Role Perceptions of JTEs and ALTs Engaged in Team Teaching in Japan

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Abstract

In the Japanese EFL context, team teaching involves a Japanese teacher of English (JTE) teaching with an assistant language teacher (ALT). The process of team teaching consists of three phases: pre-instructional, instructional, and post-instructional. Substantial research on the roles JTEs and ALTs play during the instructional phase of team teaching has been conducted but relatively little exploration into the pre- and post-instructional phases has been undertaken. A survey exploring JTE and ALT role conceptualizations during all phases of team teaching, their sense of role clarity, what makes team teaching enjoyable, challenging, and successful was conducted. Findings and pedagogical implications are discussed.

Key words: JET Programme, team teaching, roles

BACKGROUND

The JET Programme & Team Teaching

Initiated in 1987, the Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme (JET, hereafter) is approaching its 30th anniversary. At that time Japan had an image problem abroad and was viewed by many as culturally cut-off from the rest of the world. A new push for internationalization, or 'kokusaika,' emerged in Japan around this time and was highly influential in the establishment of the program. Inviting young native English speakers to Japan to teach English was an avenue to internationalization. JET's establishment was no small undertaking. The Council of Local Authorities for International Relations (CLAIR) runs JET in conjunction with the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (MIC), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), along with local government bodies.

ALTs are recruited and screened by CLAIR. Applicants to the program must meet three main eligibility requirements: Be under age 35, a college graduate, and a native speaker of English. Teaching experience and Japanese language ability are not necessary. Upon acceptance to the program, ALTs are hired by local boards of education.

Team teaching was a novel idea in the Japanese context at the outset of JET but was not a new pedagogical concept. The potential for multiple instructors in the same classrooms had been recognized for some time. Nearly 30 years prior to the initiation of JET, team teaching was defined as "a group of two or more persons assigned to the same students at the same time for instructional purposes in a particular subject or combination of subjects" (Johnson & Lobb, 1959, p. 59, as cited in Bailey, Curtis, Nunan & Fan, 2001, p. 180). Bailey, Curtis, Nunan and Fan (2001) expanded on this definition slightly, adding that "... team teaching really consists of three (reiterated)

phases," pre-instructional, instructional, and post-instructional. (p.181). Other researchers (Richards & Farrell, 2005; Buckley, 1999) have expressed agreement with these phases. JET, by contrast, defines team teaching as follows:

> "… A concerted endeavor made jointly by the Japanese teacher of English and the assistant language teacher in an English language classroom in which the students, the JTE and the ALT are engaged in communicative activities" (Brumby & Wada, 1990, Introduction).

This definition of team teaching was tailored to meet a specific Japanese EFL context, specifically mentioning JTEs, ALTs, and communicative activities. This definition lacks any mention of pre-instructional or post-instructional phases.

Role Clarity in Team Teaching

ALTs typically do not receive training in team-teaching prior to their arrival in Japan. Pre-departure and welcome orientations primarily focus on the survival skills ALTs need participants need for life in Japan. ALT training, when it happens is left to the JTEs with whom they work. CLAIR does provide a handbook covering many issues, and team teaching among them. Unfortunately, however, the official JET policy on team teaching described in the handbook has itself been cited as a source of role confusion. Ohtani (2010) comments on the handbook, stating, "Ambiguous phrasing creates confusion among ALTs … The phrase "team-teaching partner" and the term "assistant," implying very different roles, frequently appeared in the "Work Duties and Workplace" section…" (p. 41). *Partner* implies a sense of equality, while *assistant* implies a secondary role. At times the book stresses that JTEs and ALTs should work cooperatively, at other times it reminds readers ALTs are *assistants*, and still other times it advises ALTs to take a great deal of initiative.

JTEs are generally given no handbook or guide of any kind. Moreover, opportunities for pre-service and in-service professional development focused on team teaching appears to be non-existent. With that in mind, we now turn to the literature on roles played by ALTs and JTEs during actual classroom practice of team.

JET has experienced many challenges since its inception. CLAIR has, from the outset, seemed primarily concerned with how JET could meet the political objectives of *kokusaika* and less concerned with educational outcomes. Mistranslations and inconsistency between supposedly identical documents presented to ALTs and JTEs, inadequate training of both JTEs and ALTs, inconsistent distribution of information, isolated ALTs, lack of time to prepare for lessons, and poor eligibility criteria for selection of ALTs are among the issues (Ohtani, 2010). There are some common refrains coming from team-teachers, particularly from ALTs. Planning and delivering team taught lessons is often left to ALTs alone. ALTs are forbidden to discipline students, and according to ALTs this becomes problematic when JTEs fail to maintain classroom discipline (Mahoney, 2004; Hasegawa, 2008; Igawa, 2008). Another common refrain from ALTs is the absence of post-instructional feedback geared towards improving lessons. Igawa (2008) found a striking difference in JTE and ALT responses when asked if they held a post team-taught lesson meeting: Over 60% of JTEs responded affirmatively, and over 80% of ALTs responded negatively (p.157). Hasegawa (2008) found that post-lesson meetings between JTEs and ALTs are almost entirely neglected. It is possible that JTEs and ALTs have a different conceptualization of what qualifies as a "meeting," with JTEs perhaps feeling that the brief discussion that occurs on the way back to the teachers' room qualifies (Igawa, 2008, p.157).

Role clarity has been discussed early and often in JET history. Brumby and Wada (1990) suggested teachers in a team-taught lessons are required to play several roles such as the instructor role, the modeler role, the resource

role, the evaluator or monitor role and the organizer or motivator role. Kaneda and Fukazawa (1991) identified the triadic interaction pattern, in which the ALT, JTE, and students engage one another freely and without script, as an ideal classroom interaction pattern. Expanding upon the triadic interaction model being ideal, Fukazawa (1997) expanded upon this pattern later, suggesting its primary strength is that it leverages ALTs' pragmatic intuitions in English. Combined with JTE awareness of pragmatic norms in Japanese, this creates a powerful example of cross-cultural communication. This is in line with the JTE-as-co-teacher model professed by Aline and Hosoda (2006).

Role ambiguity between JTEs and ALTs is one of several challenges JET has faced. In a Ministry of Education sponsored survey, Mahoney (2004) asked a single open-ended question to over 400 ALTs and nearly 1000 JTEs in an attempt to identify and clarify incongruous perceptions of team teachers' roles. The question/prompt was: "JTEs and ALTs are supposed to play different roles in team teaching. Please describe briefly your perception of these roles." Respondents identified over 40 roles. Mahoney (2004) concludes that JTEs and ALTs a.) Recognize the existence of different roles, and b.) Often disagree on who should play what role(s).

The research presented here attempts to build upon previous research by investigating the following two research questions:

1. *In what ways, if any, do JTE and ALT role perceptions differ during the pre-instructional and post-instructional phases of team teaching?*
2. *Do JTEs and ALTs feel their roles in the team-teaching process are clear?*

METHODOLOGY
Participants

All responses were anonymous. Responses were solicited through personal and professional networks of the researcher, thus comprising a convenience snowball sample. The respondents were current JTEs ($n = 18$) and ALTs ($n = 12$).

Ten JTEs had earned advanced degrees in English education, TESOL, or linguistics. The remaining eight JTEs had BAs in English or English literature. Three ALTs had advanced degrees (two in TESOL, one in special education), the remaining nine had BAs in varying fields. One ALT had secondary education licensure. ALTs, on the whole, generally had fewer years experience teaching English. ALT respondents did not fit the profile of typical JET participants well. ALTs engaged in team teaching far more than JTEs. This is unsurprising considering ALTs are employed almost exclusively to team teach.

Instrument

The survey was delivered Qualtrics (www.qualtrics.com). Two proficient Japanese/English bilinguals translated and back-translated the survey and Japanese responses the survey generated. The survey, comprised of both open ended questions and Likert-style close-ended questions, focused on the pre- and post-instructional phases of team teaching. Open-ended questions included two scenario questions, an item asking for elaboration on role clarity, and a question on what makes team teaching successful or unsuccessful.

Scenarios were created based on common challenges identified in the literature on team teaching: Lesson planning and disciplinary issues. The Likert items investigated the pre (4 items) and post-instructional phases (6 items). Participants responded to these items on a six-point scale ranging from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*. No neutral option was offered.

Analysis

Responses to the open-ended scenario questions were subjected to open-coding to identify prominent themes. For the Likert items, the small sample size ($n = 30$) mandated

collapse of response categories *strongly agree* and *agree* as well as the categories *strongly disagree* and *disagree* to allow for more reliable inferential statistical procedures to be conducted. A two-way group-independence chi-square was performed for each item to assess the relationship between group membership and agreement or disagreement with items.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Results are presented here in three sections. The first two sections report on the pre- and post-instructional phases of team teaching by combining the statistical results with the qualitative responses provided by respondents. The third section reports the results related to the direct line of questioning on role clarity in team teaching.

Pre-Instructional Phase

Four Likert items were used to gauge how cooperative JTEs and ALTs feel the process of lesson planning to be. Items 1, 2, and 3 did not reveal any systematic differences between JTE and ALT response. Item 4 (*Planning team-taught lessons is a cooperative activity between my team teaching partner and me.*) exhibited systematic differences between JTE and ALT response, $\chi^2(1, N = 30) = 11.75, p < .01$. The questions in Tables 3 and 4 are very similar. What JTEs agreed upon in Table 3 (that lessons are planned *together*), they agreed on even more strongly in Table 4 (that lesson planning is a *cooperative activity*). Conversely, ALTs indicated they somewhat agree team-taught lesson planning as being developed *together*, but agreed much less that it was a *cooperative activity*.

ALT Open-Ended Responses

Most ALTs report that they typically produce the entire lesson plan and supplementary materials, after JTEs inform them about the language point to be covered. JTEs review the ALT's lesson plan and materials, augmenting or altering as necessary. ALTs generally qualified their responses,

saying this process depended on the JTE. Some JTEs engage in supportive lesson planning that makes it a more equitable process with negotiation. As one ALT said "Depending on the teacher they might ask questions, but usually they go into the lesson blind." Another replied "This depends entirely on who the partner is... in most cases, it feels less like a team and more like a boss/underling relationship, albeit a casual one."

JTE Open-Ended Responses

Of the 18 JTEs who responded, three indicated that they make the lesson plans on their own, and one that the ALT was given free reign to design lesson plans. The remaining responses lined up consistently with what ALT respondents indicated: JTEs initiate lesson planning by identifying lesson objectives for the ALT, at which point ALTs then creates a lesson plan on their own. The following JTE comment describes lesson-planning process in a manner consistent with most ALT and JTE responses:

> I will tell my partner which lesson we're doing next week...Usually, I ask the ALT to think of a lesson plan, I will share my thoughts, and there may be some changes... but basically I will go along with the ALT's plan.

This response reveals the JTE-initiation of the lesson topic as well as the input and veto power a JTE has over ALT-developed lesson plans. It also acknowledges that JTEs typically follow ALT lesson plans, which is what ALTs generally described in their responses.

Discussion: Pre-Instructional Phase

The statistical measures suggest conflict, but the qualitative responses clearly suggest JTEs and ALTs agree on the general process of lesson planning. This divergence may be due to the nature of the word *cooperative.* Perhaps ALTs see the lesson planning process as a result of having little input in terms of the language focus of the lesson but having to create the lesson plans and materials on their

own. An ALT's lesson plan is subject to JTE approval, and the JTE may "scrap it entirely" or "agree to do it whatever it is." ALTs may view such JTE oversight as a less cooperative and more hierarchical arrangement.

What might make JTEs agree with the notion of team-taught lesson planning being cooperative? While difficult to ascertain from the survey responses, but one possibility is that JTEs view of involving ALTs in lesson planning at any level as cooperative. Teaching and lesson planning are traditionally somewhat solitary activities; involving anybody else in the teaching process is something JTEs may consider cooperative compared to the traditional model in which they plan, deliver, and reflect upon lessons primarily on their own. Another possibility is that many of the JTEs who responded to this survey may involve their ALTs in a more cooperative type of lesson planning. One limitation of this study (which will be elaborated upon later) is that the JTEs and ALTs who responded did not compose actual, working teaching-teams. It is therefore very possible that many of these JTEs strive to engage in that "ideal" process offered by the JTE quoted earlier.

Post-Instructional Phase

Six Likert items were used to gauge how JTEs and ALTs feel about the post-instructional phase of team teaching. No significant differences were found for items 1 through 5. For item 6 (*My TT partner(s) and I usually talk about the lesson we just team-taught on our way back to the teachers' room.*), the majority of JTEs report discussing team-taught lessons with ALTs on the way back to the teachers' room. ALT responses also lean toward general agreement but it less definitively so. The difference was statistically significant $\chi^2(1, N = 30) = 8.42, p < .05$.

ALT Open-Ended Responses

Nearly all ALTs indicated that classroom discipline has been an issue they have confronted. Overwhelmingly, ALT responses indicated that discussing these problems with JTEs after class was best. Two ALTs mentioned going to the homeroom teacher to discuss such misbehavior. The general tone from ALTs is reflected in this response: "*It is not the job of the ALT to discipline the class... if the JTE isn't helpful in keeping the class in control it can be very frustrating...*"

JTE Open-Ended Responses

JTEs overwhelmingly answered that such problems stem from the lessons themselves. Said one JTE, "I've experienced this... I talk to my partner and try to change something if it is about problems of lessons." Only one JTE took the position that discipline during the class is their responsibility, saying that:

> *I have been in this situation before and if I thought the students were not behaving well, I would stop the class and tell the students to be quiet even if I had to use Japanese. I will discuss with the ALT after class about how we can avoid situations like this in future classes.*

Discussion: Post-Instructional Phase

In team teaching it is crucial that teachers reflect on the quality and success of their lessons. Most ALTs and JTEs indicated that a post-lesson discussion was the preferred reflective approach to addressing problems. Viewing teaching as cyclical, however, there seems to be a disconnect between the post-instructional reflection and the beginning of the next instructional cycle. The JTE position that the problem described in scenario two stems from the lesson plan itself is disconcerting. The data on the pre-instructional phase revealed that JTEs accept ALT lesson plans with minimal modification. That an unruly classroom stems from poorly designed lessons is intuitive and probably correct, but also predictable. When ALTs with little or no pedagogical training or materials design expertise creates lessons with little oversight, lesson quality is likely to be compromised.

Other explanations exist as well. ALTs and JTEs may approach discipline from different, culturally situated perspectives. There is the possibility also that JTEs do not know that ALTs are contractually obligated *not* to discipline students.

Role Clarity

ALTs and JTEs both recognized roles are contingent on the teaching partner they are working with, and that communication is key in establishing role clarity. However they also mentioned contracts, pre-service role delineation, and institutional guidance as potential sources for establishing of role clarity or not.

Survey responses illustrated that JTEs and ALTs feel their roles are clearer when they are explicitly described during direct communication with contracting organization (CO) or team teaching partners. Absent a teaching manual or some form of institutionally-run training program, it becomes incumbent on the ALTs and JTEs to engage in direct discussion of what team teaching ideally looks like in their classrooms. Unfortunately communication seems to be lacking between all stakeholders.

CONCLUSIONS

When it comes to the first research question, *'In what ways to JTEs and ALTs role perceptions differ during the pre-instructional and post-instructional phases of the team teaching process?,'* a few non-generalizable conclusions can be drawn. During the pre-instructional phase, JTEs and ALTs seemed demonstrate general agreement on the process of planning lessons. JTEs initiate the process, ALTs often create lessons and materials, and JTEs have final say on the modification and use those materials. There was statistically significant disagreement as to whether or not this process was *cooperative*.

Post-instructionally there may be a disconnect between post-instructional reflective practices (or a lack thereof) and the subsequent pre-instructional lesson planning phase. JTEs acknowledge that ALTs generally plan lessons and create materials, but also expressed the feeling that issues of classroom discipline can be traced back to these lesson plans. These responses seem contradictory in that JTEs may be allowing ALTs to plan lessons, and then blaming those lessons for discipline problems in the classroom. In the absence post-instructional follow-up, this seems to be a tacit acceptance of a cycle of poor pedagogical practice. This is a tenuous conclusion considering participants were not actual teams.

Regarding the second research question, *'Do JTEs and ALTs feel their roles in the team-teaching process are clear?,'* JTEs generally indicated they felt clear what their roles in team teaching were, whereas ALTs generally couched their responses with *it depends on the JTE I'm working with.* Respondents who indicated roles were unclear generally blamed lack of communication between JTEs and ALTs, multiple perspectives on team teaching, and the absence of institutional guidance. Clear communication between teachers, institutional guidance, and experience teaching together were factors establishing role clarity.

The three phases of team teaching should comprise a sustained, cyclical process. By reflecting on pedagogical successes and challenges, future lessons can be designed to be more effective. This research indicates, however, that teaching teams lack time to cooperatively plan and reflect in a pedagogically formative manner. JTEs and ALTs also may not work for an organization that provides clear role distinctions. Without such an organization it is necessary for the JTE and ALT to make these distinctions, a task once again complicated by a lack of time and the fact that ALTs typically work with multiple JTEs and often at multiple schools. Left on their own to figure out what good team teaching looks like, it is little wonder ALTs so frequently prefaced their open ended responses with *it depends on the JTE.* How, then, might

stakeholders in team teaching contexts like JET facilitate such practices? The results above have implications for three groups: Contracting organizations (COs), JTEs, and ALTs.

Clear communication between all stakeholders is crucial if team teaching is to be improved lesson-to-lesson. Not only must JTEs and ALTs communicate with one another in an effort to establish clear roles and expectations, but COs must also inform JTEs and ALTs of role expectations or compel them to negotiate those expectations themselves. In practice, JTEs are very busy and ALTs are often visiting multiple schools. Making time for planning and reflection sessions is challenging given such constraints. At the very least, those JTEs who serve as ALT supervisors should be encouraged to introduce new ALTs to reflective practices and lesson planning. This is not a novel concept, but merely asking JTEs to apply certain skills they already possess to the team teaching paradigm. Japanese pre-service educators engage in student teaching where they are assigned a mentor who guides them through the lesson planning process, observes their classes, and provides constructive criticism during the post-instructional phase. Many JTEs have experience mentor teaching; considering most ALTs are not even familiar with basic pedagogical skills one would be hard pressed to think of a better application of those mentorship skills.

Another transferrable skill/practice would be lesson study. Through lesson study teachers collectively identify objectives, design lessons, observe lessons being taught, and collectively reflect on lessons. This process is often done repeatedly over several years, effectively constructing entirely new curricula in the process. Lesson study does not seem to be applied to the team-taught curricula at present.

ALTs should also be encouraged to engage in reflective practices independently. For JET, pre-departure and arrival orientations should encourage reflective practice and consider providing models and materials for ALTs that

support such practices.

This research is not without limitations. JTE and ALT respondents were not team-teaching pairs, teachers were teaching anywhere from elementary to high school, and most ALT respondents had more experience than average JET ALTs. JTEs also seemed atypical inasmuch as several had MA TESOL degrees. The survey instrument itself was balanced in collecting quantitative and qualitative feedback, however future iterations should be augmented to include a few more problematic scenarios.

Future research into roles in team teaching would be well-served by looking at actual teams of JTEs and ALTs that work together. Investigating actual teams in practice would be more informative than anonymously surveying individual JTEs and ALTs. This would allow for deeper analysis of the connected, cyclical nature of the pre- and post-instructional phases that are inextricably linked. Moreover, investigating practicing teams would enable the investigation of more specific areas of potential conflict. For example, classroom management (discipline) has been shown to be something ALTs frequently find more troublesome than JTEs.

Finding out what happens when a school opts to include team-taught lessons in the *lesson study* model would be revealing. Encouraging JTE supervisors to record what happens when they employ mentor teaching techniques to the team teaching model would be another potential project. On the ALT side it would be interesting to see what kinds of improvements, if any, would be reported after a thorough pre-service team teaching training seminar. It may be useful in investigate what pre-service ALTs and JTEs think about team teaching, or how those attitudes towards team teaching change over time.

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