Foreign Teachers in Japanese Secondary Schools: Why Aren’t They Happier?

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Introduction

When the Japan Exchange Teaching Program (JET Program) began in 1987, about 850 university graduates were recruited from English-speaking countries to work in junior and senior high schools as assistant English teachers (AETs) to team-teach with Japanese teachers of English (JTEs). They were to teach English communicatively, as well as internationalize the school environment. By 1995 the number of AETs had exceeded 3000, suggesting that the program has been a raging success. However, a quick survey of articles written on the subject in local teachers’ journals indicates that this is highly debatable. Maybin (1989), for example, has commented:

*Letters to editors of national newspapers regularly detail horror stories of incompetency and insensitivity by both instructors as they apparently wrestle through the lesson plan and with each other. One suspects a great deal of time, money and human resources are currently being expended to create an education nightmare for both teachers and students.* (p.63)
Most of the pieces written about the JET Program give an overview of the general problems (typically: 'JTEs are reluctant to team-teach', 'AETs don't know enough about Japan', 'the textbooks aren't up to standard', 'there is poor communication between AETs and JTEs'). The majority of these articles have been written by individual teachers on the basis of their personal experiences in the program (Kume 1989, Maybin 1989, Leedham 1991, Inoue 1992, Iwami 1992, Scholefield 1994) or are reports of the opinions and ideas thrown forward at conference workshops (Shiozawa and Rives 1988, Rowe 1994).

Although this body of literature is useful in providing an overall picture of the various problems that exist in this cross-cultural work situation, it is surprising that so few reports include any concrete (as opposed to anecdotal) data. Only two studies that I am aware of provide such data in the body of the report. One is a questionnaire by Kawamura and Schloss (1989) that investigated JTEs' attitudes to AETs in Ishikawa prefecture, coming up with such facts and figures as '79.4% of AETs lack professional experience', and '83.3% of team-teaching classes are preceded by joint planning'. The other, by Yukawa (1992), was an ethnographic study conducted in a senior high school reading class over a one-year period that observed the routine teaching strategies used by the AET and the JTE, and the way these strategies changed over time due to the influence of each teacher on the other. Neither of these two studies, however, directly address the issue with which we are concerned here - the underlying reasons for intercultural friction between AETs and JTEs.

### Data Collection

This study examines the teaching situation of a junior high school AET working in a smallish city (population 145 000) in Chiba prefecture. He is in his third year as an AET, and is not particularly discontented with the JET Program - in fact he enjoys his work and is quite a popular teacher, and has a good relationship with the JTE featured in this study. He was interviewed twice, and several of his team-taught classes were recorded. In this study, the data is taken from one particular third grade lesson that was representative of the team-taught lessons observed. [In the transcripts and general text the AET is referred to as 'Jamie' and the JTE as 'Matsumoto' - not their real names.]

The following key is used in the transcripts: J= Jamie, M= Matsumoto, AS= all students, FS= a few students. Japanese words are underlined, as in so desu ne. Words in brackets, like [laughter], are comments of the author. Short pauses are indicated by three dots, like ..., and four or more dots indicate slightly longer pauses. The symbol ~ indicates the trailing off of the voice due to incompleteness of the utterance.

To give the classroom data a sense of context, the framework of the lesson is provided here:

1. **Greetings. (2 minutes)**

   AET and JTE addressed the class with opening salutations and questions such as 'How are you?' and 'What is today's date?'

2. **New Vocabulary. (17 minutes)**

   Target items introduced: _planet, space, travel, jewel, moon, realize, beauty, marble, astronaut, from behind, at first_. JTE showed the words on a flashcard,
and the students repeated each one three times after the AET. The AET, with the help of the JTE, explained the meaning in English, and the students were invited to give the Japanese equivalent.

3. Presentation. (14 minutes)

The text, section 6-1 from the Sunshine 3 textbook was presented in a novel form: as an interview between 'MASA Space Station' (Matsumoto's nickname being Masa) on Earth, and two astronauts in space, Kousuke and Yuki (actually the names of two popular members of the class). The presentation was given twice - students were given four listening points to think about after the first run-through.

4. Listening Points (5 minutes)

The students were given a minute or so to write down their answers to the listening points. The teachers then asked for feedback of the answers.

5. Cloze (5 minutes)

The JTE reviewed the new vocabulary items again (speedily, using the flashcards). The students were given the text on paper with gaps. The AET then read it twice, slowly, and students completed the cloze. The JTE then checked the answers orally.

6. True or False Check. (4 minutes)

Comprehension of the text was then checked by a T or F quiz given by the AET. Students indicated their answers by hand signals.

7. Closing Remarks (1 minute)

Both teachers farewelled the class formally, and students farewelled the teachers (in English).
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morning Mr Smith’ or the teacher says ‘How are you today?’ and the students say ‘I’m fine thank you and you?’... In the cases where I can start the class, I use very simple terms. I might say ‘Good morning’ or ‘Good afternoon’, but I typically throw in one other expression... just something to get the students to think, and it’s amazing that the lights actually go on in their heads and you can see that they understand what you’re saying.

Q. Do the Japanese teachers like to play with the patterns in the same way?
A. Um, I don’t think they like to, ah, it depends on the teacher. The school I’m at now, I don’t think any of the teachers have used anything outside of the pattern.

Q. Is that typical, or atypical?
A. I think it’s typical. The exception is a teacher who will throw different things at the students at the start of the class. But typically no, they stick with the norm. And it’s terribly terribly mind numbing and boring for me to listen to. And certainly if the student goes through first, second and third grade listening to very similar English at the start of the class all the time, it’s going to be a distraction I think.

Q. A distraction?
A. A distraction from them wanting to study English because it’s not a useful language. It doesn’t serve any purpose... it’s not a tool they feel they can use if they’re limited to... let’s say by the time they reach the third grade, a pool of five greetings. Certainly it doesn’t start
them up, get them fired up.

Although Jamie is not a teacher discontented with his lot, it is evident from these comments that even he harbours views on the purpose of language teaching that are seemingly at odds with that of the system (and even the culture) in which he works. He tries to coax creative output from the students through the use of non-pattern language: 'just something to get the students to think, and it's amazing that the lights actually go on in their heads' - the implication being that without the challenge to provide this kind of output, the students will virtually switch off. And if the students are not switched off, he certainly is: 'and it's terribly, terribly mind numbing and boring for me to listen to'. There is an assumption that the production of this type of output is a central purpose in learning a foreign language - without it, English is 'not a useful language, it doesn't serve any purpose'. Yet it may well be argued that English education in junior high school is 'useful' only in so far as it helps one pass examinations for a desired senior high school. Note also that Jamie makes a further assumption about the nature of classroom interaction when he states that 'certainly it doesn't start them up, get them fired up.' This assumes that active participation is a necessary constituent of a language lesson - a fair enough assumption in the communicative classrooms of the West, but not necessarily so in Japan where English is often viewed as merely as a body of knowledge to be acquired.

At several points in the lesson it could be observed that students were reluctant to participate publicly even when seemingly safe opportunities to do so presented themselves. For example, they would not supply the answer to a question even though they clearly knew what the answer was. This was evident during the teaching of new vocabulary, the feedback on the listening points, the answers to the cloze, and in the true/false quiz. In many of these cases the students even had the correct answers written in front of them. In this extract, the teachers called for answers to the listening comprehension questions:

M:  [In Japanese, repeated in English]
J:  OK.
M:  OK. Number one.
J:  Number one. Does the Earth look different from space?
M:  Dou? Kotaete San hai.
AS:  [Low voices] Yes it does.
M:  So da ne.
J:  OK.
M:  [In Japanese, repeated in English]
J:  Number two. What does the Earth look like to Kousuke?
M:  Kousuke kotaeraren?
J:  What does the Earth look like to~
M:  Nanka itteta yo naa. Nantoka de nantoka no nantoka... Nantoka de nantoka de nantoka no nantoka... A....? Ha-ha. A.....?
J:  A nantoka to nantoka no nantoka.
M:  Nantoka iro de nantoka iro no nantoka, San hai- A....? naniro? Blue... soshide Ha? And... naniro? White... de? ... Kore da yo, kore, kore. [Pointing to an illustration of a jewel drawn by Jamie on the blackboard.] A blue and white... So da ne, ALT ga kaita... Blue and white? Nanadake? A blue and white? Kore ne, kore da, [Pointing at the picture again.] A blue and white jewel. Ne. Thank you, ALT.
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self, the protection of which is highly valued in Japan. Although high-level individual participation of a creative nature is likely to be highly assessed in a Western classroom, this is not necessarily the case in Japan, and is another possible cause of discontent among AETs:

Q. Do you feel that your idea of a ‘good student’ coincides with that of the Japanese teachers’ idea of a good student?

A. ... A lot of times it doesn’t, and that’s funny. Because I’ve asked some of the teachers about particular students that are outspoken in class and participate in class heavily. I’ve asked the teachers, you know, ‘How’s their English?’, and a lot of the times I’m surprised and disappointed to find out that those students don’t do very well in English.

The disappointment at students’ unwillingness to actively participate in class must certainly be a potential source of discontent for AETs who have come to Japan expecting to teach communicative English. It would be natural for most AETs to wonder what purpose they serve in the system when oral communication abilities are not even examined. Students’ lack of progress in this area can be demotivating for many AETs:

Q. How do you find the students’ ability to manipulate the language, and create their own output using the language they’ve learnt?

A. I’d have to say that, considering this is just introductory English, I can’t say I’ve seen many cases where the students have manipulated the language...

Q. First grade, second grade, or third grade...
A. ...or third grade. Even some of the third grade students that have been keen throughout the three years would, ah, be able to manipulate the language, but very few. The example I gave earlier was that the second grade student that today, ah, she used the phrase, after she said it in Japanese she said, we were playing volleyball on the field, she said 'spread out'. And I'm sure she didn't see that in the lesson. So I think she gathered that on her own and she applied it to the situation. She also came to the class today at lunchtime to get me and riddled off about four sentences inviting me to the class, and, not flawless English, but I could tell that she was manipulating the language. But that is the exception. For the most part the students would not be able to manipulate the language and, I think, as part, as proof of that, or partly I can prove that by, if I was to change the question, if I have a, say an easy question like 'What day is it today?', if I change that question to, ah, 'What day of the week is it?', or 'What's today?', ah, the students have a hard time figuring that out and I find that generally none of them can really manipulate, um, I think it's the listening process.

Q. Why do you think it is that they can't do that to a great degree?
A. ...I can think of some easy answers to that question. I mean, I think that they would be glued to the textbook only and, ah, they would not explore the language outside of the textbook. They would not have a chance to use the language ... I think maybe because they might be spoon-fed a lot of the English that is necessary to, ah, in order to pass the exams. So they're ... not forced to, ah, think for themselves.
exams”), the main goal should be communicative competence - present methods are ‘a distraction’ from this goal (of ‘wanting to study English’ as ‘a tool they feel they can use’). Therefore he is naturally ‘disappointed’ at students’ inability to participate in class even on a basic level.

Improving the current situation can be viewed from two points of view: either the system can be changed to accommodate AETs, or AETs can be changed to accommodate the system. Until now, emphasis has been placed on the former. An oral communication element has been introduced in the senior high school syllabus, there are calls for improved materials to meet the demands of communicative language teaching, and the high-pressure examination system is receiving more and more attention in the media and elsewhere.

Promising though this may be, it cannot be expected that anything the size of the Japanese education system will change overnight. Nor can it be expected that just because the system changes, the culture does too. The introduction of oral communication classes in schools does not ensure that they will be taught effectively, or that AETs will suddenly come into their own as vital cogs in the school machine. All the old culturally determined problems will remain. For these reasons, more thought needs to be put into ways in which the quality of AETs can be improved to suit the Japanese context.

Clearly what is required is better educated AETs - ‘better educated’ in the sense of better informed about the situation into which they are coming, and more open-minded about working within it. Although Jamie is in his third year as an AET and still enjoys his work, 60% of AETs leave the job without renewing their original contracts (Shiozawa and Rives 1988) - in spite of extremely attractive conditions. The Mombusho does hold orientations prior to and on arrival, but these have been criticised for failing to prepare new teachers for the reality of junior high school life. Garant (1992) has stated that many classroom problems ‘could be avoided if traditional team-teaching was explained to incoming AETs. Rather than doing this, AET orientations tend to stress ideals and general topics’ (p.27).

Apart from improving awareness among new AETs about the particularities of Japanese culture and its relevance to the classroom, attention needs to be paid to the type of AETs being recruited. At present the only official qualifications required of AETs are that they be native speakers of English, and that they hold a recognised university degree. It seems time to introduce ability in the Japanese language (not to mention some teacher training) as further criteria. Undoubtedly many will object that this runs counter to the ideal of the AET as a pioneer English speaker in a monolingual culture, yet the evidence points to the fact that junior high schools in Japan are not ready for the innovation. Apart from the fact that students at this level have great difficulty communicating with foreigners in a language other than Japanese, the level of cultural miscommunication between AETs and JTEs remains high. Japanese language ability would lessen the isolation of the AET in the workplace, facilitating better relations all round. Furthermore, AETs who have studied Japanese are likely to have a greater appreciation of Japanese culture in general - which could only lead to less misunderstandings about teaching styles.

Sensitivity to culture can also be cultivated by allowing AETs to remain in their positions longer. In her discussion of ‘culturally diverse speech styles’
and their relevance to the classroom, Robinson (1987) noted that

*Multicultural understanding takes place as individuals become multicultural to some degree - that is, when individuals have multiple ways of interpreting things and possess multiple interaction styles that correspond to different cultural styles.* (p.142)

This process of ‘becoming multicultural’ is one that certainly can be achieved by living and working in a foreign culture, but it certainly cannot be achieved overnight. As regards the JET Program, AETs presently cannot remain on the program for longer than three years. This rule has been criticised by Minoru Wada, one of the original architects of the JET Program, who commented that *forcing AETs to leave their positions after three years inflicts an enormous loss on the development of foreign language education in the schools* (Cominos 1992). He also explained the existence of the rule:

*The JET Program is a cooperative venture between several ministries, and this rule represents a kind of compromise between the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Home Affairs, which is keen on promoting the cultural exchange objectives of the Program. They are therefore keen on some kind of time limit so that more and more people can take part.* (Cominos 1992, p.13)

This rule needs to be changed if AETs are to have a chance to ‘acquire the Japanese interaction style’ (to use Robinson’s expression) - a process that would surely take at least one or two years. The three year rule is counterproductive to culturally harmonious language teaching, in that the program loses those valuable teachers, such as Jamie, who made up the 40% that decided not to leave after one year, and who presumably have the keenest interest in Japan and the Japanese.

References


Scholefield, W. (1994). 'JTE attitudes to ALTs: Reflections of a one-shot ALT'. *Team Teaching Bulletin (JALT N-SIG), 2 (1).*


