

Barriers to Effective Team Teaching with ALTs

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Assistant language teachers (ALTs) in Japan have played a unique and important role in English education in public schools since the launch of the Japan Exchange and Teaching Program in 1987. After the introduction of foreign language activities for the 5th and 6th grades of elementary school in 2011, ALTs have become a significant presence in both secondary and elementary schools. A large-scale study, based on questionnaires collected from 1,545 ALTs teaching in elementary and junior high schools, highlighted the varied backgrounds of ALTs and the differing conditions they face in English classrooms. Issues that hinder effective teaching by ALTs are also discussed. Considering these barriers to effective team teaching at the elementary and junior high school level, we conclude with recommendations regarding the future of ALTs in Japan.

ALTは日本における英語教育の担い手として1987年のJETプログラム設立以来、独特かつ重要な役割を果たしてきた。2011年より小学校高学年において「外国語活動」が導入されたのを受けてALTの果たす役割は中等教育、初等教育どちらにおいても顕著である。本論では1545人の小学校と中学校で教えるALTに対して行った大規模調査の結果をもとに、調査から導き出されたALTの多様な属性と、小学校と中学校の教室内でのALTの指導形態と役割における差異に焦点を当てる。ALTが日本人教員とのチームティーチングによって、より効果的に小・中学校での英語教育に携わる為にはどのような方策が必要か考察し、提案する。

Reform of English education in Japan is an ongoing issue. In 2014, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) published *Five Recommendations on the English Education Reform Plan Responding to the Rapid Globalization* (MEXT, 2014c). The government's aim is to have assistant language teachers (ALTs) in all elementary schools by 2019, and also to promote the use of ALTs in junior and senior high schools in order to increase opportunities for students to use English in practical situations, such as conversation, presentations, and discussion.

ALTs have been teaching in Japan for over 50 years. According to Wada (1987), the first ALTs were invited from the United States by the Japanese government with the cooperation of the Japan-US Educational Commission (Fulbright Japan) in 1952. The Fulbright English Teachers Program was taken over by the Mombusho English Fellows Program and the British English Teacher Scheme Program in 1976, and these two programs were eventually integrated into the JET program.

MEXT (2016b) reported that 15,432 ALTs taught in Japanese public schools in 2013. Of these teachers, 6,325 taught in elementary schools and 3,084 taught in junior high

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schools (p. 73). The Japan Exchange and Teaching Program (JET) hired 26.5% of the ALTs; others were hired by private companies, boards of education, and schools. Compared to the previous year, the number of ALTs had increased by approximately 3,000. This seems to indicate progress, but based on a MEXT (2014a) survey there are 20,601 elementary schools in Japan. If the government wants to station an ALT in every elementary school, thousands more are needed.

Studies of how ALTs have been involved in Japanese English education are quite limited. McConnell (2000) conducted a qualitative study of the first 10 years of the JET program from the perspective of culture clash. Tajino and Tajino (2000) suggested a JTE-ALT team “learning” relationship to promote active language learning among students. Miyazato (2009) focused on JTE-ALT team-teaching relationships, revealing that the ALT is more likely to be the main teacher in class. Miyazato also found that target-language ability surpassed any other qualification, which caused unequal role sharing in team teaching. Houghton and Rivers (2013) published an edited collection on the situation of ALTs in Japan, which revealed the difficulties ALTs face in their workplace as native speakers of the target language. However, studies of ALTs based on quantitative data are scarce. Currently it is not easy to provide an overall portrait of ALTs in Japan.

In 2012, joint research on ALTs in Japan began at Sophia University. Questionnaires for elementary, junior high, and high school ALTs were created and an online survey was conducted nationwide. We will report on some key findings from the elementary and junior high portions of the survey that reveal various barriers to effective team teaching. An overview of ALT demographics is followed by an outline of the current conditions ALTs face in the classroom. Issues that hinder ALT effectiveness in the classroom will be introduced in relation to the current situation of Japanese Teachers of English (JTEs). The findings and implications of this study should serve as a helpful resource for future ALT training and contribute to the effective utilization of ALTs’ skills and expertise as native speakers of English.

Data Collection

Data collection for the survey was carried out from July 2013 to February 2014 via *Survey Monkey*, an online survey. The research team contacted local boards of education in order to facilitate greater awareness of the survey. ALTs from all over Japan, who had been hired through the JET Program and private dispatch companies, answered online. Data presented in this paper are from elementary and junior high school ALTs, totaling 1,545 respondents, with 655 of them mainly teaching in elementary school and 890 in junior high school. ALTs teaching in more than one type of school were asked to respond

only for their main workplace. Questions were both multiple choice and open ended. This gave researchers the chance to analyze data from both quantitative and qualitative perspectives. In this paper we will highlight details in the survey that pertain to barriers that prevent effective team teaching. The relevant questions from the surveys, which totaled 60 questions each, are presented in the Appendix. An interim report published online by Yoshida, Kano, Izumi, and Shimizu (2015) contains a thorough overview of the data collected.

Results

The results are presented in three sections. The first section summarizes the demographic differences between elementary and junior high ALTs who responded to the survey. The second analyzes the relationship between ALTs’ satisfaction with their classroom roles, the amount of responsibility allotted to them for class preparation and the time spent addressing students in class as a whole. The final section focuses on issues that hinder effective teaching, with quotes from ALTs who responded to an open-ended question regarding any comments they had about working with JTEs. These data suggest that the causes of the barriers to effective teaching are substantially different between elementary and junior high school ALTs.

ALT Demographics

Demographic data on the elementary and junior high school ALTs who responded to the survey showed some distinct differences along with some areas that were very similar. Age range was quite similar in that 63% of elementary school ALTs and 66% of junior high ALTs fell within the age bracket of 25 to 40. Although more males worked at both levels of education, there was a higher percentage of females in elementary school (45%) than in junior high school (38%). Another difference was nationality: Americans made up less than half of the ALTs teaching in elementary school (47%) but well over half those in junior high school (62%). Although most other ALTs came from inner-circle countries such as Great Britain, Canada, and Australia, the second largest nationality in elementary school was Filipino (15%). In short, there were substantial differences in gender and nationality between elementary and junior high school ALTs.

Differences between elementary and junior high ALTs also included years of residency in Japan and Japanese proficiency. Nearly 40% of junior high ALTs had resided in Japan less than 3 years, but 17% of elementary ALTs had lived in Japan more than 10 years. These numbers coincide with Japanese proficiency levels in that a majority of elementary

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ALTs considered themselves advanced learners of Japanese, but nearly half of junior high ALTs considered themselves intermediate-level learners. These differences may very well be reflective of JTE English proficiency and ALT role allotment in elementary and junior high schools, which will be discussed later in the paper.

ALT Working Conditions

Teaching Configuration

We categorized ALT teaching configurations in English classrooms into five combinations. In “solo teaching” the whole class is taught by an ALT. “Collaborative team teaching” refers to when the ALT and JTE create lessons together, such as planning activities and interacting with each other. “Non-collaborative co-teaching” is when the two teachers are in the classroom, but preparation and teaching are conducted separately.

Table 1. ALT Reported Teaching Configurations

Configuration	Elementary	Junior high
Solo teaching	164 (34%)	49 (7%)
Collaborative team teaching	83 (17%)	284 (39%)
Non-collaborative co-teaching	8 (2%)	87 (12%)
Combination of solo and collaborative team teaching	167 (34%)	190 (26%)
Combination of solo and non-collaborative co-teaching	43 (9%)	66 (9%)
Others	22 (4%)	51 (7%)

Note. Elementary $n = 487$, junior high $n = 727$.

Table 1 shows that solo teaching was the most common teaching configuration in elementary school, while collaborative team teaching was preferred in junior high school. Solo teaching and both solo and collaborative team teaching accounted for approximately 70% of the configurations reported in elementary school. On the other hand, in junior high school, solo teaching and both solo and collaborative team teaching together made up 33%, only half of that in elementary school. Results show that elementary school ALTs were given more responsibility within the classroom, which is consistent with the following reports on class preparation.

ALT's Responsibility in Class Preparation

To the question, “How much responsibility is given to you for the preparation of classes?” a total of 1,275 ALTs (elementary $n = 512$, junior high $n = 763$) replied, using a 5-point scale of 1 (*none*) to 5 (*all*). As Table 2 shows, a clear contrast between the two school types can be seen. More than half of the elementary school ALTs answered that they prepared everything on their own, but 70% of junior high ALTs answered that their responsibility was for half or less than half of the lesson.

Table 2. ALT Reported Degree of Responsibility for Class Preparation

Amount of responsibility	Elementary	Junior high
None	10 (2%)	67 (9%)
A little	42 (8%)	232 (30%)
About half	45 (9%)	239 (31%)
More than half	127 (25%)	121 (16%)
All	288 (56%)	104 (14%)

Note. Elementary $n = 512$, junior high $n = 763$.

ALT Job Satisfaction

To the question “How strongly do you feel that your strengths are being utilized in your school?” the mean value of the elementary group was 3.43, while the degree of satisfaction declined in the junior high group, with the mean value slightly above 3 ($M = 3.09$). The lower mean value of the degree of satisfaction and Mann-Whitney U test results (Mann-Whitney $U = 241897.0$, $p < 0.01$) revealed that there was a significant difference between elementary and junior high school ALTs’ job satisfaction (see Table 3).

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Table 3. ALTs' Sense of Their Strengths Being Utilized

Reported use of strengths	Elementary	Junior high
Not at all	8 (2%)	32 (4%)
A little	96 (18%)	168 (22%)
Fairly strongly	159 (31%)	324 (42%)
Strongly	179 (34%)	182 (24%)
Very strongly	80 (15%)	58 (8%)

Note. Elementary $n = 522$, junior high $n = 764$.

Issues That Hinder Effective Teaching by ALTs

The quantitative data in the previous section have revealed notable differences between elementary and junior high school ALTs in terms of the degree of responsibility for class preparation and job satisfaction as teachers. Now we turn to what ALTs think is problematic or hinders effective teaching in the current situation. Regarding issues between JTEs and ALTs, the answers to the question “What problems do you face with JTEs?” are presented in Table 4. To this question ALTs were asked to choose all that applied. A choice of “If others, please specify” was given, and ALTs were able to type in free comments.

Table 4. Major Problems ALTs Report Facing With JTEs

Reported problem	Elementary	Junior high
JTEs rarely talk to you	91 (44%)	162 (43%)
JTEs don't understand English	99 (47%)	119 (32%)
JTEs rarely speak English	101 (48%)	109 (29%)
JTEs don't respect your ideas	36 (17%)	101 (27%)
JTEs don't let you participate in lesson planning	30 (14%)	176 (47%)
JTEs don't try to utilize your advantages as an ALT	65 (31%)	265 (71%)

Note. Elementary $n = 209$, junior high $n = 373$; more than one response was possible.

The results reveal that the issues ALTs reported facing in teaching were qualitatively different in elementary and junior high school. In elementary school, the major issues were related to communication with JTEs. On the other hand, among junior high school ALTs, dissatisfaction with utilization and participation in planning were the main issues. These parallel the results of the previous section on current ALT working conditions, which indicated that junior high ALTs were given less freedom and responsibility than elementary ALTs and were less satisfied.

Discussion

Elementary School

A major issue that hinders effective teaching by ALTs in elementary school is JTEs' limited English proficiency. A MEXT (2015) study of JTEs' English proficiency reported that merely 5% of elementary school teachers possessed an English teaching license, and only 1% of JTEs in elementary school met the standard of English qualifications, which include a pre-first grade on the Eiken (Test in Practical English Proficiency) test.

Interestingly, elementary school ALTs reported less frustration with their involvement in lessons and planning. Many perceived that their strengths as ALTs were utilized and their ideas were respected by JTEs, who allowed them to participate in lesson planning as well as actual teaching. As mentioned in the previous section, 81% of elementary school ALTs were in charge of all or more than half of class preparation. Likely due to their low English proficiency, JTEs in elementary school may tend to delegate most of the responsibility for planning and teaching to ALTs. Ironically, this situation results in a higher sense of utilization of skills and satisfaction among elementary school ALTs.

However, without sufficient communication and feedback, ALTs' roles in teaching can be easily limited or restricted. JTEs' lack of English proficiency may limit effective collaboration. The following ALT comment is representative of what many ALTs wrote on the survey:

There is definitely a bit of a language and cultural barrier. I speak a bit of Japanese, however, much is still lost in translation when planning lessons or discussing ideas. I wish I could encourage more of a discussion of ideas, rather than having most teachers simply approve of my ideas.

The data also imply that ALTs teaching in elementary school had higher Japanese proficiency and more experience living in Japan. One ALT gave a possible explanation for this:

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I think the biggest problem is (at elementary school here, at least) that nobody speaks English. I am intermediate in Japanese, so this doesn't pose a problem for me . . . but I think it would create problems with non-Japanese speaking ALTs.

Moreover, many ALTs felt isolated because they were unable to communicate in English:

The homeroom teachers that I do teach English with don't really understand or speak English, and will rarely make the effort to speak to me outside of class or at all.

Another reason for insufficient communication was the workload of JTEs. Japanese teachers are well known for their overwhelming workload. This will be discussed in the junior high school section in detail, but here is one comment that illustrates the situation:

It would be nice if we could do more collaborative lessons together but it's near impossible, because the JTEs are so busy at school. I find it easier to just do everything myself and it also makes one less thing for them to have to worry about.

Junior High School

According to MEXT (2015), the English level of junior high JTEs has shown substantial progress. Thirty percent have met or surpassed the standard of Eiken test pre-first grade, TOEFL iBT 80, or TOEIC 730, which is a big difference when compared to the elementary school teachers. From this metric, it would appear that the barrier to effective team teaching lies somewhere other than JTE English proficiency.

Judging from the top three answer categories shown in Table 4, the barriers derived more from lack of in-class utilization of ALTs' expertise and insufficient communication. One ALT's comment clearly illustrates the current situation of English education in Japan:

Each JTE is different. Some JTEs, however, don't encourage verbal communication from students. This means there is a very small role that the ALT can play in the classroom.

There was a significant number of ALTs who took the survey who reported they had collaborative relationships with JTEs and felt satisfied with the situation. More than half felt that their strengths were being utilized. However, some JTEs were still reluctant to initiate communicative language teaching in collaboration with ALTs, leaving the ALTs unable to understand their roles in the classroom:

One JTE never schedules my classes, or if they do, they don't tell me or have me prepare anything. I just show up and have no idea what the class is doing. I'm used only as a tape recorder and the JTE limits interactions with me as much as possible. I don't feel like I have a purpose in their classes.

Lack of communication comes not only from low English proficiency of JTEs or unwillingness to communicate. Some of the ALTs made comments on how busy the JTEs were, and that it was actually difficult for the two teachers to find time for satisfactory communication in order to conduct an effective and interactive lesson. One wrote,

All of my JTEs are so busy and rushed that there's never enough time to discuss the lesson in detail. Sometimes all I'm given is a page number and asked to create a lesson. Without any background knowledge (i.e., if it's a brand new topic or if it's review), it's sometimes difficult to prepare properly. I wish there was a set time to talk and discuss class goals, etc.

A survey by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2014) reported that Japanese junior high school teachers spent 54 hours per week working, while teachers in other countries averaged 38 hours per week. Moreover, Japanese teachers had to spend two thirds of their working time on tasks other than teaching. Recruit Management Solutions (2006) were contracted by MEXT to conduct a study of public elementary and junior high school teachers. They found that 85.3% ($n = 6,877$) said they were under strain because they had to work at school after their working hours, and 71.6% ($n = 5,769$) had to take work back home.

Conclusion and Implications

As stated earlier, the number of respondents totaled 1,545, which is roughly 10% of all ALTs that were employed during the period in which the survey was conducted. That being said, the results indicate that the barriers to effective team teaching were quite different in elementary and junior high school. While some may previously have assumed that the majority of ALTs are male and from the USA or the UK, this study revealed a variety of backgrounds among ALTs in Japan. Furthermore, the backgrounds of the ALTs who responded to the questionnaire were quite different in elementary and junior high school. In elementary school there were more female ALTs than in junior high school, with an increasing number of non-inner circle English speakers. Fifteen percent of ALTs in elementary school were Filipino, but in junior high school they were of a far smaller percentage.

In addition, the questionnaire results suggest that the conditions for ALTs in elementary and junior high schools were quite different. Elementary school ALTs bore most of

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the responsibility for class preparation as well as conducting the classes. In contrast, ALTs in junior high school faced a situation in which they were often not able to contribute to classroom preparation or interaction. This disparity may have several causes, one of which in elementary school may be the lack of teacher training and English proficiency of Japanese teachers. At the time of this survey, elementary school teachers were not required to take any mandatory courses related to English or English teaching when they acquired their teacher's licenses.

After the implementation of English activities in elementary school, efforts have been made to train teachers (MEXT, 2014b) but with only partial success at best. With the burden of teaching multiple subjects to grades 1 to 6, it is no wonder that teachers lack the necessary time and skill to prepare for English classes.

On the other hand, junior high school teachers have to be certified in English, so problems with communication are less likely to happen. However, junior high teachers of English are under pressure to prepare students for high school entrance exams. Communicative English classes with substantial involvement of the ALT are often regarded as less effective for students to pass such exams, thus leaving little room for active ALT participation. Elementary school teachers have to ask a lot of ALTs, but junior high school teachers may feel rather reluctant to involve ALTs in classroom activities. Thus, the disparity of class preparation and interaction between elementary school and junior high school ALTs reflects different causes of barriers to effective team teaching.

Taking these findings into consideration, those involved in ALT training and dispatch will have to recognize the starkly different situations of the two types of schools and recalibrate expectations. It is often thought that younger teachers should teach younger students. However, given the fact that more responsibility is given to elementary school ALTs, perhaps it would be in Japan's (and the ALTs') best interest to employ more mature and experienced ALTs at the elementary school level. Also, it is increasingly important for teachers and educators to consider who should have the primary responsibility in the classroom. It must be clearly stated who the facilitator is and who the assistant is in English teaching. This is perhaps one way to enable smoother interactions and greater mutual satisfaction among ALTs and JTEs. To create better English classrooms with more meaningful collaboration, JTEs may need to undergo team-teaching training together with ALTs.

In addition to the rather short and limited training of ALTs (Yoshida et al., 2015), our study also revealed that a lack of communication between ALTs and JTEs was a barrier to effective teaching. This may have come not only from the insufficient English proficiency of JTEs or their reluctance to speak to ALTs, but also, and to a greater extent, from pure lack of time. JTEs are extremely busy. In order for team teaching to be successful, it is impera-

tive that JTEs be given time for training and preparation with ALTs. If JTEs were released from other duties, they would have time to take English language training and team-teaching workshops together with ALTs. In order to change the situation, improvement of JTEs' English proficiency is a matter of urgent need. Training for both ALTs and JTEs is sorely needed for better English education in Japan with the current system in place.

For elementary schools specifically, improving the English proficiency of homeroom teachers is both urgent and problematic. Considering the implications of our findings, other necessary measures should immediately be taken. Elementary schools in Japan need the help of ALTs, but to make the most of their teaching skills and abilities, more support from nontraditional sources should be directed towards the elementary school English teaching context.

One solution in the meantime is a new scheme to employ skilled Japanese teachers of English without elementary school teaching licenses as English coordinators at elementary schools. This has been suggested by Kano, Ozeki, Yasu, and Suga (2015). Significantly, the latest survey by MEXT (2016a) revealed that among the 11,439 ALTs in elementary school, the category of "other ALTs" numbered 4,737. Among these are local Japanese teachers of English hired as assistant language teachers. This number has tripled since 2014 and currently amounts to over 40 percent of the total number of ALTs.

Both in elementary and junior high school, ALTs are doing their best to help improve the situation. The authors were surprised at the number of free comments given by the ALTs, but this may come from the fact that respondents volunteered to take part, rather than having been chosen to complete the survey. Still, reading the comments, we were convinced that these ALTs were seriously and eagerly putting forth their greatest effort in positively contributing to English education at the schools where they were teaching.

It is highly recommended that programs to facilitate smoother communication between ALTs and JTEs, effective and sufficient training programs, and utilization of external human resources for support in schools be implemented immediately to improve the current state of English education in Japan.

Bio Data

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Appendix

Selected Questions from Junior High School ALT Questionnaire ALT Expectations

- How strongly do you feel that your strengths are being utilized in your school?

(a) Not at all	(d) Strongly
(b) A little	(e) Very strongly
(c) Fairly strongly	

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Lesson Planning

1. How much responsibility is given to you for the preparation of classes?

(a) None	(d) More than half
(b) A little	(e) All
(c) About half	

2. What do you pay most attention to in planning your English lessons? Select all that apply.

(a) New vocabulary to introduce	
(b) New grammar to introduce	
(c) Activities / tasks to do	
(d) How to make the lesson fun	
(e) How to develop the topic / content	
(f) Where students may make mistakes	
(g) How to incorporate the culture of English-speaking world	
(h) If others, please specify:	

3. How do you wish to contribute to lesson planning with JTEs (Japanese Teachers of English) if you have a chance to do collaborative team teaching? Select all that apply.

(a) Set goals of the lesson	(d) Propose discussion topics for class
(b) Support the use of English	(e) Propose activities / tasks for class
(c) Share your culture	(f) If others, please specify:

ALT-JTE Interaction

1. How often do you interact with JTEs during class?

(a) Never	(d) Often
(b) Rarely	(e) Very often
(c) Sometimes	

2. How often do you interact with JTEs outside of class?

(a) Never	(d) Often
(b) Rarely	(e) Very often
(c) Sometimes	

3. How often do you speak with JTEs in English?

(a) Never	(d) Often
(b) Rarely	(e) Very often
(c) Sometimes	

4. How do you feel about the amount of interaction you currently have with JTEs?

(a) Not enough at all	(d) More than enough
(b) Not enough	(e) Too much
(c) Adequate	

5. Do you face any problems with JTEs?

(a) Yes	(b) No
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6. What problems do you face with JTEs? Select all that apply.

(a) JTEs rarely talk to you	
(b) JTEs don't understand English	
(c) JTEs rarely speak English	
(d) JTEs don't respect your ideas	
(e) JTEs don't let you participate in lesson planning	
(f) JTEs don't try to utilize your advantages as an ALT	
(g) If others, please specify:	

7. Please write freely any comments you have about your relationship with JTEs.

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ALT Background

1. How old are you?

- (a) 18-24
- (b) 25-30
- (c) 31-40
- (d) 41-50
- (e) 51-60
- (f) Over 60

2. What is your gender?

- (a) Male
- (b) Female

3. How many combined years have you lived in Japan?

- (a) Less than 1 year
- (b) 1-3 years
- (c) 3-6 years
- (d) 6-10 years
- (e) More than 10 years

4. How many combined years have you worked as an ALT?

- (a) Less than 1 year
- (b) 1-3 years
- (c) 3-6 years
- (d) 6-10 years
- (e) More than 10 years

5. What is your country of origin?

6. What is (are) your native language(s)?

7. What is your approximate level of Japanese?

- (a) None
- (b) Beginner
- (c) Intermediate
- (d) Advanced
- (e) Native-like

8. What certificates or qualifications, if any, have you acquired related to English teaching? Select all that apply.

- (a) TESOL (ESOL)
- (b) Celta
- (c) 4-year education degree
- (d) Teacher's license
- (e) If others, please specify:

9. What classes have you been teaching as an ALT? Please list all the courses you have been teaching.

10. What is the main style of teaching as an ALT for you?

- (a) Solo teaching
- (b) Collaborative (i.e., interactive) team teaching with a JTE
- (c) Non-collaborative (i.e., role divided by time / activity) co-teaching with a JTE
- (d) Both solo teaching and collaborative team teaching depending on the class
- (e) Both solo teaching and non-collaborative co-teaching depending on the class
- (f) If others, please specify:

11. What is your current employment status?

- (a) Hired under the JET program
- (b) Hired by a private company
- (c) Directly hired by the board of education or by the school
- (d) If others, please specify:

12. If you have further comments on any aspects of your work as an ALT, please write below.