

Homogenous Representations, Diverse Realities: Assistant Language Teachers at Elementary Schools

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As of 2020, foreign language as a subject has become compulsory for upper grades in Japanese elementary schools, and MEXT recommends the use of assistant language teachers (ALTs) in foreign language classes. While ALTs represent diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, MEXT documents for Japanese teachers portray them as homogenous monolingual native speakers of English. To better understand the linguistic repertoires of ALTs, this study investigates the languages ALTs know. The findings suggest that, contrary to MEXT portrayals, most ALTs have ability in at least one language other than English. With reference to the goals of foreign language education, this paper argues that MEXT should more accurately represent the diversity of ALTs in their literature and actively promote the inclusion of their other languages in classroom practice.

2020年度より、日本の小学校高学年には教科としての外国語が必修化された。文部科学省は外国語の授業における外国語指導助手 (Assistant Language Teachers: ALTs) の積極的な導入を勧めている。多くのALTが様々な言語や文化的背景を持っているにもかかわらず、文部科学省の教員向け資料における記述の多くは、未だにALTをモノリンガルの英語母語話者としてのみ想定している。ALTの運用可能な言語について調査した先行研究が不足しているため、本研究は、小学校勤務のALTを対象に、使用言語に関するアンケート調査を実施した。結果として、ALTのほとんどが英語以外に1つ以上の言語を使用できることが判明した。本論文は、外国語科目の目標に照らして、文部科学省のALTに関する資料の更新の必要性を示すとともに、ALTの持つ英語以外の言語の知識をも外国語の授業に取り入れることの重要性を主張する。

As of April 2020, foreign language as a subject has become compulsory for fifth- and sixth-grade elementary school students, and foreign language activities have been brought forward to the third and fourth grades. The introduction of foreign languages was hastily decided, and many schools remain under-equipped to teach them (Terasawa, 2017). To compensate, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) recommends using assistant language teachers, or ALTs (MEXT, 2013; 2017a, 2017b).

ALTs have traditionally been represented in policy documents as (monolingual) native English speakers. However, previous research suggests that ALTs are a lot more diverse than such representations suggest. Around 30% of elementary school ALTs report

having a native language other than English, and a similar number come from countries outside the traditional Anglosphere (Sophia University, 2017).

As yet, no study has examined the full linguistic repertoires of ALTs. This demographic study therefore seeks to determine the linguistic resources of ALTs and consider how they might be applied to foreign language education in elementary schools.

Goals of Foreign Language Education

Although foreign language education in Japanese elementary schools came about in response to government rhetoric that regarded English as an essential element of globalization, there was resistance within MEXT to adopting early English education as a full subject, which resulted in foreign language activities being introduced in 2011 (Terasawa, 2019). Foreign language activities were to be an unevaluated subject in which students would engage in speaking and listening activities to familiarize themselves with foreign languages. Policy, however, continued to advocate for early English education (see, for instance, the *Plan for English Education Reform in Response to Globalization*, MEXT, 2013). Foreign language is now a full subject, although remnants of resistance to early English education are visible in current MEXT documents. While in the Course of Study, both foreign language as a subject and foreign language activities directives state that the target language to be taught is, “in principle, English” (MEXT, 2017b, p. 164, translation by the author), the commentary to the Course of Study emphasizes the need for awareness of other languages and cultures:

Many people in the world speak languages other than English. Therefore, in order to understand the people in the world, it is important to take into account the daily lives of people who use languages other than English (MEXT, 2017c, p. 134, translation by the author).

Thus, while much of the literature and government documents refer to early English education, it is clear that MEXT did not intend for foreign language to be English *only*. This can be seen in the

goals of the foreign language subject, which emphasize development of “foundational qualities and competences necessary to attempt communication” (MEXT, 2017b, p.156, translation by the author), rather than knowledge of specific languages themselves.

Representations of ALTs

Despite MEXT’s recognition of other languages, Japanese-language documents curiously portray ALTs as homogeneous monolingual native speakers of English. While the only reference to ALTs in the Course of Study is that HRTs should “devise lessons with the help of *native speakers*” (MEXT, 2017b, p.162, translation and emphasis by the author), the 2017 *Guidebook for Foreign Languages Activities and Foreign Language*, a MEXT resource for HRTs, gives more detail:

Table 1

Expected Roles of Homeroom Teachers (HRTs) and Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) in Team-Taught Elementary Classes (MEXT, 2017a, pp.109–110, translation by the author)

HRTs’ expected roles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Observe students’ understanding while progressing the lessons • Alongside the ALT, demonstrate how to conduct activities • Pick up on students’ comments and noticing, and have the ALT reply with easy English • Make the ALT repeat, or adjust speed of, remarks in English for the students to listen to • Conduct shared evaluation, and in reflective tasks, praise the students’ noticing
ALTs’ expected roles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alongside the HRT, demonstrate how to conduct activities • Introducing life and culture of their home country relevant to the current unit, and learn about the students’ country through interaction • Pick up on students’ comments and noticing directly, or with the assistance of the HRT, and reply with easy English and gestures • Repeat and have students listen to the correct native-speaker pronunciation • Engage in conversation with the students using English they have learned • Conduct shared evaluation, and in reflective tasks, praise the students’ skills

According to the guidebook, use of a foreign language (English) is primarily a role of ALTs, who are referred to as native speakers. Furthermore, throughout the guidebook the HRT is instructed to clarify ALTs’ statements by using Japanese, implying that ALTs are monolingual. No other foreign languages are mentioned. It is possible that such representations are partially responsible for the continued use of ALTs as ‘human tape-recorders’ simply providing model English pronunciations, resulting in a feeling amongst many ALTs that they are underutilized (Kano & Ozeki, 2018).

Given the global predominance of English in a number of fields, it is reasonable for educational policy to emphasize that particular language. Nevertheless, English is not the only global language, and where it is prominent, is often intertwined with local and other languages (see, for instance, Forlot, 2018). If early foreign language education has been introduced as a response to globalization, and if MEXT policy recognizes the importance of other languages, ALTs’ other languages should also be recognized and capitalized upon.

Capitalizing on Linguistic Resources

In advocating for the inclusion of ALTs’ other languages, I do not suggest that each should be taken up as a target language for acquisition or given individual recognition in the curriculum. However, from a plurilingual view of linguistic competence, they may be incorporated into classes to help achieve the primary goal of the foreign language subjects as stated by MEXT; developing the foundational qualities and competences necessary for communication¹.

Plurilingual education stands in opposition to traditional language teaching, which has often treated knowledge from other languages as interferences, rather than aids to construction of new linguistic knowledge, or incomplete knowledge of the target language with the (somewhat pejorative) term *semilingualism* (see, for instance, Stroud, 2004). Understanding that bilinguals apply their languages for specific, and differing, purposes, and therefore very rarely have equal or balanced knowledge across their languages (Grosjean, 1989), plurilingual education takes a positive view of partial knowledge of languages as valuable, forming part of what is called “linguistic capital,” a set of linguistic assets that are employed according to the situation and the interlocutor (Coste et al., 2009, p. 20).

The plurilingual viewpoint also values knowledge *about* languages as well as knowledge *of specific* languages. Several pluralistic approaches to language

teaching have been developed based on the concept of plurilingual competence, including *Awakening to Languages* (Oyama, 2016), which makes use of multiple language varieties simultaneously. Some of the characteristics of this approach are as follows:

- a. Using multiple languages simultaneously: Through exposure to, examination and comparison of multiple languages, and the building of hypotheses about language form and function, learners acquire the skills necessary to pursue a target language (for instance, English).
- b. Using languages that the ALTs (or children in the classroom) know: Through active take-up and inclusion of input from ALTs (or children) about languages that they know, their experiences and knowledge can be given fuller recognition in the classroom.
- c. Teacher as facilitator: It is not necessary for teachers to have a perfect knowledge of the languages introduced, but rather work together with their students to observe and hypothesize, and to promote the holistic study of language (adapted from Oyama & Pearce, 2019).

If one understands what MEXT calls the foundational qualities and competences necessary for communication as resonating with the concepts of plurilingual and pluricultural competence, then capitalizing upon ALTs' other languages may help to foster such competences in students. Incorporating ALTs' full linguistic repertoires can be an aid to the acquisition of a specific target language (English), while also conveying a more accurate representation of foreign language users (ALTs), one that recognizes them as speakers of languages other than English. Before such theory can influence policy documents on ALTs, however, it is necessary to establish the linguistic resources ALTs have at their disposal.

The Current Study

Purpose

The purposes of this demographic study were to uncover the different languages that ALTs have access to and to establish whether ALTs employ these languages in their lessons, as many may have access to languages other than English.

Participants

The participants in this study were 161 elementary-school ALTs, 114 females, 44 males, and 1 non-binary (2 preferred not to say). 88.2% (n=142)

were currently employed as ALTs at the time of the study². Participants were recruited via personal connections, including local boards of education, and through Facebook groups for ALTs employed by dispatch companies³. Perhaps due to the method of data collection, JET Programme participants are overrepresented in the data at 49% (see Table 2, below), whereas JET ALTs only account for roughly a quarter of the population (MEXT, 2016). As the primary goal of this research was to gain a general idea of ALTs' linguistic repertoires this discrepancy was considered acceptable⁴.

Table 2
Employment types of ALTs surveyed

Type of Employment	Number (Percentage)
Hired by a private/dispatch company	53 (33%)
Directly hired by board of education or by school	23 (14%)
Recruited under the JET Programme	79 (49%)
Other	6 (4%)
Total	161 (100%)

Questionnaire

The 14-item questionnaire was prepared in English and Japanese (see Appendix for the English version) and conducted between February and March 2020 via a Google form. The respondents were told that participation was voluntary, data collected was anonymous, and that responses could be retracted at any time. An open-ended question was included, in which any other relevant information could be volunteered, to which 47 responded. Results relevant to linguistic repertoires will be explored below.

Results

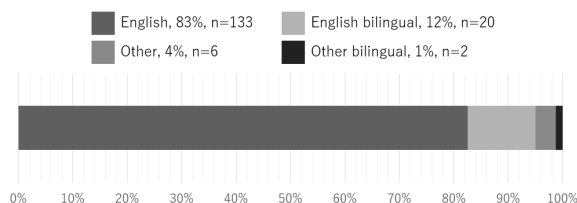
Native Languages

English was the native language of 95% of respondents (n=153), including 20 native bilinguals (English + another language). This number differs somewhat from earlier data from a survey conducted at Sophia University, in which around 30% of respondents reported native languages other than English (2017). This discrepancy may be due to differences in sampling methods, and because the previous study only reported discrete languages and

did not discriminate between bilingual and monolingual native speakers.

Figure 1

ALTs' native languages

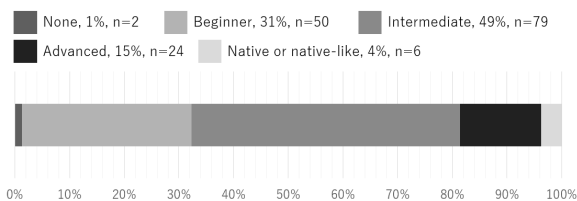


Japanese and Additional Languages

Despite the apparently lower figure of other native languages, results regarding Japanese ability were consistent with those reported in the Sophia University (2017) study. Most respondents (n=159) reported some degree of Japanese ability (Figure 2).

Figure 2

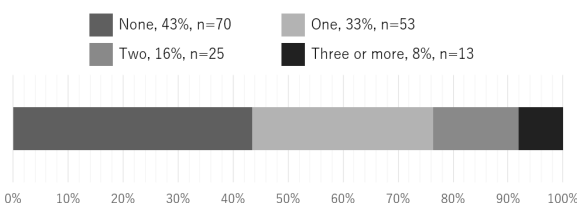
ALTs' Japanese ability



Only 43% (n=70) reported knowing no other language than Japanese and English. Regarding ALTs' knowledge of other languages, 33% (n=53) reported one other language, 16% (n=25) reported two, and 8% (n=13) reported knowledge of three or more other languages (Figure 3). Self-reporting of ability in each language varied from beginner to native-like (for a full list of ALTs' languages, see Pearce, 2021).

Figure 3

ALTs' additional languages

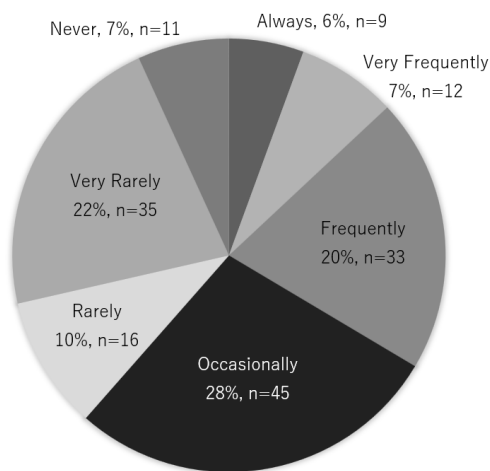


Use of Japanese in Lessons

Regarding use of Japanese in class/lessons, responses varied considerably, from “always” to “never”, although nearly half (48%, n=78) of respondents used Japanese either “occasionally” or “frequently” (Figure 4).

Figure 4

“How often do you use Japanese in your lessons?”



In the voluntary open-ended question, 19 respondents elaborated on their use of Japanese. From these responses, for most ALTs, Japanese use seemed to be a personal choice. Four respondents stated that they adjust the amount of Japanese based on the students' grade, typically using more Japanese for lower grades. Four others specified that they use Japanese for complex instructions or to ease communication. Two respondents emphasized the importance of Japanese use by ALTs for social cohesion: “using a little Japanese in class combats the social block that many Japanese people seem to have developed against foreigners as someone automatically difficult to understand,” and “keeping their interest and the doors of communication open is important enough to justify using some Japanese, since refusing to ‘meet them halfway’ often results in anxiety and giving up attempts to communicate.” Two respondents indicated that Japanese use was forbidden by their dispatch companies, one of whom stated:

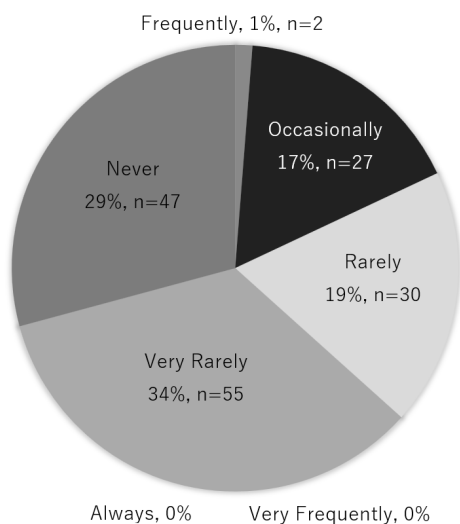
We're instructed by our company not to use Japanese at all (or I would probably use more). That said, it's sometimes necessary for me to repeat myself in Japanese quietly for the HRT's benefit, [or] use Japanese to explain hard concepts to students.

As language management research (Lüdi et al., 2016) and our respondent above have shown, overt policy does not necessarily reflect how interactants actually manage their languages. Given research on the effectiveness of L1 use in the EFL classroom (e.g., Shin et al., 2019), and the emergence of sociolinguistically-informed pedagogical approaches such as translanguaging (García & Wei, 2014), the legitimacy of forbidding ALTs from using Japanese is somewhat dubious, and may serve only to reinforce in the minds of both young learners and HRTs the idea that *foreigners = monolingual English speakers*, which can be considered counterproductive considering the multilingual reality of the globalized world (Forlot, 2018). It seems that at least some ALTs are cognizant of this and reject policies that artificially limit their language use.

Use of Other Languages in Lessons

Regarding the use of other languages, no respondent replied with “always” or “very frequently”, and only two (1.3%) reported that they include other languages “frequently”. While 17% (n=27) stated that they incorporated other languages occasionally, the majority, 82% (n=132) of respondents replied that they used other languages in lessons “rarely” (n=30), “very rarely” (n=55), or “never” (n=47).

Figure 5
“How often do you include languages other than English or Japanese in your lessons?”



From among the volunteered information, 16 respondents made reference to their other-language use. Introduction of other-language greetings or numbers/counting seemed to be common (six re-

sponses) whereas four respondents stated that they introduced words from other languages only if they appeared in the textbook. Some gave more in-depth reasons for their use of other languages:

I often use other foreign languages to get kids interested in foreign languages and cultures. I try to help kids realise that outside of Japan, there is a lot more than English speaking countries, and that each country is unique.

I think it’s important to expose children to many different cultures and languages, so sometimes I find it interesting to talk about Spanish numbers or something like that.

Here, the ALTs displayed an understanding of, and a desire to share, the multilingual and multicultural reality of the globalized world. One respondent expressed a disappointment in the lack of HRT enthusiasm for the inclusion of other languages:

I teach greetings in multiple languages in our lessons about other countries. I also teach the song Feliz Navidad in December. I feel this is too surface level, and I’d like to do more. I wish HRTs would encourage this more too.

This lack of enthusiasm on the part of HRTs may be a result of the portrayal of foreign language at elementary schools as early English education, and of representations of ALTs as monolingual native-English speakers in Japanese-language documents. As plurilingual approaches have shown the potential to increase recognition of minority languages and create more inclusive classes within the Japanese context (Oyama & Pearce, 2019), they may also provide an avenue for including ALTs’ other languages. This could potentially alleviate the persistent use of ALTs as ‘human tape recorders’ by giving ALTs a more active and varied role in the classroom. In turn, it might also help to reduce feelings of underutilization and isolation that ALTs sometimes feel (Kano & Ozeki, 2018).

Discussion

Homogenous Representations, Diverse Realities

As the results have demonstrated, the ALT population is considerably more diverse than their representation in MEXT documents as monolingual native-English speakers. Nearly all respondents (n=159) affirmed some level of Japanese ability, and the majority (n=91) reported abilities in languages other than English and Japanese. Homogenous representations of ALTs are therefore not only

inaccurate but may also be problematic, resulting in the ‘hiding away’ of ALTs’ diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. HRTs typically do not have free periods during the school day, and thus often have no opportunities to talk with ALTs to learn about their linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Much of their understanding of ALTs is therefore likely to come from either prior experiences or the aforementioned MEXT documents. It has been pointed out in the previous literature that “many ALTs... do not get information regarding their school mission, lesson planning, and curriculum” (Ohtani, 2010, p. 43), but the same can be said of HRTs; they do not get sufficient information about ALTs. While MEXT documents can continue to emphasize English as the target language, they should be updated to include more accurate representations of ALTs.

Making the Most of ALTs’ Linguistic and Cultural Repertoires

It has been suggested exposure to multiple languages has a positive effect on the learning of specific languages in monolinguals (Bice & Kroll, 2019). As such, there is a strong argument for the inclusion of ALTs’ other languages in the classroom. This might be achieved through plurilingual approaches to teaching. For instance, *Awakening to Languages*, described above, which has already been implemented at some elementary schools in Japan (Oyama & Pearce, 2019) may be one way to include ALTs’ other languages in a manner that is not “too surface level,” but encourages genuine learning.

We must also remember that ALTs are not just linguistic resources, but also cultural informants, as can be seen in the roles expected of ALTs (Table 1, above). An ALT might capitalize on their other languages from a cultural informant point of view. ALTs could include information on languages in their home countries – including the role of English, if they are from a place where English is a minority language. Alternatively, they might share indigenous or minority languages, foreign languages they know, or information about the roles of different language varieties in their countries.

Given that prior research has cast doubt on the long-term effectiveness of English-only education at elementary schools when compared with children who began English study at the secondary level (Terasawa, 2017; Uematsu, 2015), there is likely little reason to focus on ALTs’ English ability alone. Rather, capitalizing on their full linguistic and cultural repertoires may be more in line with the stated goals of foreign language education at elementary

schools, “to develop... the foundational qualities and competences necessary to attempt communication” (MEXT, 2017b, p. 156).

Concluding Remarks

This demographic study has shed some light on the diversity of ALTs’ linguistic repertoires. In contrast to homogenous portrayals of ALTs as monolingual native-English speakers, it was found that almost all ALTs reported a degree of Japanese ability, and the majority reported knowledge of at least one other language. It was argued that these linguistic resources should be capitalized upon through plurilingual approaches in the classroom to better achieve the goals of foreign language education. Such approaches are likely to require a greater awareness of ALT diversity, and of plurilingual approaches, which therefore need to be reflected in policy and teacher training. Having established that ALTs have a remarkably diverse range of languages, follow-up research into how ALTs include other languages and cultures in their classrooms may also help to better inform policy and to enrich foreign language education in Japanese elementary schools.

Notes

1. The “fundamental qualities and competences necessary for communication,” are not defined in the Course of Study, and there is thus ambiguity in policy, which has put teachers in the position of having to define these for themselves (see, for example, Ohtani, 2014).
2. ALTs have a variety of employment types. Initially recruited only via the government-sponsored JET Programme beginning in 1987, in the 1990s employment types expanded to include ALTs directly hired by local Boards of Education, private sector companies which contract ALTs and dispatch them to local schools, and volunteers. Of the current ALT population, recent figures show that volunteers (including Japanese nationals) comprised around 41% of ALTs, dispatch companies around 26%, JET Programme participants around 18%, and direct-hire ALTs, around 15% (MEXT, 2016).
3. The author reached out to four major ALT dispatch companies for assistance in distributing the survey. One company responded with a refusal, and the other three did not reply. While the author understands the right of the companies to refuse cooperation, given that ALTs are involved in public education, this inaccessibility to information is problematic.

4. Given that non-JET ALTs show a greater diversity in mother tongue and country of origin (Sophia University, 2017), it is likely that diversity in ALTs' linguistic repertoires is even greater than in the results reported here.

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