

Clarifying Classroom Responsibilities in Elementary English Education

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This study reports on the expectations and concerns of elementary school teachers responsible for implementing new English education requirements in Japan. Assistant language teachers (ALTs) have long been key players in supporting English instruction; however, with the introduction of specialized English teachers (SETs), many changes have occurred, and the roles and responsibilities of ALTs and Japanese teachers are in flux. Surveys by the authors attempt to clarify these relationships and begin to envision a path forward. The results indicate that in team teaching with ALTs, SETs tend to operate as lead teachers, with homeroom teachers (HRTs) adopting a

secondary role. ALTs are perceived as English speakers rather than educators, whereas HRTs express a reliance on SETs as capable English teachers. The SETs in this study displayed an inconsistent range of English proficiency, experience, and expertise. One concern is that ALTs' roles may become limited because SETs' strength in English overlaps with that of ALTs.

本研究は、日本で新たに導入される英語教育施策における小学校教員の期待や懸念について報告するものである。外国語指導助手 (ALT) はこれまで英語教育を支える重要な存在であったが、英語専科教員 (SET) の導入に伴い、ALTと日本人教員の役割と責任は大きく変化し依然流動的である。筆者らの研究はこれらの関係を整理し今後への道筋をつけることを目指すものである。ALTとのチームティーチングにおいて、SETは主導的な指導者の役割を果たし、担任教師 (HRT) は補佐的な役割に留まる傾向があるという結果が示された。ALTは教育者というよりは単なる英語話者と見なされており、一方でSETは英語教育の担い手としてHRTからの期待を担われている。本研究ではSETは英語能力、経験、専門性などにおいて個人差が大きいことが示された。英語が使えるという点でSETの強みとALTがこれまで果たしてきた役割が重なるため、今後ALTが果たす役割の幅が限られてくることが懸念される。

With the inclusion of Foreign Language (English)¹ in the Japanese elementary school curriculum as a mandatory “subject” for 5th and 6th graders and a required “activity” for 3rd and 4th graders, the number of English teaching hours required for Japanese elementary school teachers has grown rapidly. Since its inception by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology–Japan (MEXT, 2015), the teacher training system for teaching elementary school English has been discussed and modified, and it remains a system in flux. Despite these efforts to improve the system, the increasing demand for teachers able to teach English in elementary schools outstrips the available supply of proficient English teachers (Matano & Izumi, 2021; Tokyo Gakugei University, 2021). In secondary English education in Japan, native English speakers employed as assistant language teachers (ALTs) have long played a crucial role in supporting English instruction, to the extent that team teaching by Japanese homeroom teachers (HRTs) and ALTs has come to be regarded as the standard form of English instruction (Pearce, 2020) and as such has been adopted in elementary education as well. The introduction of ALTs into the elementary education system, however, has been somewhat less than systematic, and with the inclusion of Japanese specialized English teachers (SETs/*senka*) in 2018, the

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relationship between HRTs, ALTs, and SETs requires clarification. This paper will attempt to provide this necessary clarification by extending the efforts of two ongoing research projects based on questionnaires and interviews with HRTs and SETs, analyzing their responses and comments to gain a deeper understanding of what HRTs expect from SETs and ALTs in terms of their teaching expertise and responsibilities in team teaching.

Research by Nakazawa and Kano (2022) and Kano and Hiratsuka (2023) delved into elementary school HRTs' expectations for classroom and team-teaching dynamics with ALTs and SETs. The HRTs in Nakazawa and Kano revealed a high degree of dependence on ALTs in terms of classroom English support, and they exhibited a tendency to idealize the English expertise of SETs relative to their own competence. HRTs in Kano and Hiratsuka's study exhibited less dependence on ALTs, as detailed below. The results also showed substantial differences between expectations the HRTs and SETs had about working with ALTs. The survey and interviews conducted in Kano and Hiratsuka found a lack of clarity in the SETs' expectations and characterization of responsibilities, and their overall perspectives differed from those of the HRTs, possibly indicating why the unstable situation of elementary school English in Japan seems ambiguous and overly complex to the actors responsible for implementing it in the classroom (MEXT, 2022). Thus, in order to optimize elementary school students' English learning experience, HRTs, ALTs, and SETs need to have a clear understanding of their respective roles and responsibilities in the classroom, as well as of each other's concerns and expectations. The current research focuses on one element of this relationship, namely the potential overlap of responsibilities between SETs and HRTs and an attempt to clarify their dynamic yet unclear relations with ALTs. In the following section we will review research that provides some context for how the current situation has developed and highlight some of the issues that prompted the research informing this paper.

Literature Review

Team Teaching and the Role of ALTs in Japanese Elementary School English Education

Assistant language teachers (ALTs) have played a crucial role in secondary English education in Japan for 35 years (Council of Local Authorities for International Relations [CLAIR], 2022). From the beginning, ALTs have participated in team-teaching settings, where homeroom teachers (HRTs) ostensibly take the lead classroom management role (MEXT, 2017,

2018). Based on recent changes to national English education policies, however, ALTs have been introduced into elementary education, and the system is currently in a period of transition. A wide-scale survey by Yoshida et al. (2017) and a follow-up study by Kano and Ozeki (2018) revealed that with the mandatory inclusion of English, ALTs' responsibilities have increased significantly, creating a situation where the line between the HRT and the ALT as to who is the lead teacher—an issue which determines allocation of various workload responsibilities, including meeting attendance, grading, and classroom management—has become blurred. Concurrently, elementary English education continues to experience other drastic changes, such as the increasing number of Japanese specialized English teachers (SETs) being placed in elementary classrooms. Although the qualifications and requirements for becoming an SET have not been clearly outlined (or regulated), and their ranks are currently being filled in an ad hoc manner, SETs have now come to represent a substantial portion of the teachers working in elementary English education (MEXT, 2022). Along with the adoption of new official textbooks and the introduction of digital equipment and materials, the changes wrought by the increase of SETs into classrooms have converged to create a situation in flux, and although there are many variables influencing the relation between ALTs, HRTs, and SETs, a consistent and principled training strategy has yet to be clearly articulated.

Implementation of Specialized English Teachers

According to MEXT (2022), specialized English teachers² are teachers who are solely responsible for foreign language education and who are not assigned a homeroom of their own. As noted, the number of SETs being deployed in elementary schools has seen a marked increase recently, jumping from 9,691 in 2019 to 38,686 in 2021 (MEXT, 2020 & 2022). MEXT (2022) recommends that the lessons be designed by licensed teachers. The survey also reflects the continuing fluidity of the current situation, with HRTs teaching 50.8% of elementary English classes, SETs handling 37.9%, and other categories of teachers, such as those in charge of other subjects and part-time teachers, conducting the rest of the classes as the main teacher. Additionally, SETs were often dispatched to other schools from their own home school, as “roving” SETs, who do not have a specific “home” school but travel around a particular district handling English classes.

Because SETs are a newly implemented and rapidly growing category of teacher, there is limited

research beyond MEXT reports detailing precisely how they are being integrated into their respective school systems. Research thus far does not fully treat the variety of circumstances under which SETs are working, nor has it analyzed the qualifications, experience, and demographics of the teachers placed in the SET position.

Research Design

With the introduction of SETs, the possible combinations of teachers that comprise team-teaching teams has increased, raising the questions of what composition maximizes learning outcomes for the students and who should take the lead role (T1) in team-teaching and solo-teaching situations, and, in terms of the composition of the teams, what is desired or preferred by the two types of Japanese teachers (HRTs and SETs). To shed light on this complicated situation in Japanese elementary school English education, the authors administered two online questionnaires to HRTs and SETs. The questions requested information about the respondents' current teaching situations for English lessons, their demographics, and, in relation to team teaching, who they perceived as the ideal lead teacher and who, in actual practice, usually takes that role.

Research Questions

How do HRTs and SETs feel about the changes being implemented in the English curriculum in Japanese elementary schools?

Table 1

Requirements and Roles of the Three Positions

	Roles	HRT	SET	ALT
teaching qualifications	teacher's license	required	required	not required
	specialize in English education	not required	desired but not required	required
	specialize in elementary education	required	not required	not required
tasks/roles in classroom	English proficiency	not required	expected to be proficient, but varies in practice	sufficient
	team teaching	lead teacher	lead teacher	lead/secondary
	teaching responsibilities	teaches all subjects	teaches English classes only (can conduct class independently)	teaches English classes only (requires presence of a licensed teacher)

RQ1 How do HRTs and SETs feel about team teaching?

RQ2 What are SETs' expectations toward ALTs?

The research questions set here are of a rather broad scope. However, as SETs have been introduced widely, yet in many cases without specifically defined responsibilities, the results of the research presented in this paper will lay a foundation for proposals clarifying the responsibilities and relations among different types of teachers and will attempt to inform the future development of teacher training programs and curriculum design.

Table 1 summarizes the differences in the requirements and the roles of the three positions we explore in this paper. As discussed in subsequent sections, the qualifications, licensure, and backgrounds of the SETs vary greatly and have not been clearly articulated by MEXT. The employment or designation of a teacher as an SET and the exact requirements necessary for this designation therefore depend on the needs of the school, the regional board of education, and the municipal government.

Methodology

Participants and Data Collection

Data used for the descriptions and analyses in this paper are derived from two sources. The first of these was 72 elementary school homeroom teachers. Three of the respondents were SETs (4.1%

of respondents) and were excluded from this data analysis. The data (hereafter HRT-1) were collected in November 2021 through a local board of education using Google Forms. All the participants were Japanese elementary school teachers teaching grades 1–6 at public schools. The respondents had team-teaching experience with ALTs, but their experience team teaching with SETs was limited. The three cities where the HRT-1 respondents taught followed an ALT team-teaching system in which each elementary school employed one part-time ALT and 75.3% of the English classes had ALTs in every class or every other class.

The second data set, from March 2022, was also collected via Google Forms. The questionnaire was distributed to attendees of elementary school English study groups and study seminars. The participants volunteered to respond, all gave informed consent, and the project was cleared with the institutional review board.

Although the 69 participants in the first data set (HRT-1) were all HRTs, the second set includes responses from HRTs, SETs, and others. Because some of the survey respondents were ex-teachers, private English teachers, researchers, and others who were not directly involved in elementary school education, these responses were excluded. The remaining data from 28 HRTs (HRT-2) and 51 SETs (SET-1) currently teaching English at elementary schools were analyzed. The categorization of teachers as either HRT or SET was based upon the respondents' own answers to the relevant questions.

Results

Quantitative Data: HRTs and SETs in Relation With ALTs

The first data set (HRT-1) consisted of HRTs who expressed a high degree of dependence on ALTs, coinciding with results found in Machida (2016). When asked who they felt was the *de facto* main teacher, 54.4% indicated that it was the ALT. However, 83% responded that they thought the *ideal* lead teacher would be the SET. Only 10% of these HRTs felt HRTs should be T1, and those who felt ALTs should take the role of T1 were merely 8%. These results reveal a discrepancy between what HRTs convey as the ideal situation for team teaching and the actual situation as it plays out in real-world classrooms. It must be noted that most of the HRTs who chose SETs as the ideal candidate for taking the lead teacher role did not have actual team-teaching experience with SETs. This may be a reflection of their idealized expectations toward SETs.

In contrast, 75% of the HRTs who responded in the second data set (HRT-2) answered that they were the actual T1 in team-teaching situations. Most of these had team-teaching experience with ALTs but not with SETs. Two respondents who had team-teaching experience with SETs felt that they were the actual T1. SETs displayed a strong sense that they occupied the T1 role when team teaching with ALTs, with 85.7% responding that they considered themselves the T1, whereas only 10.2% of the SETs considered themselves the T2 when teaching with ALTs.

For the question “Who do you think is the best candidate for the T1 position in elementary school English education?” the respondents in HRT-2 gave the highest preference to themselves (HRTs). SETs were believed to be the second-best candidates for T1 and ALTs were seen as third choice. SETs answered that they (SETs) would be the best choice for the T1 role, followed by HRTs. Both HRTs and SETs expressed a preference to have a licensed Japanese teacher as the lead teacher. According to their comments, they believed that the Japanese teachers had a deeper understanding of the Japanese education system, the MEXT course of studies, the students, and classroom management.

As team-teaching partners, native English-speaking ALTs were the HRTs' and SETs' first choice. The second preference for both were non-native ALTs. Although HRTs displayed a clear preference for Japanese ALTs as a third choice, SETs' responses varied. This weaker preference may be attributed to the higher English proficiency of SETs and a belief that they have an advantage by being native Japanese speakers and understanding the elementary school system while at the same time being fluent in English.

All three categories of Japanese teachers responded to questions exploring their perceptions and expectations of ALTs' responsibilities, both inside and outside the classroom. The results in Table 2 show the wide variety of responsibilities that the Japanese teachers believed ALTs should assume.

Expectations toward ALTs' classroom roles were similarly high among the three groups. Because ALTs have been involved in the Japanese English teaching system for a long time in secondary education, there seems to be a stable model of ALTs' classroom responsibilities based on the model of junior high school English classes. However, Yoshida et al. (2017), Kano and Ozeki (2018), and Hiratsuka (2022) have found that the ALTs themselves are not always satisfied with their specific yet somewhat limited roles.

Table 2
Expectations Towards ALTs

Q: What do you expect from the ALTs?	HRT-1	HRT-2	SET-1
<i>In classroom</i>			
Introduce their own cultures	87.5%	89.3%	92.2%
Model English pronunciation	94.4%	92.9%	88.2%
Conduct lesson demonstrations with Japanese teachers	88.9%	89.3%	90.2%
Interact with students	81.9%	92.9%	100%
<i>Out of classroom</i>			
Support assessments	20.8%	35.7%	60.8%
Attend meetings to assist with class preparation	41.4%	35.7%	51.0%
Support in-school training sessions	27.1%	35.7%	29.2%

The expectation that ALTs should “support assessments” was much lower than expected from both groups of HRTs, whereas 60.8% of SETs did believe that this should be a responsibility for ALTs. In the comments, several SETs noted that they oversaw hundreds of students from multiple schools, reflecting an enormous workload regarding grading and assessment. Their responses here may indicate their desire for help in this area from ALTs. Another reason for their responses here may be recognition of the growing emphasis on “evaluating students’ performance” in elementary schools. Evaluation of students’ in-class interactions and presentations is a growing area where ALT involvement is natural and expected.

Demographics of SETs

A comparison of the demographics of HRT-2 and SETs was conducted for the second set of data. This included 28 HRTs from HRT-2 and 51 SETs from SET-1 from across Japan who were all teaching in elementary schools at the time. However, 18% of the SETs had licenses for junior or senior high school but not elementary school. Additionally, 23.5% of the SETs had less than three years of elementary school teaching experience, as opposed to 14.3% of the HRTs. These results indicate that some SETs

may be less familiar than HRTs with the elementary school system and the school culture and have limited experience teaching English to young learners in the classroom.

Asked to assess their English proficiency, 11.8% of SETs perceived themselves as advanced, equivalent to *Eiken* Grade 1 or CEFR C1, whereas none of the HRT-2 rated their English proficiency at those levels. Nearly three quarters (70.9%) of SETs described their English level as high intermediate (*Eiken* G2-preG1/CEFR B2), whereas only a third (35.7%) of HRT-2 did. Only 5.9% of SETs judged themselves at a basic level (*Eiken* G3/CEFR A1), compared to 35.7% of HRT-2. These self-evaluations suggest that SETs may have higher English proficiency than the majority of elementary school teachers in general. However, it must be taken into account that the SETs who responded to the survey were members of professional study groups and so were likely to be highly motivated teachers willing to learn and interested in improving their skills. The implementation of SETs is administered differently according to the region and the school, and from interviews conducted we learned that not all SETs have the necessary background or expertise to teach English in elementary schools. This is an issue that requires further research.

Qualitative Data: Open-Ended Questions

A qualitative analysis of the open-ended questions from the HRT-2 and SET-1 surveys supports and clarifies to some extent the findings of the quantitative data. Using KH Coder analysis software (Higuchi, 2017) as a tool for text mining, we attempted to analyze the text data in a structured manner. Text data were also displayed as co-occurrence network charts (see Appendices A & B).

For the question “Who do you think is best suited to take on the role of T1 in future team-teaching instruction?” we extracted from the HRT-2 and SET data sets some frequently appearing keywords. As expected, the number of keywords found was relatively small, as this data set itself is quite small. The most frequent keyword, “do” (する), was used 24 times, with most of the other keywords appearing only a handful of times. Because the number of participants in each group was not uniform (HRT-2 $n = 28$, SET-1 $n = 52$), we did not focus on the number of appearances of each keyword but rather on the ones used by both groups, as well as those that were specific to each group. Table 3 shows the list of keywords examined.

Among the commonly appearing keywords were “subject” (教科), “license” (免許), and “expertise” (専門).

These words were used to address issues or problems the respondents might have with different types of teachers: ALTs, HRTs, or SETs. The term “understanding” (理解/わかる) of class/students was used by HRTs to emphasize the strength of Japanese teachers (both HRTs and SETs) in contrast with the ALTs. SETs, however, used this keyword specifically as a way of differentiating themselves from the ALTs. A common theme emerged that SETs generally felt they had a better grasp and deeper understanding of the nature of the students, appropriate classroom management techniques, and the goals and principles of the elementary school system in Japan. The keyword “license” also appeared in the comments of both groups, but it was more often used by the SETs. The thrust of the comments that contained “license” focused on the fact that a weakness of the ALT system is that they (ALTs) do not (and are not required to) hold either an elementary teaching license or an English teaching license.

A keyword that was specific to HRT-2 was “cross-curricular” (教科横断/教科間連携), which was used to indicate the strength of elementary school teachers who handle all required subjects by themselves, a feature that enables them to implement flexibility into the curriculum. For their part, the SETs used “assessment/evaluation” (評価) and “grades/school record” (成績) in ways suggesting that their roles and responsibilities in the position were added benefits of their inclusion in team teaching. The keyword “grades/school record” (成績) was also found to co-occur with the keyword “difficult” (難しい). There were two aspects to this response in the comments, one related to the difficulty of assessing hundreds of students and the other to teaching licenses. ALTs, because they do not hold teaching licenses, were perceived as weak in expertise and thus not considered the best candidates to assess students and award grades.

Table 3
Keywords Extracted From the Free Descriptions

	HRT-2	SETs
Keywords in common	ALT, HRT, SET, T1, English, subject, license, expertise, teacher, student, elementary school, class/lesson/instruction, understanding of class/students	
Keywords specific to group	cross-curricular, reality of class/children	grades/school record assessment/evaluation

Discussion and Further Implications

Before and after the survey was conducted, the first author found opportunities to interview SETs and HRTs from various districts throughout Japan and asked them about the specific conditions under which they were actually teaching. Their responses differed depending upon the districts and schools they worked in, but even within the same school, there appeared to be a wide variety of duties and expectations encountered by the SETs. Although the SETs in this study displayed some unique characteristics compared to the HRTs, the precise demographics of SETs have yet to be carefully researched. In informal conversations and interviews, their English proficiency and expertise in teaching English to young learners also varied quite considerably from one to another.

It should be noted again that the SETs in this study were recruited through online study group sessions and teacher development seminars. Such attendees may be more confident or motivated than teachers in general. This type of self-selected, highly motivated cross-section of teachers thus may not be representative of SETs as a whole. We have learned that the reasons for and circumstances under which people have become SETs differs from person to person, and we need to be cautious not to overgeneralize the results and demographics of SETs from this study.

According to MEXT (2022), the number of SETs dispatched in 2021 was 38,686. Compared to the number of ALTs in elementary schools, which was 13,903 in 2021, this seems a noteworthy difference. Still, it is less than a quarter of the total number of elementary school teachers (160,273) who are in charge of elementary English education classes. Whether there should be additional SETs or even if the position of SET should be continued in elementary English education is unclear. The authors are concerned that, by relying too heavily on SETs, the know-how, advantages, and strengths—the institutional memory, as it were—that have been cultivated over the years as a result of team teaching between HRTs and ALTs will not be passed on.

In their responses, HRTs generally assumed SETs to be experts in teaching English. Expectations of HRTs toward SETs are thus quite high. In a way, SETs have become a beacon of hope for HRTs of a possible resolution to the ongoing problem of overworked and under-trained teachers in elementary schools having to teach English. Another reason HRTs have come to have such high expectations toward SETs may be the introduction of the new evaluation policy and use of certified textbooks along with the *Course of Study* (MEXT, 2017). In

order to fully follow these new guidelines and teachers' manuals, proficiency in spoken and written Japanese and a thorough understanding of the elementary education system in Japan, as well as the necessarily significant time which must be invested to read, assimilate, and discuss with peers, would be required. Neither ALTs nor HRTs can meet such a goal in the current situation. Therefore, it is natural that HRTs perceive SETs who specialize in English education as a solution.

However, it needs to be emphasized that the above notion of HRTs does not take into account the issue of whether SETs are actually the most suitable teachers for teaching English to elementary students. In other words, it has not been considered whether SETs are the best option as instructors for elementary school children. Although the SETs in this study rated their own English proficiency quite favorably relative to that of the HRTs, as discussed, this does not directly equate to evidence of actual proficiency or suggest that they are the ideal English instructors for children. SETs may be unfamiliar with individual elementary school systems and, because of the ambiguous nature of the requirements to fulfill this position, may not always be fully competent or confident in teaching English to elementary students. Due to the high dependency HRTs have shown toward ALTs, the authors fear that the promise of SETs may become idealized and eventually lead to a potential clash of expectations versus reality.

At this point, HRTs, SETs, and ALTs comprise important components of elementary English education in Japan. Each category is currently vital to the endeavor, and their collaboration in team teaching appears to provide unique advantages to elementary students. As we have seen, the system is in flux. To stabilize it, a robust system must be developed to ensure that all the component parts work together seamlessly in service of enhanced English language outcomes for young Japanese learners. Future surveys, encompassing a much larger number of team-teaching situations, along with a wider range of questions exploring the relationships, both real and desired, of SETs, HRTs, and ALTs are needed to provide a clearer picture of what is necessary for long-term sustainability. With research based on a further accumulation of data, we will continue to analyze this complex situation in elementary schools and outline recommendations that will help to develop more robust and pedagogically sound training plans that consider and are considerate of ALTs, HRTs, and SETs.

Notes

1. The official name is "Foreign Language (English)" for Grades 5 and 6, and "Foreign Language (English) Activities" for Grades 3 and 4. In this paper, we will refer to these as "English" and "English Activities" for simplicity.
2. In Japanese, 「専科教師等」とは、外国語教育のみを担当する教師のほか、学級担任となっていない教師で外国語教育を担当する教師をいう。

Bio Data

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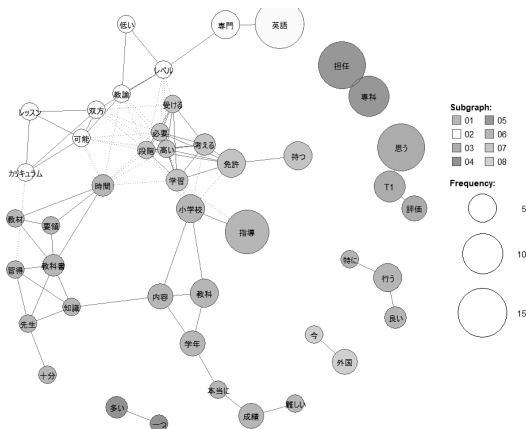
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Appendix A

Co-Occurrence Network Graph of SET-1



Appendix B

Co-Occurrence Network Graph of HRT-2

