

Dispatch Language Companies at Japanese Universities: An Underexamined Relationship

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Dispatch language companies have become widespread in Japanese higher education, providing a variety of services such as filling instructor positions, operating extracurricular programs, and running accredited language departments. This article provides a background analysis of how these companies operate within the current university system in Japan. It finds that this subject has so far received little attention. Why these companies find university contracts desirable, and from the other side, why some universities find dispatch companies beneficial, is discussed. It also examines how these companies have come to play a significant role in the training and development of future instructors. The article suggests reevaluating the role of these dispatch companies and the services they provide on campus.

日本の高等教育機関では、語学教師派遣会社の利用が拡大しており、講師の補充、課外プログラムの運営、正規の語学系専攻の運営など、さまざまなサービスを提供している。本稿では、日本の大学制度の中でこれらの派遣会社がどのように機能しているかについて背景分析を行う。結果として、このテーマがこれまでほとんど研究されてこなかったことが明らかになった。これらの企業が大学との契約を望ましいと考える理由、それに対して、一部の大学が派遣会社を有益と考える理由についても考察する。また、これらの企業が将来教員となる者の指導と育成において重要な役割を果たすようになった経緯についても検証する。本稿により、語学教師派遣会社の役割と派遣会社が大学に提供しているサービスの再評価を提言するものである。

<https://doi.org/10.37546/JALTTLT49.3-3>

The landscape of Japanese higher education has changed significantly since the early 1990s, including the hiring practices and academic requirements of English and EFL faculty (Hale & Wadden, 2019). In the past there was less competition, and instructors from overseas could find permanent positions with job security while possessing fewer academic credentials and publications than would be expected today. There is also a much clearer delineation in the present between an instructor position and a professor position, with a Ph.D. required for professor positions, whereas in the past an M.A. may have been adequate (Larson-Hall & Stewart, 2019; Parrish, 2015).

Further employment changes have come about due to the 2013 Labor Contract Act revision, which allows employees on fixed-term contracts for over five years to apply for an unlimited-term contract. The employer must accept this application (General Union, 2024). While implemented to increase job security for fixed-term contract employees, it has had the opposite effect overall, with universities now commonly offering contracts of no longer than five years. This has negatively impacted job security in higher education, where having an ongoing annual contract that was continuously renewed indefinitely is now essentially a thing of the past, both for part-time and full-time staff (Okunuki, 2016).

Amid all these job security and employment changes, one element has not received adequate attention: the rise of dispatch language companies operating at Japanese universities and their role in tertiary English education.

Background

EFL instructors in Japan are commonly employed in two distinct ways. “Direct hire” is when a university directly employs an instructor, which makes this individual an employee of the university. “Dispatch,” or outsourcing, is when an instructor is hired by a separate dispatch company, which then sends the instructor to a university to teach English courses. These two forms of employment apply to both part-time and full-time instructors.

This dispatching encompasses a wide range of activities, from a single instructor placed in a pre-existing program, to a whole department being operated and staffed by a dispatch company with various degrees of oversight from the educational institution. Dispatch companies operate at all levels of education, from K-12 to university, with multiple companies operating in different regions and differing in their business methods, educational specialties, and employment practices (Goodhew & Kozlowski, 2021).

It is unknown how many dispatch language companies currently operate in Japan, how many

instructors they employ, and how fast this industry has grown over the years. Understandably, specific companies are hesitant to share such private information. Some are independent companies focusing on a specific dispatching service, while others are corporate subsidiaries of larger, well-known *Eikaiwa* chains. At the university level, dispatch instructors can typically teach two broad categories of courses: Extracurricular courses are essentially an *Eikaiwa* on campus, and students who desire this additional English practice must usually pay for it. Accredited courses provide students with credit upon completion, either as a required course for their major or as an elective, and these courses are part of their formal university education (Goodhew & Kozlowski, 2021).

While there is literature on the use of dispatch ALT companies at the high school level (Aspinall, 2008; Flynn, 2009; Martin, 2010; Sekeres, 2010), there is little explicitly focused on tertiary education. Butler (2019), writing on the concept of the “ronin” teacher and how one can make a living as a “full-time part-timer,” mentions that dispatch companies are increasingly competing with part-timers for courses at many universities. Milliner (2017), writing on the lack of support part-time English instructors receive while being the bedrock of many university programs, remarks that the growing trend of using dispatch companies worsens their plight. Parrish (2015), writing from a career development perspective, comments that employment through a dispatch company can be a way for aspiring teachers to sidestep universities’ requirements that all instructors possess a graduate degree.

Kozlowski (2020), drawing on his previous experience as a salesperson and administrator at a dispatch company, has presented on how dispatch companies gain access to universities and attempt to expand their influence once established on campus. He states that dispatch companies find university contracts desirable, as they provide a steady stream of income, with additional benefits such as name recognition for the company and a work schedule for instructors that may allow them to be assigned to multiple jobs a week. It is perhaps one of the few sectors within the private language school industry that consistently turns a profit. From the other side, universities find dispatch companies beneficial, as once the service or program of instruction has been determined, the company manages all administrative, HR, and day-to-day teaching operations. These companies can also provide additional peripheral services that the university traditionally may have little experience with, such as study abroad programs, online programs, and test preparation (Kozlowski, 2020).

Implications for Instructors

For direct-hire instructors currently employed at universities, the mere mention of dispatch companies may elicit immediate concerns about their employment security and future opportunities, as Butler (2019) and Milliner (2017) have stated. It is true that, with a finite number of accredited courses being offered at a university at any given time, any course taught by a dispatch employee is one less taught by a direct hire. It may be incorrect, however, for the direct-hire to assume that the potential antagonism between the two is centered on cost. While dispatch employees make much less than their direct-hire peers, the price the dispatch company charges the university is significantly higher than the instructor’s wage. This markup is used to fund their day-to-day operations, pay the salaries of non-teaching support staff, and turn a profit for the company. Instead of cost savings, the primary benefit these companies provide universities is easing administrative burdens (Kozlowski, 2020).

Dispatch companies have also come to play a significant role in the training and development of future university instructors. These aspiring instructors commonly find themselves in a catch-22 situation—almost all direct-hire positions require some previous university experience, but how does one gain this initial experience if they have never worked at a university? Dispatch companies, in contrast, will typically hire those who have teaching experience but not at the university level (GaijinPot Jobs, 2022; Westgate, 2024). Consequently, unless instructors gain this university experience before moving to Japan, a common career path in the current job market is to obtain a graduate degree, work for a dispatch company to gain this required experience, and then transition to direct-hire employment. Working at a dispatch company has thus become, for many, a necessary step on this path.

Implications for Administrators

The appeal of these dispatch companies to university administrators is very understandable. Once the scope of the contracted service has been determined, the company performs all administrative, HR, recruitment, and employee-management functions. Sometimes the university has a clear plan and may give the company a pre-made syllabus for the dispatch instructors to follow. In other cases, the university and the company will work together to create a syllabus that works for both entities (Kozlowski, 2020).

What must be remembered is that these companies, as for-profit entities, are primarily motivated

by revenue, or in the case of university dispatching, by retaining and perhaps increasing their current teaching contracts. Their primary interest is keeping the university satisfied with their services, not the education of the students taught by their dispatch instructors.

However, this relationship is further complicated because, as these dispatch companies are motivated to keep their contracts, they often engage in more quality control than direct-hire university departments. Their lesson plans are systematic and structured in a way that instructors know exactly what they are supposed to do at every stage. Teacher observations are regularly conducted so the company knows whom they want to rehire and who needs additional teaching practice. These companies often have a university-facing support staff with a much better understanding of what is happening week-by-week in the classroom throughout the semester. This profit incentive may keep the standards and educational outcomes of the courses high (Goodhew & Kozlowski, 2021).

Future Directions

Regarding the categories of courses taught by dispatch companies, the distinction between extracurricular and accredited courses should not be overlooked. The fact that dispatch instructors are allowed to teach accredited courses without possessing a graduate degree—only permitted to do so by the university because they are not direct-hire employees—seems like an employment loophole that should be closed. Currently, there are university students in Japan who have taken multiple English classes for credit, as required for their major or as general education language credits, and unknown to these students these classes were not only 1) taught by dispatch instructors, rather than university faculty, but 2) taught by instructors that perhaps did not possess a graduate degree as generally required. Certain accreditation standards and minimum requirements should be held consistently throughout the university system. It is somewhat ironic that this is occurring at the same time as the academic credentials required for direct-hire positions are generally increasing.

One possible strength of dispatch companies may be in their ability to offer general or specialized extracurricular courses to highly motivated students and those with specific goals. These courses can, at times, be paid for or subsidized by the university (Campus English, 2024a). Many universities already provide “English Lounge” sessions, with direct-hire instructors obligated to attend a certain number

each week. However, as these duties are in addition to their standard teaching load, these sessions are frequently low on the list of priorities for the instructor. Dispatch companies may be able to provide a more enhanced and focused program by enlisting instructors who can be fully dedicated to its implementation (Campus English, 2024b).

Conclusions

The rise of dispatch language companies operating at Japanese universities is an underexamined development that warrants further attention. The relationship between universities, the companies, the instructors, and the administrative staff is complex. At every university where a dispatch company operates, there is a unique relationship defined by the services provided and the distinctive role the company serves. However, general observations on this relationship can be made at the systemic level.

Regarding potential avenues of further research into these dispatch language companies, one possible approach would be for examinations from the perspective of teacher identity, especially of instructors who had previously been dispatch employees but have now become direct-hire instructors. There is some literature on transitioning from a different teaching context to the university level: Hooper writes on the experience of transitioning from *Eikaiwa* to university from the perspective of 11 surveyed instructors (2019) and his own (2018). Ferrier (2018) writes on his own experience transitioning from ALT to university. Unfortunately, no comparable literature exists on the experience of university dispatch to university direct-hire. Hopefully, future research can shed more light on this underexamined aspect of EFL tertiary education in Japan.

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