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The Impact of Foreign Instructors in Japanese Schools:

An Analysis of ALT and JLT Responses to Semi-Structured Interview Protocols

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Abstract

The present study compared the perspectives of 13 Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) and 14 Japanese Language Teachers (JLTs) working together through the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program regarding the actual and potential impact of foreign instructors working in different school contexts. Particular focus was on analyzing responses to semi－structured interview protocols to determine views on ALT impact on school atmospheres, student learning and motivation as well as JLTs' pedagogical approaches, proficiency in English and extent to which they believe team-teaching to affect the difficulty level of their jobs. Participant narratives yielded three main themes, or findings. First, ALTs and JLTs differ in assessing the effects of team-teaching on solo-taught, or 'regular' English lessons. Second, ALTs are more likely than JLTs to sense improvement in team-teaching over time, while both groups perceive that the longer an ALT spends at a school, and the bigger the school, the less the impact of the ALT on school atmosphere. Third, and unexpectedly, ALTs and JLTs express different views as to whether or not team-teaching renders JLTs' jobs more difficult, with JLTs being much more positive on this point.

Key words: JET Program, team-teaching, school environment, cross-cultural understanding

Introduction

This study constitutes part of a larger investigation into the effects of the increasing presence of foreign instructors on working environments and student learning in public junior and senior high schools. Based on the findings of a large scale questionnaire survey (Meerman, 2002, 2003) conducted with foreign Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) and Japanese Language Teachers (JLTs) working together through the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program, interview protocols were developed to gain more in-depth perspectives. Questionnaire surveys are useful in gaining a broad perspective on a subject, yet can only measure *perceived* impact and by nature have a tendency to lead to generalization. Interviews and observation allow for deeper insights, and can be the basis for statements as to *actual* impact.

Numerous authors (e.g., Halpin and Croft, 1963; Freiberg, 1998; Leonard and Leonard, 2001) have effectively argued that each school has its own environment. This observation also applies to the Japanese setting, and if anything is further intensified by the introduction of foreign instructors from different cultures now occurring on a large scale through the JET Program. The positive relationship between the quality of professional working environments in schools and both student and teacher performance, satisfaction, retention, and efficacy is well documented (e.g., Freiberg, 1999; Goodson & Hargreaves, 1996; Lieberman 1988; Rozenholtz, 1989).

Much has also been written on the Japanese school from the perspective of those who have experienced Japanese education both as students and teachers (e.g., Benjamin,1997; Feiler, 1991; Simmons, 1990). Literature on the JET Program is now proliferating (e.g., Adachi et. al., 1998; Chandler and Kootnikoff, 1999; Gorsuch, 2002; Juppe, 1998, 2000; Laufer, 1998, and McConnell, 2000). To date, however, collections of personal narratives based on team-teaching, while interesting in themselves, have not undertaken comparative statistical analysis in order to arrive at a deeper understanding of team-teaching as a professional practice. Accordingly, this paper reflects an effort to go beyond reporting *what is* or *was,* to *what works* and *why.* Focus is on seven selected aspects of the team-teaching dynamic, and what 27 Japanese and foreign educators have to say concerning ALT impact in these areas, and how this impact might be ultimately improved.

Method

Participants

This study focused on a purposive sample of 13 Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) and 14 Japanese Language Teachers (JLTs) working together as team-teaching partners through the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program in junior and senior high schools in Hiroshima Prefecture, Japan. Japanese subjects for this study were obtained by approaching the principals of four local public schools (2 junior high, 2 senior high) to solicit the participation of their staffs. Schools were selected based on physical setting (urban, rural), size (in terms of student numbers), age (years since construction), and academic orientation (known to excel in a particular subject area), with the aim of investigating whether these characteristics would have indirect bearing on the ability of foreign instructors to make an impact on their environments.

Access to foreign participants (ALTs) in addition to the five employed at the four aforementioned schools was achieved with the assistance of the Hiroshima Municipal Board of Education (HMBE). Both male and female ALTs with varying degrees of team-teaching experience, and who were employed at schools in different settings were interviewed.

Interview Protocol

Of the 15-item interview protocol, 7 questions (see Appendix) were considered pertinent to the focus and scope of this paper, and involve possible variables concerning the ALTs actual impact on their surroundings - positive as well as negative - and thoughts as to their potential for making a positive contribution to English education and cross-cultural understanding in Japanese schools. The variables were selected upon consideration of related literature, consultation with numerous present and former ALTs and JLTs, and personal experience (over eight years) working with Japanese educators at both the school and school board levels.

Extensive trial testing ensured that both Japanese and foreign English teachers considered interview items pertinent. Changes made following these trials led to the development of an interview protocol consisting of both closed and open-ended questions. This was considerably effective in inviting respondents to share in-depth commentaries, as well as this structure might also have been particularly suited to the nature of the participants interviewed. As Morton-Williams (1993) notes, "Highly educated respondents in interviews expect to have a chance to express their particular views; very structured questionnaires that do not allow for sufficient opportunity for them to respond in their own words can be very unpopular and lead to (prematurely) aborted interviews" (p. 188). The language, structure and content of questions in this study therefore reflected from the outset a consideration of interviewee characteristics. The combination of both closed and open-ended questions was intended to accommodate participants' various English speaking abilities, age levels and social positions. One who struggles to express himself or herself in a second language is not usually given to lengthy elaboration in that language. Therefore, more specific questions were included to fill in any information gaps left by those participants with less capacity than others to offer comprehensive responses.

Scaling

Interview protocols comprised 15 questions, followed by an opportunity for participants to elaborate freely upon the ALTs' overall impact on students, staff and the school environment in general. These latter comments were combined to form 'impact statements', which effectively summarize general impressions that could be formed without the restrictions posed by closed-question structuring. "Yes" responses were scored "1", while "no" responses were scored "0".

Data Gathering Procedure

Interview protocols were sent to participants one week prior to the actual interview to allow each to consider his or her responses. By way of a postage-paid response post-card, I was invited to the four schools to conduct interviews with ALTs and JLTs during their free periods, and to observe team-taught and solo-taught lessons. Narratives were recorded, transcribed and analyzed to reveal perspectives on the impact of the foreign assistant language teacher on the overall school environment in general, and their impact on student learning and lesson content in particular.

Interviews were conducted individually, over a period of two months (May - June, 2003). This provided an interesting blend of ALT-JLT combinations. In that JET Program participants come to Japan in August, even the most inexperienced ALT interviewee had at least three-quarters of a year team-teaching experience. As for JLTs, however, in that the new school year in Japan starts in April, some were fresh out of university teacher training programs while others had been team teaching for as many as 25 years. There were, therefore, novice (inexperienced) ALTs and JLTs working together in various combinations and circumstances. Compounded by the number of schools visited during the study, virtually every combination of ALT-JLT was observed, as far as length of teaching experience was concerned. This variety in circumstances, although being beyond my control regardless of the time of year I chose to do interviews, contributed to, rather than detracted from the study. The narratives of the participants in this study could represent both current and retrospective accounts of what team -teaching is like for all involved in the process.

ALT Responses and Analysis

Agree-or-disagree responses by 13 ALTs to the seven questions are tabulated and re-arranged on the basis of frequency of agreement in Table 1. ALTs' self-perception concerning 'impact on student's attitudes toward English' is notable in that all responded positively to this question. Conversely, few ALTs perceived having any effect on the pedagogical approach of their team-teaching partners.

Table 1. Breakdown of ALT responses to seven questions

ID	Impact on JLTs' teaching approach	ALT visits make JLTs' job more difficult	Impact on JLTs' English proficiency	Team-teaching improving over time	Impact on school atmosphere	Impact on students' communicative abilities	Impact on students' attitudes towards English
101	0	1	1	1	1	1	1
102	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
103	1	1	0	0	0	0	1
104	1	0	1	1	1	1	1
105	1	1	0	0	1	1	1
106	0	1	1	0	0	1	1
107	0	0	0	1	1	1	1
108	0	0	0	1	1	1	1
109	0	1	1	1	0	1	1
110	0	1	1	1	1	0	1
111	1	0	0	1	1	1	1
112	0	0	1	1	1	1	1
113	0	1	1	1	1	1	1
Agree	5	8	8	10	10	11	13
Disagree	8	5	5	3	3	2	0

The quantification method of the third type (hereafter, the quantification method III) was conducted to analyze similarities of response patterns. In the present study, this method was used to quantify seven interview

Table 2. Values of three axes of ALT responses to seven questions as determined by the quantification theory type III

#	Questions	1st axis	2nd axis	3rd axis
1	Impact on JLTs' teaching approach	0.361	-0.136	0.176
2	ALT visits make JLTs' job more difficult	0.109	0.232	-0.125
3	Impact on JLTs' English proficiency	-0.097	0.170	0.239
4	Team-teaching improving over time	-0.111	-0.076	0.063
5	Impact on school atmosphere	-0.051	-0.128	-0.015
6	Impact on students' communicative abilities	-0.048	-0.047	-0.111
7	Impact on students' attitudes towards English	0.020	0.001	-0.080
	Eigenvalue	0.174	0.137	0.036
	Variable Explained (%)	43.4%	34.3%	9.0%
	Accumulative Variable Explained (%)	43.4%	77.7%	86.7%

questions using 13 ALT responses. Values of nominal scale were coded 1 as 'agree' and 0 as 'disagree', as depicted in Table 1. The present study used the Excel add-in program (Excel Quantification Theory Version 1.0 provided by Esumi). The quantification method III produced three axes, as reported in Table 2, suggesting three major perspectives to discern similarities among the seven questions. The first axis indicated 43.4% of variable explained while the second 34.3%. The third axis, however, only contributed 9.0%. Combined, the first and second axes accounted for 77.7%, indicating that the results contributed highly to reveal similarities among the seven questions based on response patterns.

Interpretation of ALTs Responses

For the purpose of interpreting ALT responses, since the third axis was not considered a major perspective, the first and second axes sufficed to compose the graph presented in Figure 1. The first axis is considered to be a major perspective to grasp similarities among the seven questions based on quantified values. The second axis indicates the second major perspective. With both perspectives, the seven questions were plotted in two dimensions.

The raw data in both Table 1 and Figure 1 reveal at least three interesting patterns. Most notable among these is the extent to which respondents failed to perceive a carry-over effect of team-taught lessons, i.e. there was little change observed in the JLTs' pedagogical approach in solo-taught lessons despite team-teaching with a foreign assistant on a regular basis. One ALT stated his understanding that "team-teaching and regular lessons are separate parts of the curriculum," and that at least as far as content was concerned, the ALT can have little or no effect on what is taught in class when he or she is not there. However, that fact that most ALT respondents reported not having an impact on the teaching styles of their partners may reflect ignorance, rather than an absence of any impact. One ALT suggested that there really was no way to determine the degree of impact: "I don't know about any effect on actual classroom behavior or procedure, because I am not there to see how it could be different, but I imagine it would be 'business as usual' when I'm not here" (my emphasis).

A second finding involves a similarity between ALT opinions as to whether or not their visits make JLTs' jobs more difficult, and if they feel they are having an impact on JLTs' English speaking abilities. ALTs who answered positively to one question were likely to answer in kind to the other. This may reflect that JLTs of lower English speaking ability have a more difficult time interacting in English with the ALT, and yet simultaneously experience a steep learning curve as a result of struggling to communicate with native speakers of English. As one ALT noted, "My visits make things more difficult for those who cannot speak English, but for those who can it makes it more fun." Several ALTs shared the belief that only those JLTs who make an effort to communicate to them often derive linguistic benefit from interactions:

> If they try to improve, they can through me. I am essentially the only chance they have to practice their conversational skills. Some just don't try. One always asks for help and over time it shows. In some cases I have noticed improvement, but only for those who are willing to ask me questions.

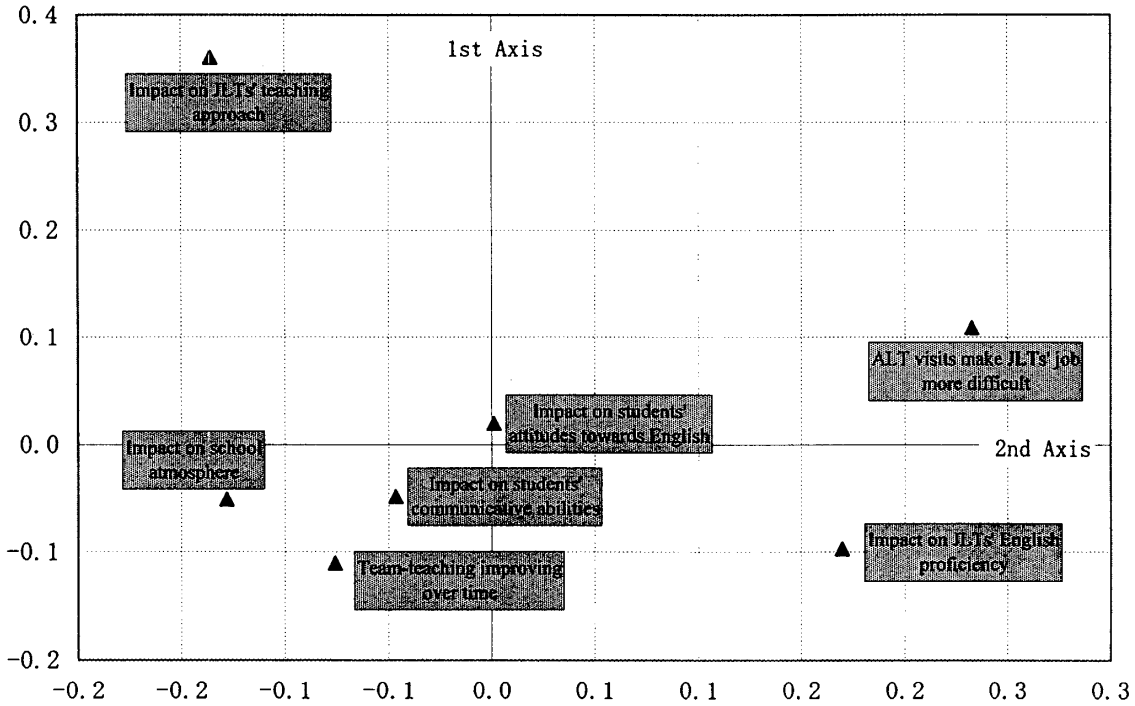

Figure 1. Plotting of seven questions based on values of 1st and 2nd axes for ALT responses

> It has to be yes if compared to not learning at all. Some learn a lot - all cannot learn a lot. The ones who visit me, who take the initiative, they are the ones who are learning. Still it's the mindset that is the most important.

Responses to the remaining four questions also resulted in a loose grouping. By and large, these indicate that ALTs feel they have an impact on student attitudes toward English, students' communicative abilities, the larger school atmosphere as well as they shared a sense that team-teaching was improving over time at their schools. Most made a strong connection between the motivational influence of their presence in the class, and student learning. Particularly interesting were opinions about the extent and form of impact for students of different ages:

> Some ALTs feel as if the older students get more out of their lessons, but actually this may be influenced by the fact the ALT can actually have something that resembles a conversation with them. But really this is just a regular progression. In junior high school, the ALT role is to excite interest and motivate the students. In senior high, it is more for grammar and practical assistance. I suppose for both levels the cross cultural awareness thing is the same.

While the mutual, positive relationship between student motivation and learning may be an obvious point, one ALT made the interesting comment that "As far as the measurability of effects of team teaching on student learning are concerned:

> This is probably impossible to evaluate. The desire to learn is there. Fortunately, I get to see progress over years, in that this is my third year at this school, and there is a general increase in English proficiency. I'm not sure if this is because of me, or [locally-based English conversation schools]. It would be very egotistical to take credit after having only been with any given student for 30 classes of 50 minutes in a class of 40 students.

A large majority of ALTs felt they were having an impact on overall school atmosphere, mostly in the respect they feel their presence alone is contributing to a more 'international' character. However, most also believed this impact diminishes over time:

> At first, yes, but over time the novelty of a new face wears off. I can communicate in Japanese now, am familiar with the customs - no longer using other people's coffee cups, you know - so I guess other than how I look, at least I do not stick out so much in terms of how I behave.

From the ALTs' perspective, interest in 'doing rounds' in the hallways to chat with students, as well as learning more about the Japanese education system wanes over time, as they become either used to their surroundings or absorbed in more administrative aspects of their job:

> I used to eat lunch with the students, but now I am usually involved just in classes. During cleaning time I check papers. Getting the students to offer daily greetings in English does not, in my opinion, necessarily mean having an effect, as other teachers often understand it to be. This does not count as changing the atmosphere, in my book.

ALTs believed that if their school-wide impact was diminishing over time, team-teaching was nevertheless gradually improving at their school. This indicates the perceived importance of establishing enduring working relationships with other staff members, in terms being comfortable working with one another, becoming familiar with various teaching styles, and establishing effective communication strategies:

> Over time, we've gotten to know each other better, so it's a lot more comfortable. We also know each other's teaching style better, so there's a lot less 'Oh, what should we do now?' moments. The roles are more defined. Communication-wise, things have gotten better. It varies from teacher to teacher, but in general there is better rapport.

JLT Responses

Agree-or-disagree responses to the seven questions by 14 JLTs are tabulated and re-arranged on the basis of frequency of agreement in Table 3. Surprisingly, JLTs' largely reported that team-teaching is not improving with time, a view that differs markedly with that of ALTs and one that supports the findings of previous, questionnaire research (Meerman, 2002). Also unexpectedly, JLTs were largely in agreement that hosting an ALT on a regular basis does not make their jobs more difficult.

Table 3. Breakdown of JLT responses to seven questions

ID	ALT visits make JLTs' job more difficult	Team-teaching improving over time	Impact on JLTs' teaching approach	Impact on students' communicative abilities	Impact on JLTs' English proficiency	Impact on school atmosphere	Impact on students' attitudes towards English
201	1	0	0	0	1	0	0
202	0	0	1	1	1	1	1
203	0	0	1	1	1	1	1
204	0	0	0	1	1	1	1
205	0	0	0	0	1	1	0
206	0	0	0	1	1	1	1
207	0	0	1	1	1	0	1
208	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
209	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
210	0	0	1	0	0	1	1
211	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
212	0	1	1	1	1	1	1
213	0	1	0	1	0	0	1
214	0	1	0	1	1	1	1
Agree	3	5	7	10	11	11	12
Disagree	11	9	7	4	3	3	2

Using the same procedure as with the ALT responses, the quantification method III was conducted to identify similarities among the seven questions in regards to the response patterns of 14 JLTs. This again produced three axes, as reported in Table 4. The first axis indicated 40.5% of variable explained while the second 24.8%. The third axis contributed 16.0%. Combining the first and second axes accounted for 65.3% which again showed a high contribution rate for explaining the response patterns.

Table 4. Values of three axes of JLT responses to seven questions as determined by the quantification theory type III

#	Questions	1st axis	2nd axis	3rd axis
1	ALT visits make JLTs' job more difficult	0.509	-0.002	0.066
2	Team-teaching improving over time	0.021	0.350	-0.071
3	Impact on JLTs' teaching approach	-0.035	-0.039	0.330
4	Impact on students' communicative abilities	-0.046	0.087	-0.029
5	Impact on JLTs' English proficiency	0.073	-0.104	-0.097
6	Impact on school atmosphere	-0.068	-0.128	-0.089
7	Impact on students' attitudes towards English	-0.082	0.017	0.015
	Eigenvalue	0.2603	0.1592	0.1030
	Variable Explained (%)	40.5%	24.8%	16.0%
	Accumulative Variable Explained (%)	40.5%	65.3%	81.4%

Interpretation of JLTs Responses

For the purpose of interpreting JLTs responses, the seven questions are visually presented in Figure 2, using quantified values of the first and second axes.

As the data in both Table 3 and Figure 2 clearly shows, there was a general consensus among JLTs that ALT visits (i.e. team-teaching) do not render their jobs more difficult. In fact, the few that did see their workload as heavier due to visits were quick to point out that this was not necessarily in a negative sense:

> It is my job. I like communication with ALTs, even if it is more difficult. It's fun to communicate with them.

> No. It widens my perspective. [The ALT] gives me a lot of teaching ideas.

Interestingly, many JLTs who did not see ALT visits as an unwanted burden were nevertheless of the opinion that team-teaching at their schools was not improving over time. Indirect or systemic factors, rather than the quality of existing team-teaching partnerships, were cited as the main cause for this:

> Before, we had more time. Now, we don't have time. Because of my change in position - I mean, as I get older - I get more work to do because there is more responsibility. And reducing the number of classes from 4 to 3 per week makes no difference now that we only have 5 days in the school week. It's plus-minus.

> Every time a new ALT comes, we have to start all over again. It's especially disappointing when the ALT leaves after just one year. One year is not enough to accomplish anything - it's meaningless, really.

On the whole, JLTs were in agreement on all questions directly related to the impact of the ALT, as seen by their close grouping in figure 2. However, while "Impact on JLTs' Teaching Approach" appears very near the centre of the diagram, respondents were divided on whether an impact was being made. This may speak to the various educational credentials and experiences different ALTs bring to each host school, which in turn affect the extent to which they are able to act as informed models of good teaching practice. It may furthermore reflect the variation (noted by ALTs, above) in the extent to which JLTs invest time and effort to communicate in English.

As seen in Table 3, strongest JLT agreement involved the question whether or not ALTs have an impact on student attitudes toward English, school atmosphere and JLTs' proficiency in English:

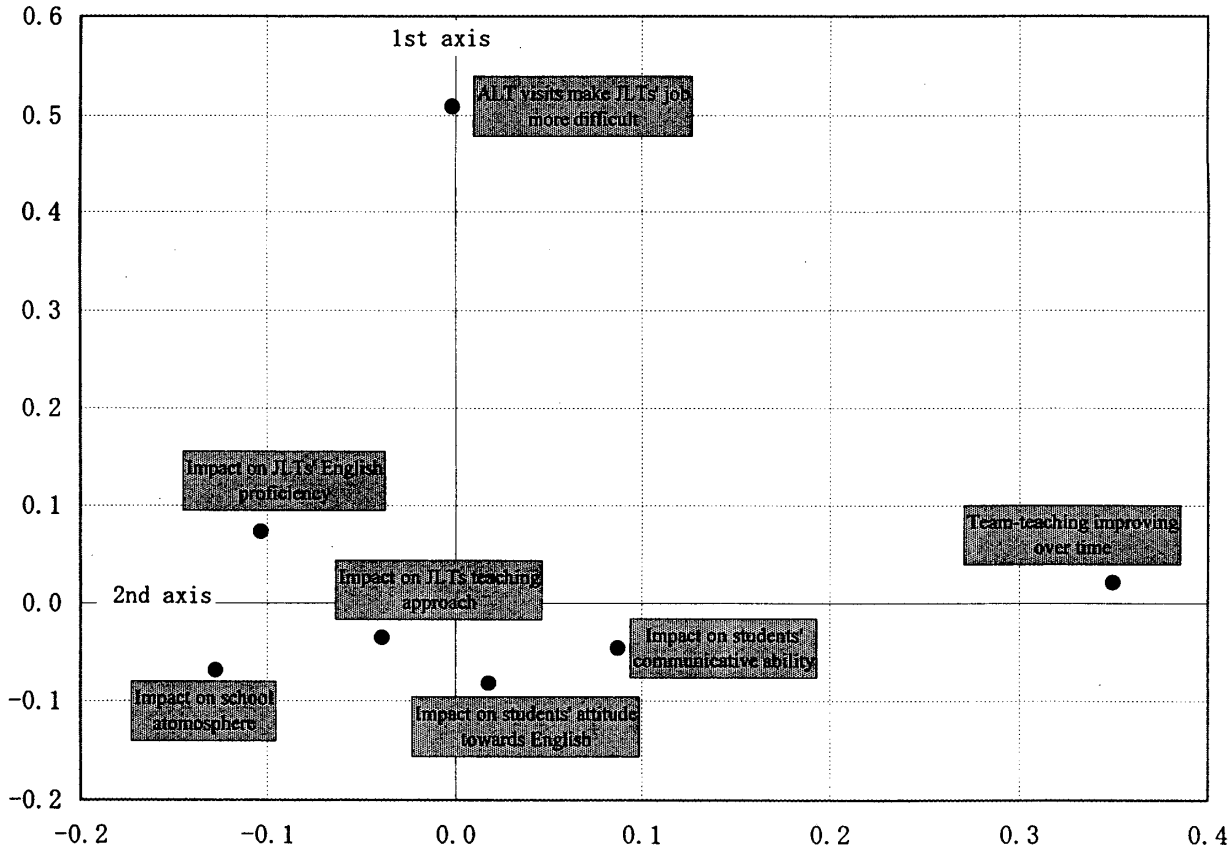

Figure 2. Plotting of seven questions based on values of 1st and 2nd axes for JLT responses

> The ALT helps students to become motivated to study English more. Once the students are motivated, I'm sure they will study more on their own. Students can learn communicative expressions through the ALT's lessons. They can also expand their vocabulary.
>
> Students now greet the ALT in English. Students are excited when the ALT is here.
>
> Of course, especially because they are the same generation as me. They are easy to talk to. Friendly. So there is no need for me to be afraid.
>
> Yes, especially in the first few years. I remember my first English dream! I have to talk to them as an English teacher. I am interested in teaching English. My ability has changed a little, not a lot, because of team-teaching. The students are the most motivated.

It is worth noting that JLTs with lower levels of English proficiency (as could be determined as interviews progressed) considered working with an ALT most beneficial in terms of arousing a motivation to study more. JLTs with decidedly higher levels, on the other hand, were more likely to identify an improvement in listening skills, rather than in speaking skills as the greatest personal benefit.

General Discussion: Comparing ALT and JLT Responses

From the narratives obtained in this interview project, three predominant themes could be discerned. First, ALTs and JLTs are in disagreement as to whether or not there is a carry over effect of team teaching on lessons which are taught solo by the Japanese teacher. This can be attributed to the fact that ALTs are not in a position to observe a class they do not attend; none of the 14 ALTs interviewed reported having observed a 'regular' (i.e., taught by the Japanese teacher alone) English class. Were more ALTs to take the time to visit solo-taught

classes, they might be surprised to find that a significant number of JLTs have indeed adapted their lessons based on contact with an ALT, perhaps by using more communicative warm ups, games instead of drill practice, or other activities borrowed from team-taught classes.

Second, both groups perceive that the longer an ALT spends at a school, and the bigger the school, the less the impact of the ALT on school atmosphere. As one JLT noted, "At first it was exciting, but he has been here three years now, so..." However, ALTs take a markedly more optimistic view concerning the question of improvement in team-teaching over time, being that the longer their tenure, the better team-teaching becomes. From the ALT point of view, this is understood as a natural byproduct of partners simply getting to know each other better personally and professionally. JLT responses support previous findings (Meerman, 2002) that as most JLTs are considerably older than the relatively youthful JET participants, and have team-taught longer and with more partners than have the ALTs, they may evaluate present performance more critically, with an eye to the longer history of their involvement with the Program. JLTs may be comparing present ALTs to previous, experienced partners or successful team-teaching experiences, as well as they may be taking issue with a perceived disparity of work ethics, feeling that ALTs are not doing enough in the school in general with respect to planning, keeping hours, club activities, etc. (Miyashita, 1999). ALTs on the other hand view their positions in briefer terms, and therefore are more conscious of how much has been learned in a short period of time.

Third, ALTs and JLTs express different views as to whether or not team-teaching renders JLTs' jobs more difficult than if a school did not host an ALT visit, with JLTs being much more positive on this point. This finding was the opposite of what was expected, and contradicts much anecdotal literature. Miyashita (1999), for example, offers a candid and detailed explanation as to the many additional, behind-the-scenes responsibilities and interpersonal challenges that accompany ALT visitations and team-teaching. McConnell (2000) informs us that Japanese teachers half-joking compared ALTs' visits to drinking 'AL*Tea*' (just one cup will keep you up the whole night). This surprising finding could be explained in two ways. First, Japanese teachers, as high profile community members and defenders of the image of their schools, might have felt limited in the information they could feel free to disclose by ethical and contractual obligations. "Bias is a concern if ... the questionnaire or interview addresses the sort of issues on which people's opinions tend to be related to their educational status or political stance" (Palys, 1997, p. 147). That being interviewed face-to-face by a former ALT may also have affected JLT responses cannot be overlooked. A second, more positive explanation why JLTs did not consider team-teaching to be an extra burden might also be a reflection of the length of time the JET Program has been in place, and of the extent to which team-teaching has become an established part of the curriculum rather than an option with which schools can experiment. That is to say, team−teaching has been in practice long enough for it to be considered 'part and parcel' of a normal English teacher's job. As one ALT observed:

> I think I make their jobs difficult, yes. But that is the nature of team-teaching. It comes with an administrative responsibility I guess. But that does not mean they do not want me there, because I think that we discuss things and plan things that they could not think of on their own.

If team-teaching is truly gaining consideration as a joint effort to be welcomed, and not an interruption to be tolerated, then English education in Japan will have made great headway.

Appendix A
Semi-Structured Interview Protocol for ALTs

1. Has team teaching been improving at this school over time?
2. Do your visits make the JLTs' jobs more difficult?
3. Does your presence affect the atmosphere in the school?
4. Do you think JLTs' English proficiency is, or will improve through working with you?
5. Have you had any effect on JLTs' teaching styles, or approach used in lessons which they teach regularly, by

themselves?

6. Can students communicate more effectively in English because of your visits?
7. Are you having any effect on student attitudes towards English?

Appendix B
Semi-Structured Interview Protocol for JLTs

1. Has team teaching been improving at this school over time?
2. Has working with an ALT made your job more difficult?
3. Does the presence of an ALT affect the school atmosphere?
4. Has working with an ALT affected your proficiency in English?
5. Has working with an ALT had any effect on your teaching style, or approach used in lessons which you teach regularly, by yourself?
6. Can students communicate more effectively in English because of the ALT's visits?
7. Is the ALT having any effect on student attitudes towards English?

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