

Assistant Language Teacher Needs and Wants for Professional Development

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The present study addresses the notable absence of research concerning professional development opportunities tailored for foreign assistant language teachers (ALTs) in Japan. Although many ALTs are relatively new to both teaching and Japanese culture, they are afforded limited opportunities for professional development, typically through brief orientations and a small number of local conferences each year. There is also little research exploring the needs and wants of ALTs in this regard. To investigate this matter, I interviewed 11 in-service ALTs to pinpoint perceived shortcomings in their career development conferences and ascertain their specific aspirations for these events. This study sheds light on the overlooked perspectives of ALTs themselves regarding their professional development opportunities and therefore has the potential to drive positive changes within the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme, reflecting ALTs' desires for a chance at impactful career growth.

本研究は、日本における外国語指導助手 (ALT) の専門能力開発機会に関する研究の不足に対処するものである。ALTは、一般的に教育経験が乏しく日本文化の知識も不足しているが、専門的な成長の機会は限られている (通常短期のオリエンテーションや年に数回の都道府県単位の会議のみである)。また、ALTのニーズや要望に焦点を当てた研究もほとんど見当たらない。この問題に深く迫るため、11人の現職ALTとのインタビューを通して、彼らの指導能力向上研修における不足点と、これらのイベントに対する具体的な期待について調査を行った。この研究は、これまで見過ごされてきたALTの専門能力開発機会についてALT自身の視点に光を当てると同時に効果的な教師教育の可能性を探り、ALT個人とJETプログラム全体の前向きな変化を促すものである。

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The primary responsibility of foreign assistant language teachers (ALTs) in Japan revolves around teaching English and fostering intercultural awareness within secondary and elementary schools (Council of Local Authorities for International Relations [CLAIR], 2024). As a Japanese teacher of English (JTE) in Japanese public high schools from 2001 to 2011, I spent a decade collaborating with ALTs. Through this experience, I observed what I found to be a lack of opportunities for effective professional development specifically tailored to ALTs. For the past 10 years, in my current role as a teacher educator, I have given lectures and workshops for professional and growth purposes to ALTs across the country. At present, the only consistent offer-

ings across the country seem to be brief welcome orientations in Tokyo organized by the government, alongside at least one required annual ALT/JTE “Skill Development Conference,” hosted by the board of education in each prefecture. Notably, the workshops at these conferences are more often than not planned and run by the ALTs themselves. Although the Japanese government Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports Science and Technology (MEXT) provides guidelines for the conference, the content and conference length are decided at the prefectural level (CLAIR, 2024). Although the Japanese government initiated the hiring of ALTs through the JET Programme back in 1987, this deficit in structured and adequate professional development for ALTs persists almost four decades later.

Despite the universal understanding of the paramount importance of professional development—be it through lectures or conferences—the realm of ALT professional development remains remarkably unexplored. Language educators are expected to stay abreast of field advancements, continuously assess their teaching abilities, and embrace new and contextualized teaching practices in line with institutional needs (Richards & Farrell, 2005). Nevertheless, there is an evident dearth of comprehensive documentation or methodical assessments with respect to the content and efficacy of ALT professional development initiatives, and this study aims to fill this gap (Hiratsuka, 2022, 2023a, 2023b).

To address ways to improve the JET program, particularly training ALTs as they progress through their contracts (a maximum of five years), a qualitative study was conducted. First, such a study sheds light on the types of professional development that ALTs seek and require—most importantly, as told from the points of view of ALTs themselves, an area that has been greatly underexamined. Second, the insights obtained from this research have the potential to catalyze positive and impactful changes for the extensive community involved in the JET Programme and other similar educational setups. These changes should emerge from the identified needs, wants, and recommendations articulated by ALTs regarding their career growth opportunities. With semi-structured interviews as the primary

research method, the current investigation revealed a shared wish among the participants for these opportunities to include: (a) more details about who ALTs are, should be, and can be; (b) thorough insights into who JTEs are, what they think, and how they approach English language teaching; and (c) more thorough explanations of the JET Programme.

Literature Review

The large body of research involving ALTs, the JET Programme, and team teaching in Japan hitherto lacks substantial depth (see Hiratsuka, 2022 for a comprehensive review). These studies have left wide gaps in our understanding—characterized by four main deficiencies. First, prior investigations have chiefly focused on singular aspects of ALTs' professional lives, such as perceptions about team teaching, classroom practices, or teachers' role delineations. Second, these studies oftentimes treated their findings as static entities, neglecting the evolving and fluctuating sentiments and encounters of the participants and their immediate socio-cultural environments. Third, the data collected in these studies frequently suffered from brevity, comprising rather terse or isolated responses from educators and/or students captured within restricted time-frames (e.g., short surveys). Even in instances where studies adopted an in-depth case study approach, the participant pool remained markedly small, largely limited to a single context—sometimes even confined to a single school or classroom. Last, a serious gap exists in the variety of research methodologies, most importantly an absence of studies employing a narrative inquiry approach, using stories as the focal point for data collection, analysis, and presentation and offering the potential to meticulously dive into actions, emotions, events, and a myriad of phenomena.

In response to these inadequacies, Hiratsuka (2022) employed narrative inquiry to attempt to unravel the intricate tapestry of ALTs' experiences throughout historical time (before, during, and after their tenure as ALTs) and within varied social spheres (both within and outside of school contexts). This approach spotlighted the construction and evolution of ALTs' identity structures, thereby placing these dynamic formations at the heart of the investigation. Hiratsuka (2023b) then traced the professional trajectories of team teachers in Japan, orchestrating 14 original empirical studies. This investigation provided a complex panorama of the day-to-day professional landscapes and actualities faced by JTEs and ALTs. Accentuating cognitive, ideological, and affective dimensions, Hiratsuka (2023b) scrutinized these facets in a holistic man-

ner, thus offering novel insights into their professional realities and lived experiences.

Nevertheless, there still remains a lack of research into the specific essentials concerning professional development opportunities tailored for ALTs. Although there is a spectrum of methodologies available for advancing language teaching professionals' development—such as action research, Exploratory Practice, focus group discussions, and stimulated recall sessions (as detailed in Hiratsuka & Barkhuizen, 2015)—professional development events via lectures and workshops have received limited empirical scrutiny. Such opportunities are purported to enhance confidence in implementing new pedagogical skills and techniques (Murray, 2010; Ur, 2012) while keeping attendees abreast of the latest developments within their field. Despite recurring assertions with regard to the advantages of attending professional development conferences and presentations, the literature has been devoid of empirical studies validating these claims until recently. Borg (2015) spearheaded a pioneering study exploring language teaching professionals across seven Gulf countries by probing into the impact of conference attendance on their professional growth. The majority of participants conveyed through questionnaires and interviews a positive sentiment toward their conference experiences, highlighting an expanded breadth of knowledge in language teaching techniques and a more favorable attitude toward their jobs. In the context of Japan, Hiratsuka (2017) conducted a study involving participants attending presentations delivered by two esteemed language education scholars. The gathered data from questionnaires and interviews pointed to a multifaceted array of benefits experienced by participants, including the acquisition of academic knowledge, a reconfiguration of perspectives on English teaching and learning, and an elevation in motivational levels.

Research Question

Despite previous endeavors, a systematic exploration into the substance of professional development opportunities for ALTs and their corresponding experiences remains conspicuously absent. Against this backdrop, this inquiry elicits ALTs' points of view with respect to their participation in professional development events. It seeks to uncover their perceived imperatives and desires, as well as the inherent potentials and possibilities embedded within these experiences from their idiosyncratic vantage points. Hence, this study was guided by the following research question: What are the specific needs and wants perceived by ALTs in Japan concerning their professional development opportunities?

Methodology

Participants

In adherence to ethical guidelines, the research plan was approved by the relevant bodies at my institution prior to the start of this investigation. Participants were recruited through both snowballing and purposive sampling methods (Robinson, 2014), with calls made at professional conferences and via my social networks, including social media outreach. From the volunteers, I purposefully selected 11 participants, all of whom were part of the JET Programme. These participants were drawn from more than four different prefectures to ensure a range of perspectives on ALT professional development opportunities (Staller, 2021). My focus, however, was not on the geographical representation of prefectures, but rather on participant characteristics such as gender, experience, nationality, major, age, and Japanese ability (see Appendix for background information). It is also worth noting that nine out of the 11 participants had previously attended professional development conferences where I had been the keynote speaker. Consent was obtained from all participants prior to their involvement, and their personal identities were anonymized through the use of numerical identifiers.

Data Collection and Analysis

Because interviews are widely recognized as a valuable method for examining participants' knowledge, attitudes, and perspectives across diverse contexts and time periods (O'Neill, 2020; Seidman, 2013), I selected narrative interviews as the primary approach for data collection, thus allowing for a flexible exploration of participants' experiences and understandings. These interviews were conducted in English (the common language of fluency between the interviewer and the interviewee), either face-to-face or on Zoom. At the beginning, the participants were asked to reflect on their previous professional development experiences and share any relevant opinions, episodes, stories, or personal anecdotes connected to them. Thus, this inquiry used a combination of inductive and deductive methodologies to draw insights from the primary research question and the gathered data. The duration of each interview ranged from roughly 30 minutes to nearly one hour. The interviews were recorded and transcribed in full.

The transcripts were then subject to thematic analysis—a well-established approach for identifying and inspecting patterns, subjects, and significance within qualitative data. During the analysis, I first identified general main codes, which led to

a more detailed dive into the source transcripts to find particular instances of further coding. Following the organization and categorization of pertinent coded segments using the qualitative data analysis software (NVivo 10), I continued with the process of focused coding as described by Charmaz (2014). This coding method identified both often repeated underlying themes and individual yet noteworthy remarks (see Hiratsuka, 2018). Through the use of an iterative approach of generating and refining codes, a handful of categories was established. Afterward, I proceeded to verify and strengthen the identified categories by selecting germane statements from the participants' interviews.

Findings

All the participants expressed varying degrees of dissatisfaction with the professional development opportunities provided during their orientations and conferences. According to them, these events predominantly concentrated on the experience of living as foreigners in Japan. Although guidance on English language teaching and cultural exchange was provided to some extent, participants remarked often leaving these events feeling demotivated and questioning the purpose of them. ALT3 remarked, "We received information about Japanese laws, culture, and etiquette, but it wasn't quite relevant for my job. It felt like we were treated as foreign tourists, despite being funded by Japanese taxpayers." ALT4 added, "It was frustrating because speakers would say, 'This is what you should do in Japan,' and then immediately follow with 'Everybody will have a different experience.'" In contrast to the largely irrelevant content presented at these events, ALTs signaled the need and desire for information regarding (a) ALTs themselves, (b) their JTEs, and (c) the JET Programme.

Concerning ALTs

The participants voiced a keen interest in attaining better insights into the multifarious role of ALTs in Japan, as it vitally affects their professional life, collaboration with JTEs, and influence on students. Moreover, they underscored the significance of exploring the experiences of fellow ALTs through case studies and anecdotal accounts. ALT2 grappled with defining her role within the school context amidst colleagues' perceptions of her as being merely "an English-speaking celebrity or an incompetent foreigner": "I think they [her colleagues] feel like I'm not capable of doing many things." This way of thinking led her to question whether other ALTs encountered similar challenges. ALT4 also suggested that learning from past negative experiences of

ALTs could help anticipate similar situations: “It would have been good to hear people’s bad experiences as well to just give us some kind of warning.” Similarly, ALT10 advocated for a case-study approach to understand the diverse experiences of ALTs (although he recognized the potential disparity between his own teaching background and the realities of ALT work in Japan): “It would be very helpful to know what the other ALTs’ situations are like—almost in a case-study manner. That said, my experience might differ significantly as I had teaching experience in my country before coming to Japan.” Interestingly, despite her background in education in the USA, ALT6 found that nuanced differences in ALT work in Japan necessitated a reevaluation of her teaching approach: “I could not automatically transfer my knowledge and experience from the US context to Japanese context.” ALT3 commented on one of my keynote speeches in which I discussed ALT identity. She found the exploration of ALT identities valuable, acknowledging its potential impact on student–teacher dynamics and intercollegiate relationships: “What you presented—like, the identities of ALTs could be absolutely beneficial because how ALTs are perceiving themselves as like a celebrity could definitely have some consequences to [sic] their students or to their co-workers, right?” In the same vein, ALT7 claimed to have found my lecture’s exploration of ALT identities—encompassing social, cultural, and personal dimensions—to be informative beyond pedagogical considerations. ALT9, who attended numerous orientation and professional development sessions through the years, also claimed to have found discussions on ALT identity and perception particularly engaging and insightful.

Concerning JTEs

The participants harbored a fervent curiosity with respect to the perceptions, experiences, and identities of their teaching counterparts—the JTEs. They were interested in gleaned insights into what JTEs had acquired from their teaching licensure programs and the constraints they face within their professional contexts (e.g., those deriving from curriculum guidelines). They believed such knowledge held the key to enhancing collaborative lessons and fostering more harmonious relationships between ALT and JTE. After a conference where I gave a talk on ALT identities, ALT1 shared with me in the interview that, post-conference, he and his JTE (who was also in attendance) affirmed the value of probing into the roles of JTEs and ALTs, reinvigorating their resolve to lead effective team-taught lessons together. He advised, “We need to bring

JTEs together for our professional development conference; otherwise, team teaching would not work well.” ALT4 endorsed compulsory JTE attendance in professional development opportunities—particularly when a connection between JTE and ALT is lacking: “If you have a JTE you are struggling to have any kind of chemistry with, I think it is important for JTEs to also listen and study and learn [at ALT professional development conferences].” ALT8 bemoaned the absence of opportunities to listen to the viewpoints of JTEs in these forums: “There is no balance of other opinions from other points of views [sic], especially from the points of views of JTEs.” ALT3 expressed a desire for guidance on developing personal connections with JTEs and students: “It would be helpful to learn how to interact with JTEs and students on a personal basis.” ALT6 echoed the sentiment, stressing a demand for an understanding of appropriate communication methods with JTEs: “I need to know more about what kind of communication style we need to have with JTEs. That’s a big part that I want them to put in the orientation and conferences.” ALT2’s plea was straightforward: “I just want JTEs to tell me what I need to do, and I will do it. There is very little communication between us, and I want the board of education or my school to address that.” ALT5 experienced a drastic shift in understanding JTEs after gaining insight into how JTEs perceive their own professional roles in relation to ALTs: “Hearing about JTEs’ thoughts and JTEs’ perspectives were [sic] really helpful.” ALT10 concurred, advocating for ALTs to learn about various types of JTEs.

Concerning the JET Programme

The participants expressed an urgent desire for comprehensive information about the JET Programme, seeing it as a crucial aspect of their professional development. They called for clarity on the program’s objectives, successes, failures, and historical context. ALT1 articulated his aspiration to align his efforts with the program’s goals but lamented the ambiguity surrounding its overarching objectives: “I aim to fulfill the government’s vision for the JET Programme, but the specifics elude me.” ALT3 observed a contentious division between the Japanese government’s intentions and the core objectives of her team-taught lessons: “I guess there is this disparity between what the government is trying to achieve and what is actually happening in our team-taught lessons. It would be really helpful to discuss this in those conferences.” ALT5 voiced uncertainty regarding the program’s origins and its ultimate objectives, highlighting the need for transparency: “I remember reading somewhere that the JET Programme isn’t ac-

tually about teaching English but a political tool for the relationship between the US and Japan.... I want to know what the program is really about.” ALT7 echoed these sentiments, indicating an inclination to ponder the subtleties and societal implications of the JET Programme on both individual and collective levels: “I yearn to comprehend the program’s nuances and its broader impact on Japanese society on both micro and macro levels.” ALT10 illuminated the cruciality of effective communication and implementation of the program’s objectives at all levels: “The JET Programme needs to make sure that their message is understood and practiced by local boards of education, schools, and ALTs themselves.” ALT11 questioned the program’s lack of clarity in articulating its mission, thereby critiquing its current state as ambiguous and ineffective in advancing English language education or promoting cultural exchange.

Discussion and Conclusion

The participants conveyed discontent with the existing professional development opportunities that failed to cater to the complex needs of ALTs. They underscored the necessity for these orientations and conferences to delve deeper into topics concerning ALTs themselves, their team-teaching partners (JTEs), and the overarching JET Programme. Specifically, they sought an adequate understanding of their roles and positioning within their unique contexts, espoused mandatory JTE involvement in ALT conferences to cultivate more fruitful collaboration, and demanded clarity regarding the objectives and origins of the JET Programme. These findings shed important light on a sharp disparity between governmental aspirations and the realities of language education and cultural exchange dynamics at the grassroots level. Even though the professional development events did include some topics about ELT theories and pedagogies, the current focus might appear to center more on individual challenges ALTs face as *foreign residents* in Japan rather than addressing their *professional and cultural ambassadorial roles*. This pattern underlines an implicit or explicit perception of ALTs not as language educators but as mere non-Japanese outsiders, thus corroborating Hiratsuka’s (2022) findings, where foreign identity emerged as a primary facet of ALT identity. It is interesting that the participants in this current study chose not to discuss or criticize so much during their interviews the linguistic/applied linguistic theories and teaching “tips” from their skill development events but instead chose to focus on themes of defining ALTs/JTEs/ the JET Programme. This divergence suggests that the topics of teaching methodologies and theories may have been deemed irrelevant or easily acces-

sible online and so did not warrant deliberation in the interview. It could also be that the participants’ perceived lack of urgency or necessity on these topics stems from their pre-existing backgrounds in educational studies and experiences. In hindsight, I may have been biased in selecting participants with significant educational backgrounds and experiences, or the participant pool may have already been skewed in that direction (see Hiratsuka, 2025). In either case, this finding runs counter to the findings of previous studies (see Borg, 2015; Murray, 2010; Richards & Farrell, 2005; Ur, 2012)—perhaps because of the peculiar nature of the ALT job in Japan (e.g., as teaching assistants). Alternatively, it is possible that the participants focused on topics (e.g., ALT and JTE identities) that were of interest to me and/or among the subjects of one of my conference presentations, thinking that these were what I wanted to hear about. If this is the case, it may represent a limitation of the current study.

Nevertheless, this inquiry has two principal implications. Firstly, educational authorities and JET Programme administrators should include detailed information and further clarification regarding ALTs, JTEs, and the JET Programme itself in ALT professional development events. Secondly, fostering collaborative engagement between JTEs and ALTs as English language educators should be prioritized within their professional development spheres. Moreover, given the pivotal importance of collaboration with JTEs and local contextual awareness accentuated in this inquiry, the tailoring of ALT professional development initiatives to accommodate varying levels of ALTs’ Japanese language proficiency and school sectors (i.e., elementary, junior high, and senior high schools) is indispensable (see also Hiratsuka, 2017). To improve these areas, there should be more oversight by governmental administrative bodies to standardize the content and quality of professional development events.

In terms of future research, a longitudinal exploration encapsulating the entire range of stakeholders, including JTEs, teacher educators, and external lecturers of professional development conferences, should be pursued to gain a more comprehensive picture of professional development effectiveness. In addition, comparative analyses between ALT and JTE professional development opportunities offer promising avenues for understanding their divergences and convergences. Lastly, comparative analyses between the professional development of ALTs in Japan versus foreign English language teachers in other countries (e.g., Brazil, China, Hong Kong, Slovakia, South Korea, and Thailand) would positively impact their respective teaching environments (see Hiratsuka, 2023b).

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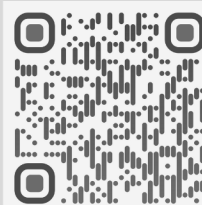
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Appendix

Information on Participants

Name	ALT 1	ALT 2	ALT 3	ALT 4
Gender	Male	Female	Female	Female
Age at the time of interview	23	23	24	24
Nationality	USA	USA	USA	New Zealand
Major	English (BA)	Spanish (BA)	Comparative Literature (BA)	Japanese (BA)
Schools assigned	Junior high	Junior high	Junior high	Junior high
Years as an ALT	1	1	1	1
Japanese ability	Advanced	Beginner	Beginner	Advanced

Name	ALT 5	ALT 6	ALT 7	ALT 8
Gender	Female	Female	Female	Female
Age at the time of interview	25	26	26	27
Nationality	USA	USA	USA	Philippines
Major	East Asian Languages and Cultures (BA)	Theater Arts (BA), Teaching (MA)	Asian Studies (BA), Applied Linguistics (MA)	English Language Studies (BA)
Schools assigned	Elementary	Elementary	Junior high	Junior high
Years as an ALT	3	1	1	5
Japanese ability	Advanced	Beginner	Intermediate	Advanced

Name	ALT 9	ALT 10	ALT 11
Gender	Male	Male	Female
Age at the time of interview	27	28	32
Nationality	Canada	South Africa	USA
Major	Philosophy (BA), Religion (MA)	Communications (BA)	Theater and Performance (BA), English Education (MA)
Schools assigned	Junior high	Junior high and Elementary	Senior high
Years as an ALT	3 (2018-2020 and 2023-)	5	2
Japanese ability	Beginner	Intermediate	Beginner