily use of English may then induce them to use it more in the classroom, or to try to motivate their students to seek opportunities to use English.

Though listening comprehension is only one aspect of language, it must be regarded as especially important, as it is an essential part of communicative competence. Indeed, it is hard to imagine any meaningful discourse without it. If the goal of foreign language education in Japan is to shift toward using English as a means of international communication, developing listening skills is essential. Nevertheless, the chief concern of most JTEs and their students is passing entrance exams, and as Iwami (1992, p. 21) points out, the norm in most secondary schools is still examination-oriented instruction with emphasis on grammar, reading, and translation.

Aside from the fact that many universities now include listening sections in their entrance exams (Brown and Yamashita, 1995), there are grounds to argue that listening comprehension need not be acquired at the expense of grammatical knowledge or other examination-oriented skills. Ellis (1995) cites a series of studies on comprehension-based methods which demonstrate this (i.e. Winitz, 1981; Asher, Kusudo & de la Torre, 1974; Doughty, 1991). Comprehension methods typically give learners lots of spoken or written input with expansions and clarifications, and nonverbal tasks to demonstrate that they have understood. Studies comparing comprehension methods with methods that rely more on explicit instruction or controlled practice found that learners using a comprehension approach did better on tests of reading and listening comprehension (as one would expect), while doing just as well on tests of speaking, writing, and grammar. Though this study can make no claims regarding the effect of ALT utilization on grammar or other skills, past research indicates that the high utilization group's greater listening proficiency could well have been achieved in conjunction with rather than at the expense of other kinds of knowledge. Further research could investigate whether ALT utilization has any effect, positive or negative, on exam skills or other aspects of language proficiency.

Listening, as comprehensible input, plays a central role in most current theories of second language acquisition (i.e., Krashen, 1981; Long, 1985, Ellis 1994). While not all regard it as a causal factor, most at least view it as a necessary condition for developing an implicit knowledge of the target language. Morley (1984) notes how the role of listening in the classroom has evolved over the past four decades from listening as

a means to teach speaking (providing a model for imitation as in the audiolingual method), to listening as a skill in its own right (listening comprehension tasks), to listening as a means to learn a language (comprehension methods). ALTs are likely used for all of the these purposes, but it seems reasonable to speculate that graduates who can demonstrate greater listening skills have experienced more of the latter two, and have thus come from a more acquisition inducing environment than is found in other language classrooms.

Whether ALTs are "doing something," or are just "a part of something," their presence seems to correlate with a desirable result. It is the author's hope that this finding will induce school systems that are under-utilizing ALTs to reconsider, and, if administrators, JTEs, parents, students, and least not ALTs themselves are not already doing so, to take these positions seriously.

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