Improving Equity and Representation Within JALT: Raising Awareness Through Discussion

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At the JALT2020 International Conference, the Code of Conduct (CoC) and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) committees deliberated on issues of equity for and representation of members within JALT. The topics of discussion included (a) wider representation, (b) native-speakerism, (c) professional development opportunities, (d) diversity and equity in teaching contexts, and (e) the effectiveness of JALT’s current measures regarding representation and inclusivity for present and prospective members. The discussions elicited valuable feedback and proved beneficial in illuminating the way forward. By summarizing the main discussion points, this paper seeks to help JALT members better understand JALT’s efforts to achieve greater equity within the organization and the teaching profession as a whole.

As JALT continually strives to be a more inclusive organization, issues regarding equity for and diversity of membership at all levels require scrutiny. Prior inclusion-focused discussions have mainly centered on deficiencies within JALT in terms of membership representation, access to professional development, and the prevalence of native-speakerism (e.g., McCandie, 2018; McCandie, 2019), begetting much-needed introspection. To that end, Amundrud et al. (2020) held a roundtable discussion at the JALT2020 conference to contemplate the progress still to be made in these areas. This paper invites consideration of JALT’s current efforts to improve equity and representation and ways for the organization to move forward as well as reflection on practices within our own teaching contexts.

The Code of Conduct (CoC) and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) committees exist to ensure that JALT is safe and inclusive. They work to identify areas where members have felt unwelcome or unfairly treated, in part by encouraging members to safely share their experiences. The DEI committee’s primary concerns currently include native-speakerism, representation of non-university educators, childcare availability, accessibility, equitable treatment for non-binary members, and the demographics of invited speakers.

Although JALT endeavors to maintain respect and decency between its members, increasing diversity makes mistakes inevitable, as comments and actions can be unintentionally hurtful and damaging. The CoC Committee works to prevent such circumstances, largely through publications, presentations, and workshops that raise awareness of the shapes diversity takes (and the forms of harassment that sometimes follow). Considerable overlap of the aims of the CoC and DEI committees results in informal mutual collaboration supporting the development of a more equitable JALT.

At the JALT2020 roundtable, both committees identified numerous issues facing JALT. These included a need for greater representation and inclusivity within JALT; greater awareness of and measures against native-speakerism in ELT in Japan; greater equity in professional development opportunities; and concern for how we, as teachers, can raise awareness of representation and inclusivity in our classrooms. Below, these issues are ex-
examined in turn, giving voice to the ideas expressed at JALT2020 and to projects that the CoC and DEI committees are currently engaged in, with the hope of illuminating ways that JALT can become a more inclusive, diverse, and just organization.

**Becoming More Inclusive: Organizational Factors That Hold JALT Back**

One problem that JALT officers will always face is limited time. Having to sandwich JALT duties between the demands of family, work, and other commitments, current officers might understandably expect newcomers to learn on the job as they did themselves. For an organization of teachers, however, JALT could do a better job at teaching. By developing stable and robust pathways to mentor members in officer roles, JALT could eliminate the do-it-yourself-or-else mentality that has characterized the experiences of so many officers.

By helping all JALT members attain their full potential to contribute to the organization, we can better facilitate professional development, especially for those who have taken time off for caregiving duties and those whose personal and educational background may not align with the predominantly Anglophone norms (set based on the perspective of “native speakers”) that dominate academic work in JALT. To this end, initiatives by JALT President Dawn Lucovich to formally establish an organization-wide mentoring committee and officer liaison roles to connect experienced and new officers are to be commended.

**Continuing Improvement to Reflect Changing Times**

JALT strives to embrace diversity; yet the organization has struggled to keep up as social landscapes have evolved. Society often teaches us that, in any hierarchical system, those in power should be feared or rebelled against (Van Kleef & Lange, 2020). Applied to JALT, general members might perceive officers as intimidating, or officers might feel similarly towards the Board of Directors (BoD). To prevent these types of situations, it is important to remember that those above us are in place to work with, not against, us. JALT needs to continue fostering deep bidirectional support to increase awareness of equity and representation issues that are not normally on the radars of those in decision-making positions. General members can make Special Interest Group (SIG) and chapter officers aware of issues pertaining to diversity, equity, and conduct. These officers can subsequently inform the CoC or DEI, which then deal with these issues accordingly while also supporting the BoD by increasing its awareness of different perspectives that should be acknowledged.

For such communication to effectively ensue, members need clarity on what constitutes diversity. Identifying and filling gaps where insufficient awareness, and potentially resistance, exists would guide JALT towards ensuring systems are in place to protect members’ safety, thus, propelling it towards truer representation. Overcoming our own biases is done through exposure, solidarity, education, and endeavoring to support individuals experiencing discomfort as well as possible (Tropp & Godsil, 2015). The CoC and DEI efforts toward these goals are discussed later in the paper.

**Issues of Native-Speakerism in Japanese ELT**

Within ELT contexts, the term native speaker usually refers to an L1 English speaker born and raised in what Kachru (1985) described as inner circle countries, where the language is deemed norm-providing. Native-speakerism refers to an ideology asserting that a native speaker should be representative of any of the inner circle countries (Holliday, 2006). It problematically “presumes Anglophones as the custodians of English” (Ishikawa, 2018, p. 9) and promulgates professional inequalities by suggesting L1 English speakers are somehow inherently more knowledgeable than their non-L1 English-speaking counterparts.

Presenting oneself as a non-native English speaker (NNES) has disadvantages regardless of one’s qualifications or teaching capabilities. For instance, some institutions in Japan continue to include “native speaker” as an application requirement, essentially pedestalling place of birth over teaching ability. Institutions may view this prerequisite as a way to stay competitive and attract students without realizing its discriminatory nature. Other issues that NNES can face include lower salaries (Walkinshaw & Oanh, 2014), less favorable treatment (Kavanagh, 2016), and being asked to adopt a false nationality and name (Galloway, 2014).

NNES teachers who speak out on these issues, whether at the workplace or in the classroom, could potentially highlight an attribute of theirs that prospective employers and students might consider detrimental. Therefore, change cannot be implemented solely by the disadvantaged. Instead, the authors hope for well-positioned English-speaking teachers, including L1 users, to feel empowered to (a) enable policy change at the institutional level, (b) educate students regarding misconceptions of the supposed superiority of L1 English native speakers,
and (c) help educators and learners alike to appreciate teachers for their ability to teach rather than their birthplace or appearance. These issues need to be on the radars of those who have not had any aspect of their professional lives threatened on account of their L1. Both the CoC and DEI committees should increase awareness of the repercussions of native-speakerism, work towards education within JALT to eliminate native-speakerism, and promote more equitable teaching and professional development practices. The methods through which the latter is achieved, however, require consideration. Native-speakerism influences ELT research and practices that, in Japan, remain embedded in a western-centric lens, including within JALT. For instance, Hollenback (2021) illuminates the propensity of ELT research published in The Language Teacher over the past decade to (implicitly and explicitly) deem the use of non-western approaches in Japan as inferior and calls for a more thorough questioning of the assumed superiority of “Western” pedagogy in Japanese teaching contexts.

Assessing Opportunities for Professional Development Within JALT

Diversity can take invisible forms. When considering equitable practices to encourage professional development, accessibility should be at the forefront. For example, since 2019, childcare provision for caregivers attending in-person conferences has become a central part of conference planning. This is a positive step towards increasing presentation opportunities, which caregivers need in order to remain competitive in the job market (see Aronsen, 2015). Event scheduling, however, will never be perfect. While some find it easier to participate on weekends, caregivers must often reserve these days for their families. Likewise, members outside of university contexts will be hard-pressed to attend weekday or evening events. Though providing recordings of events is one solution, matters of privacy and confidentiality regarding their distribution remain a crucial consideration.

Access to financial support, such as the JALT Research Grant or the many grants and scholarships awarded annually by JALT chapters and SIGs (see JALT, 2021) deserves greater consideration. Working with the Grants Committee, we must continue to promote grant availability so that everyone has an equal opportunity to apply. Avenues to advertise chapter or SIG budgets could be pursued more vigorously so that they can continue to be used in ways that best serve the JALT membership. Additionally, redistributing funding to prioritize having less established participants present at in-person conferences with more veteran participants presenting online could favor those who would benefit from the professional development that being spotlighted at conferences provides.

Ensuring JALT’s Representativeness

For our evolving understanding of diversity to become second nature, ensuring representation requires persistent work. The DEI Committee includes passionate JALT members from various backgrounds who are also active in other executive and local roles. This helps the committee gain a comprehensive view of trends in diversity-related issues and a multiplicity of perspectives on how to promote resolutions and change at various levels and on different scales. Likewise, CoC committee members work to ensure that JALT members are aware of evolving understandings of diversity to prevent unintended comments or actions that risk putting JALT participants in unsafe environments.

Vigilance in maintaining awareness of visible and invisible diversity is paramount to preserving a non-confrontational environment that encourages members to speak out on overlooked, complex, or sensitive issues (such as the assumption that all members come from a similar background with similar experiences). Both the DEI and CoC committees prioritize the need for our own education on issues raised before proposing solutions. Members actively engage in professional presentations on diversity issues throughout the year, as audience members (directly learning from and connecting with experts) and presenters (exploring diversity-related topics in depth, learning from the analysis of existing data, and reinforcing JALT members’ awareness and knowledge). Where possible, individuals with experience on specific issues are consulted to invite outside perspectives. With the aim of fostering trust from the JALT membership, the two committees must endeavor to be representative, informed, and transparent. Trust begets honest dialogue from JALT members, spotlighting concerns and suggestions on diversity and equity issues that we are not yet aware of and, thus, scaffolding further informed action.

Innovations in Awareness-Raising: Bringing It Back to Teaching

To teach effectively, we must remain open to learning about issues that we may never have had to consider before. Workshops and presentations are an effective method of highlighting important issues, but we also need to consider the possibility of more innovative ways to raise our awareness as
members of an organization whilst simultaneously fostering our development as effective teachers. In addition to succinctly defining terms for participants to feel supported in moving forward, an alternative method suggested at the roundtable was to hold events that center on inviting ideas for teaching practices that stimulate awareness of diversity- and conduct-related issues within our students. By sharing approaches extending beyond a western-centric teaching lens (as per Hollenback, 2021), members can glean practical takeaways for their teaching contexts and feel encouraged to reflect on their own practices within JALT and voice concerns around issues they have noticed within the organization. To illustrate, this year Kyoto JALT hosted an online “Teaching Global Englishes” event with workshops and presentations focusing on native-speakerism in Japanese ELT. Additionally, Tuttle (2022), hosted by Gifu JALT, addressed implications of ambiguity towards diversity in the EFL classroom and provided practical awareness-raising strategies for teachers to implement. The DEI and CoC invite chapters and SIGs to inform them of upcoming awareness-raising events in order to help advertise them or support those interested in holding such events.

**Moving Forward**

Attendee feedback at the JALT2020 roundtable was largely positive. One rural Japanese high school teacher who had been a member for two years commented that it was the first time that they had felt included and encouraged to participate more actively within the organization. Further effort, however, is needed to build on the good work already being done within JALT. The CoC and DEI committees need to establish means to assess the extent to which their methods effectively raise awareness of diversity and encourage proper conduct. Awareness of representation, inclusivity, native-speakerism, professional development accessibility, and the continued development and evaluation of awareness-raising activities should be consistently reflected upon across all chapters, committees, and SIGs for JALT to be considered a safe and productive environment for all members. We should be proactive about consulting with experienced individuals, groups, and organizations both within and outside JALT (e.g., those suggested by McCandie et al., 2022).

**Conclusion**

As JALT strives to improve its equity and representation, discussions on identifying and realizing better methods to serve its members are rightly becoming a central focus. The JALT2020 roundtable revealed that despite commendable efforts, subsequently reflected in the diversity of plenary speakers at JALT2021, additional efforts are still needed regarding native-speakerism, diversity of representation, and equitable professional development. The DEI and CoC committees are passionately working on projects concerning these issues, and we welcome insight from the JALT membership regarding areas we have not yet given due attention. Those who wish to report an issue or join us in our efforts can contact conduct@jalt.org and dei@jalt.org.

**References**


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