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## To Reform or Not to Reform: In-service Training on the JET Program

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*This paper evaluates the in-service training (IST) offered by the Japanese government to non-Japanese assistant language teachers (ALTs) on the JET Program in Japan. Established in 1987, the Program employs approximately 6000 predominantly native English speakers to assist Japanese foreign language teachers at*

*the secondary school level in raising students' English communicative skills. In view of the grand scale of the program, little independent research has focused on the evaluation of its teacher development policy or the effectiveness of the methodologies it employs. The primary aim here is to assess the training program in terms of its pedagogical orientation, and to ultimately offer suggestions that may enhance the training experience for future JET participants.*

【緒言】これは、ジェットプログラムによって日本にやってくるALTが最初に受講する「初任者研修＝in-service training,以下IST」の実態を調査し評価したものである。1987年に始まったこのプログラムは、現在日本の中学、高校における英語のコミュニケーション能力を高めるため、主に日本人教師のアシスタントとして現場に派遣される、英語を母国語とする外国人約6,000人を抱えている。

しかしながらこの壮大なプログラムの教育指導方針や、またその効果についての調査報告はない。そこで本調査においてISTの教育指導方法の見直しや、また今後のジェットプログラム参加者にむけた新たな方法を提案したい。

### The JET program

The Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program was established in 1987, and has steadily grown over the years to become one of the largest exchange programs of its kind in the world. The Council of Local Authorities for International Relations (CLAIR) regulates the Program in conjunction with three Japanese government ministries. Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) come from mostly native English speaking countries and incorporate the majority of participants hired

by CLAIR, which then places ALTs at Junior and Senior High Schools around Japan. The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MEXT) Minister, Takeo Kawamura, however, believes ALTs should serve as “more than just assistants” (2003). The program’s purpose is twofold: to improve English education and promote cultural exchange at the community level, though the former goal was to be achieved primarily through team taught lessons with Japanese Teachers of Language (JTLs). To what extent the initial in-service training (IST) provided by CLAIR prepares ALTs to meet the range and depth required to optimize English teaching is questioned by Crooks (2001), and is hence also the subject of this paper.

## Aims of the study

This study focuses on ALTs in Saitama Prefecture, and is concerned with the following questions:

1. How effective is the IST when compared to current principles of teacher development?
2. How do ALTs perceive the IST?
3. Is reform of the IST necessary? If so, what recommendations can be proposed to enhance the professional development of JET participants?

To answer these questions, this paper follows three approaches: firstly, contrasting the literature on IST with the contents of the initial orientation schedule, namely the Tokyo and Prefectural Post Arrival and Mid-Year blocks; secondly, results from a survey of ALTs’ perceptions of the IST are analyzed; and, finally, recommendations for the program are suggested. When compared to the criteria of what constitutes a current IST, the JET Program’s teacher training failed to meet the

more salient points. Our survey also found that ALTs feel more should be done in order to prepare them before their initial venture into the classroom. More theory and the introduction of EFL specialists at training blocks were found to be welcome additions. Thus it is possible to conclude that ALTs feel reform of the IST is, to a large degree, required.

## Theories of teacher development

Recently, within the fields of teacher development, it is possible to discern a shift from *teacher training* (i.e., preparing trainees with methods and techniques for teaching approaches) to *teacher education* (i.e., emphasizing an awareness of strategies for self-evaluation and theories of teaching ones). Richards (1990) refers to this distinction as micro and macro perspectives respectively, both of which can be used on IST programs. The micro approach mirrors the *training* ideal of teacher development and includes discrete activities designed to foster teaching skills. The macro approach, on the other hand, reflects the *education* ideal of teacher development and involves activities, which promote greater understanding of conceptual knowledge steering the effective second language teacher (Richards, 1990, p.15).

Ellis (1990) defines these two types of preparation practices as *experiential* and *raising awareness*. Classroom teaching, microteaching and peer teaching are examples of the experiential input, whereas lesson plans, samples of teaching materials, video recordings of actual lessons and reading second language teaching books and articles will all raise the teachers’ awareness. Teacher educators may utilize a mixture of lectures, demonstrations, group discussions, individual assignments and workshops, a combination of which is common on current IST programs.

Ellis' (1990) description serves two primary purposes. Firstly, teacher trainers can use the taxonomy as a checklist when organizing a program. Secondly, future teacher trainers or program organizers can be introduced to the range of options available to them. This shift from training to education—both in a *micro* and *macro* and *experiential* and *awareness-raising* sense—need to be incorporated when planning the IST on courses such as the JET Program.

## Theory or practice

Another significant area on an IST is the interface between theory and practice. As Wright (1990) holds, the chief objective of teacher development courses is to achieve equilibrium between theory and practice. According to Ur (1991, p.4) “practice...paradoxically, is not very practical: it is a dead end. Theory on its own is even more useless.” Thus, a teacher with a well-formed understanding of the theoretical principles behind a given pedagogic technique will be in a better position to apply those ideas.

To this end, there is a genuine need to provide ALTs with a basic pedagogic methodological framework in order that they can better understand classroom processes. Another important area to cover is that of learner and teacher roles. Such definitions would offer theoretical support of personal relevance to ALTs who are involved in team-teaching (where role definitions are more elusive).

## Team teaching (TT)

Most of the literature on IST refers to preparation for education majors and/or active/experienced teachers (Larsen-Freeman 1983, Bernhardt and Hammadou 1987, Lange 1990), yet the research on IST for situations such as the JET Program,

where new recruits from non-pedagogical and linguistic backgrounds are thrust into classroom environments, is sparse indeed. Though calls for greater pedagogic support and information assistance through IST programs have been made (Fanselow 1994, Gillis-Furutaka 1994); nonetheless, invariably, inexperienced ALTs are immediately expected to TT with JTLs, as well as design and adapt materials for their students.

According to Sturman (1992) the solution to successful team-teaching is “flexible equality.” This involves “mutual personal and professional respect, adaptability and good humor” (p.145). Such qualities are rather intangible but nevertheless provide a base from which the two teachers in question can develop their teaching relationship. Considering the diverse and problematic nature of TT and the centrality of its role on the program, we can assume that MEXT’s IST will incorporate the issues of TT and materials exploitation to at least some degree.

## Criteria for assessing the IST

The rationale for the following criteria is based on the overall objectives of the *Course of Study* (1999), which stipulates the need to “develop a practical ability to communicate in a foreign language” (1999, p.2). These aims, as stated by MEXT, suggest that a language-learning environment in which motivated communication takes place is highly desirous. The list below is therefore based on the need to provide teachers with knowledge of language and pedagogy as well as the ability to use that knowledge practically. The JET Program’s IST content should include:

- current issues in communicative language teaching, its theory and practice.

- topics of personal development (e.g., action research).
- TT, teacher and learner roles, and designing materials.
- various approaches e.g., communicative, lexical, task-based learning.
- a distribution of experiential (micro) and awareness-raising (macro) activities for the new teacher to attempt.

In the next section, we look at how the orientation program fairs when matched against these criteria.

### **Training on the JET program**

The initial IST for new recruits involves three days in July attending what are essentially cultural seminars. In Tokyo the only item devoted to pedagogy is a video of an ideal class with model students. This training provides a false image of the classrooms most ALTs will be entering in September. Closely following the Tokyo Post Arrival Orientation are two more days in local areas at a prefecture level. Two more days of IST take place in November. The purpose is “to impart knowledge, information, and techniques that are useful for living and working in Japan” (2001 online).

The content of the Saitama Post Arrival Orientation essentially consists of useful tips and ideas on how to prepare for the first lessons and develop a professional relationship with JTLs. There is some useful advice regarding the stages of a lesson and techniques such as modeling and drilling, which no doubt instills confidence and encourages the ALT to focus more on what they will do on their first day at school.

The mid-year conference takes place in November over two days and involves lectures and workshops. In the latter, junior

and senior high ALTs are sensibly divided into groups in order to discuss topics more pertinent to their respective situations. Overall, this IST block meets its goals and provides some helpful advice, as well as opportunities for ALTs to swap teaching ideas, raise questions and share their thoughts, experiences and gripes, all of which is valuable grist for the mill.

That said, each of these IST block’s point of departure is from the practical level, and no attempt whatsoever is made to integrate theory. This leaves the ALTs vulnerable to Ur’s (1991, p.4) paradox of practice, as they may be equipped with “isolated, inert technique(s).” Moreover, most of the presenters at these workshops are ALTs, a custom that has continued throughout the history of the JET scheme’s IST, suggesting a cyclical regurgitation of ideas from former participants. Various current approaches are ignored, as are the topics of action research and teacher/learner roles. There are no experiential or awareness-raising tasks to speak of, such as peer teaching and reviewing genuine teaching materials respectively (Ellis, 1990, p.29). Additionally, the video of a model lesson misrepresents the diverse levels of ability and motivation amongst students. In short, the workshops, although helpful to a certain degree, offer little opportunity to gain experience and knowledge of the foreign language classroom as stipulated by the criteria above. Clearly, more could and should be done. But do ALTs view their IST the same way?

### **The survey**

140 surveys were sent to ALTs at a total of 127 public senior high schools in Saitama prefecture, just north of Tokyo (see Appendix). The questionnaire required respondents to provide some biographic data about themselves and their teaching

experience, and then asked specific questions related to the usefulness of the IST seminars. The survey was based on a Likert scale except for one open-ended question. Preliminary data analysis involved testing the internal reliability of the survey using the Cronbach Alpha coefficient, which proved reliable (.79). The alpha level was set at  $\alpha < .05$ .

## Respondents' profiles

A total of 85 out of the 140 surveys were returned, an encouraging 60.7% response rate. Of interest is the fact that only 19 % of respondents had some type of EFL qualification or teaching experience prior to joining the program. 79% of ALTs enter the classroom having only experienced the initial orientation sessions highlighting the importance of the IST. Although there appears to be a lack of EFL experience amongst the respondents, the enthusiasm and professionalism, which many of the participants bring to Japan and its classrooms, should not be underestimated.

## Results and discussion

One of the significant findings of this survey was that nearly 64.7% ( $p < .05$ ) of ALTs answered negatively to the question of whether they believed they were prepared for the classroom after the Tokyo/Saitama orientation (see Table 1). That nearly two thirds of ALTs felt unready means more must be done to ensure they have a realistic picture of the level of their students and their needs, a clear definition of MEXT's communicative goals and the role the team teachers are expected to play in order to implement those guidelines. In short, as has been pointed out, they need to be better equipped prior to entering the classroom.

**Table 1. ALTs' views on post-arrival orientation**

*Q9: The Tokyo/Saitama Post Arrival Orientation sufficiently prepared me for the classroom.*

	ALT Frequency	Cumulative Frequency	Relative Rate
1. Yes	3	3	3.5
2. Yes, a little	22	25	25.8
3. Don't know	4	29	4.7
4. No, not really	38	67	44.7
5. No	17	84	20.0
Abstentions	1	85	1.1

The mid-year conference was looked on more favorably with a combined 69% stating that the teaching ideas from the material swap workshops were useful. Also, ALTs would like to see more EFL trained professionals presenting at the IST, but to what degree it is practically possible remains unclear. A rather disturbing 55% did not know if they could better implement MEXT's communicative goals. This infers that the IST did not achieve its goal of imparting knowledge that will be useful for working in Japan or that the ALTs are unsure of their roles in the classroom, or a combination of the two. Ultimately, a stronger definition of "communicative language teaching" is required as well as an explanation of MEXT's communicative aims.

A more important finding was the desire for greater theoretical input. ALTs recognize a need to gain grounding in basic EFL methodology, which in their view is not available on the current IST. Over half of the respondents claimed that their knowledge of theory behind teaching had not really improved, while 25% of ALTs remained undecided.

The comments received in the open-ended segment are difficult to quantify but their qualitative richness and diversity are evident. The question asked ALTs to share any comments on the IST, either positive or negative, and/or to suggest changes that they would like to see implemented. The observations received ranged from attacks on the education system to complementing the usefulness of the IST, but the majority of comments were negative in nature, a selected sample of which now follows:

*Too much complaining by ALTs; not enough input from JTLs.*

*Perhaps mock classrooms—get people to try teaching in front of peers/with groups at the seminars.*

*The common complaint between fellow new ALTs is that there was not any basic teaching lesson before we entered the classroom.*

*Being trained by individuals who are themselves untrained is not particularly helpful. More complaining than training went on at the MYC.*

*More attention should be given to practical teaching methods. I think that cultural preparation is helpful but not as necessary.*

*Teaching skills are not stressed at all. To comfort ourselves many ALTs keep repeating: “just remember, we are not teachers.” But I definitely think we should be teachers. The JET Program should either recruit qualified teachers or train those people they do recruit.*

## Further obstacles

Sturman (1992, p.159) found that the “structural impediments of the education system meant that the project simply could not fulfill its potential.” That is, the constraints from textbook and entrance exam requirements coupled with the JTLs’ reluctance to veer from this “processing” course frustrate any contribution made by the Jet Program. Additionally, I have not considered the JET scheme’s conflict of goals (Gorsuch 1999), which involves the Japanese government’s apparent emphasis of the *exchange* element rather than *teaching*. These components are beyond the scope of this paper but their bearing is just as vital as the IST to ensure an effective and progressive scheme, and consequently such controversial areas require more research. The present inquiry, however, directs its attention to the following question: What changes can be implemented on the IST in order to make the path of 21<sup>st</sup> century English education a smooth, profitable and stable one in Japanese secondary schools?

## To reform or not to reform?

Although this research has raised a number of issues, which could be not satisfactorily answered due to the scope, it can nonetheless offer several recommendations, which may improve the pedagogical preparation of ALTs:

1. Provide basic methodological input from a comprehensive teacher-training text, which are modular and thus very flexible. Themes that are particularly applicable to ALTs may include titles such as “using a course book,” “materials development,” “teaching strategies for large monolingual classes” and “successful communicative practice.” Raw data followed by experiential practicum will offer teachers appropriate EFL theory and much needed simulated contact time.

2. Experienced EFL specialists should integrate this reform.

3. Municipal and prefecture boards of education should establish monthly voluntary seminars organized by the teachers. This could offer a platform for teacher directed topics and to release tensions and defuse friction, which may have developed in the team teaching pact, thus freeing the IST for the consolidation of theoretical, practical and reflective aspects of language teaching.

4. Provide a more realistic picture to new recruits of what happens in their future working surroundings.

It is important to keep in mind the positive impact the JET Program has had on Japanese foreign language education. Since its inception in 1987 the number of participants has steadily grown, and TT prevails in many classrooms, another commonplace facet of school life. Whether the program heads in a new, revitalized direction (or stagnates) remains to be seen. To reform or not to reform, that is the question. Yes, unequivocally yes, that is the answer. Whether to teach or to *exchange*, on the other hand, that is an entirely different question.

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## Appendix

### ALTs' perception of IST survey

*Please check a box*

1. Before joining the JET Program my 2<sup>nd</sup> Language teaching experience was

None    under 1 yr    1-2 yrs    3-4 yrs    over 5 yrs

2. Do you have the following qualifications or their equivalents?

TESOL certificate    TESOL diploma    TESOL masters    No

3. In terms of teaching preparation the Mid Year Conference (MYC) lectures were:

Most Useful    Useful    Fairly Useful    Not so Useful    Not Useful

4. In terms of teaching preparation the MYC workshops were

Most Useful    Useful    Fairly Useful    Not so Useful    Not Useful

5. I found the teaching ideas at the MYC

Most Useful    Useful    Fairly Useful    Not so Useful    Not Useful

6. The teaching discussions at the MYC were

Most Useful    Useful    Fairly Useful    Not so Useful    Not Useful

7. I would like more theoretical input on the IST

Yes a bit    Yes    I don't know    No not really    No



8. I would like more EFL specialists presenting on the IST

- Yes a bit       Yes       I don't know       No not really       No

9. Tokyo/Saitama Orientation sufficiently prepared me for the Japanese classroom

- Yes a bit       Yes       I don't know       No not really       No

10. After the MYC I could better implement MEXT's communicative goals

- Yes a bit       Yes       I don't know       No not really       No

11. The MYC improved my knowledge of teaching theory

- Yes a bit       Yes       I don't know       No not really       No

12. Gender:    Male            Female

13. Age:        20-25      26-30      31-35      over 35

14. Nationality:

15. Please share any comments/suggestions (positive or negative) on the in-service training of ALTs. (Please use extra paper if necessary).