Making the Most of an ALT’s Time in Japan: The JET Program’s Influence on English Education and Grassroots Internationalization at the Local Level in Japan

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The Japan Exchange and Teaching Program (hereafter JET Program) is responsible for bringing thousands of foreigners to Japan every year and placing them in Japanese schools to assist in English classes and exchange culture with Japanese people. JET has existed for nearly 30 years, and has had its share of criticisms. The goal of study was to find the similarities and differences in opinions of current JET Program ALTs, current JTEs at Junior High Schools (hereafter JHS) and Senior High Schools (hereafter SHS), and regular Japanese citizens about ALTs in Japan. An online survey was conducted and received 42 responses. It was learned that the majority of criticisms about ALTs came from other ALTs, and that regular Japanese citizens have the most positive feelings towards ALTs and other foreigners living in Japan. In addition, ALTs reported on average that English education and cultural exchange are equally important parts of their jobs, but JTEs reported valuing the ALT’s contribution to English education over cultural exchange by 22%. ALTs generally reported feeling confused about their job description, while some JTEs were frustrated with the unskilled ALTs. Seeing these differences in opinions shows some lack of mutual understanding between ALTs and JTEs, and also gives insight into what improvements are needed in the implementation of JET from now on.

Key words: ALT, JET Program, grassroots internationalization, English education

Introduction:
The JET Program is one of the largest international exchange programs in the world, and has continued for nearly 30 years since 1987. The JET Program mission statement:

“The Japan Exchange and Teaching Program seeks to enhance internationalization in Japan by promoting mutual understanding between the people of Japan and those of other nations. The Program aims to enhance foreign language education and promote international exchange at the local level through the fostering of ties between Japanese youth and foreign youth alike.” (JET Program USA website)

JET pursues this goal by sending people from mostly English speaking countries to Japanese schools and city offices to work as either Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) or Coordinators for International Relations (CIRs). ALTs make up about 90% of the participants on JET. The Liberal Democratic Party of Japan (LDP), under Prime Minister Abe, set forth plans to double the JET Program in 2013. However, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) criticizes the JET Program for being a waste of money, costing Japanese tax payers 45 billion yen annually.

Whether or not the JET Program is a “waste of money” is difficult to say, and has no real value as the Program will probably continue for many years. The question this research wants to ask is, “How can the JET Program improve its implementation?” In other words, this research wanted to find what are the perceived problems, and benefits, of the JET Program according to current JET ALTs, current JTEs (Japanese Teacher of English), and other Japanese members of society.

Method:
The researcher designed a survey using the online survey tool SurveyPlanet (surveyplanet.com) to ask the opinions of ALTs, JTEs, and other Japanese citizens. The survey controlled for age, gender, and location (rural/suburban/city). Survey respondents were given one set of questions out of a possible three, depending on whether they reporting being a current JET ALT, a JTE, or “other”. The goal was to find if there were any areas of disconnect between what ALTs think, what JTEs think, and what other Japanese citizens think.

The ALTs were asked what they believe their role is as an ALT, and how they feel they are making a difference in their English classes, their schools, and their local

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area.

JTEs were asked what they think the role of an ALT is, and how they feel their school’s ALT makes a difference in their English classes (for JTEs with ALTs), and whether or not they wanted an ALT to come to their school (for JTEs without and ALT).

Respondents who reported being neither an ALT nor a JTE were asked how they feel ALTs make a difference in their local community, and their general opinion of ALT/foreigners living in Japan.

The survey was circulated online in online communities for ALTs and other English teachers. The survey was active for three weeks.

Results:

The survey received a total of 42 responses. Twenty-two of those were ALTs, 10 were JTEs, and 10 were non-JTE Japanese citizens.

The first free response question asked to the ALT and JTE respondents was, “What do you think the role of an ALT is? What do you think an ALT should do?”

68% of ALT responses were related to English education, and 72% were related to exposing Japanese students to foreign culture. Here are some key responses:

P2- “I think our most important role is as a bridge between Japan and the rest of the world. We help children get used to the idea of other cultures and being around foreign people.” (Female, 24, 3rd year ALT)

P20- “Making English as fun as possible for the kids. So, they make positive associations with the language.” (Male, 26, 1st year ALT)

P28- “Aid the understanding of English and exposure of the language. Act as cultural ambassadors by sharing our culture and experiences with the students in and out of the classroom.” (Female, 23, 1st year ALT)

As for the Japanese responses, 70% were related to English education, and 50% were related to exposing Japanese students to foreign culture. Here are some key responses:

P11- “I want the ALT to teach the students about things that only the ALT can teach about, such as letting the students hear native pronunciation, and telling about the differences in their culture.” (Female, 29, JHS JTE)

P22- “Showing the students that communicating in English is fun, and showing the students that they are living happily in Japan.” (Female, 43, JHS JTE)

For the respondents who were neither an ALT nor a JTE, the question was stated as: “How do you think the ALTs or foreigners contribute to your local community?”

While a different question, the answers were similar to the answers of the ALTs and JTEs about the role of ALTs. The number of responses related to English education

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![Figure 1. Role of an ALT](image-url)
were equal to the ones related to foreign culture exposure, 70% each. Here are some key responses:

P24- “They can contribute to the children’s foreign language education, and we can learn about other cultures.” (Male, 51)

P27- “Multiculturalism, getting rid of Japanese people’s rigid ways of thinking, increasing opportunities to use English, sharing the good side of Japan with the world, and also Japan knowing the good sides of other countries, and the goodness of people.” (Female, 28)

From this question, we can conclude that while ALTs as a whole put a nearly equal emphasis on English education and foreign culture exposure, JTEs on the other hand put a larger emphasis on English education, and less on foreign language exposure. Other Japanese citizens also mentioned English and exposure to foreign culture equally as benefits to having a foreigner live in their community. Out of all three categories of survey participants, the JTE group put the least amount of emphasis on foreign culture.

Next, ALTs were asked if they thought they were making a positive different in their English classes, schools, and community. JTEs were asked if they thought ALTs were making a positive difference in their English classes and their schools. And, other citizens were asked if they thought ALTs were making a positive difference in their community. Here are the results:

From this data, it’s clear that ALTs are thought to have a generally positive influence in their classes, schools, and communities by Japanese people. However, ALTs appear to slightly overestimate their influence in English class, and slightly underestimate their influence in their schools and community.

Finally, there was section allowing ALTs, JTEs, and other citizens to state their opinions about ALTs in general. There was a wide range of responses from negative to positive, with the ALT group being particularly negative. Here are some key responses:

ALT Group

P17- “I think that many people come here expecting to teach English as a proper teacher, that their presence is somehow going to make a vast amount of difference. This leads to extreme disappointment and bitterness when the program doesn’t meet the expectations. I think people who are selected for this program need to be more aware of who they are as a person, what this program is, and come with little or no expectations of what to expect. They need to be flexible, adaptable and optimistic, but also realistic.” (Female, 25, 1st year ALT)

P39- “It would be nice to have some sort of upward mobility or career path for alts. Because there is no future or way to move upward, everybody leaves this job for the most part.” (Male, 35, 3rd year ALT)
P5- “Coming to Japan for the Manga, Anime, games and other solo pursuits is a waste of time.” (Male, 28, 4th year ALT)

P31- “Many ALTS don’t take the job or living here too seriously. From what I understand, in overseas magazines the JET Program is advertised as a chance for long term travel. Because of this, the ALTs, like myself, that have come here to teach and live in the culture, meet people, and exchange ideas are not taking seriously.” (Male, 33, 1st year ALT)

P26- “I think there needs to be a better process in place to inform ALTs of the responsibilities they have, to select candidates who can meet these responsibilities. I think ALTs now are to some extent lost and have a vague sense of what they should be doing.” (Male, 30, 1st year ALT)

JTE Group

P41- “I am thankful that they are all working hard in Japan despite living in a foreign country. I think Japanese teachers have to communicate more with ALTs, especially in elementary schools where English will become a subject.” (Female, 29, JHS JTE)

P40- “There are a lot of ALTs who are nerdy and gloomy, and only have interests in manga and anime, and there are no ALTs who embody the strong American type that everyone is attracted to. I think we could have better cultural exchange if there were more sporty and athletic ALTs. I wish the useless ALTs will quit. I hope to have ALTs who can understand and emphasize with Japanese culture, and who can adapt well to new situations.” (Male, 38, SHS)

“Other” Group

P25- “It seems like foreigners in general just come to have fun, so I wish they could have some goals and reside in Japan for longer.” (Female, 28)

P8- “We hear a lot that ALTs have high salaries, but I think that’s unavoidable. Also, I want them to work hard not just as English teachers but also as cultural ambassadors.” (Female, 31)

P21- “Some ALTs are more Japanese than Japanese people. They are always friendly and we have a lot of fun together. Also I can learn from them. I am very grateful to have foreigners around me.” (Male, 31)

Out of the three categories of survey participants, the ALT group was the most negative in answering this question. The most positive group was the non-JTE Japanese citizens. Some common themes were that many ALTs come to Japan because of their interest in Japanese subcultures such as anime and manga. This type of ALT was viewed negatively by both JTEs and other ALTs. Also, both ALTs and non-JTE Japanese citizens mentioned that there should be a better career path for foreigners to continue working in Japan, as opposed to one-year contracts. Finally, the ALT group mentioned the vagueness of the job description, and said the ALTs should have more training when they first arrive in Japan. It appears that the way the ALT job is advertised overseas is sometimes different from the actual situation. For this reason, both the ALT and JTE groups said that ALTs should be flexible and understanding.

Conclusions:

Despite criticisms about the JET Program, the majority of ALTs and JTEs who took the survey reported that ALTs have a positive impact on Japanese schools. Also, non-JTE Japanese citizens also reported having good feelings towards the foreigners living in their towns. Here are some facts from this study:

1. The most valued benefits of having an ALT are access to native English, and cultural exchange. However, JTEs valued cultural exchange less than English education, while ALTs and other Japanese citizens valued both cultural exchange and English education equally.

2. Most criticisms about ALTs and the JET Program were found in the responses from ALTs and some JTEs. The main criticisms from the ALTs was the vagueness in job description and lack of training. The main criticisms from the JTEs was unskilled ALTs who come to Japan for personal interests instead of English education.

3. The Japanese respondents to this survey mentioned several times that foreigners living in Japan, especially ALTs, should be flexible to changes and understanding of Japanese culture while sharing their own culture.

4. Both ALTs and non-JTE citizens said that ALTs,
and foreigners in general, should have more career opportunities in Japan, rather than the limited-term ALT contracts.

5. Both ALTs and JTEs said that there should be more communication between ALTs and JTEs at school to work effectively together.

These findings can illustrate where there is some disconnect between what the ALT and the JTE imagine an ALT’s job should be. Also, the differences in opinions can lead to an improvement in communication and training from the JET Program to its ALT participants, and even the JTEs who have JET ALTs at their schools.

References: