

Perspectives on English Education in the Japanese Public School System: The Views of Foreign Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs)

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Public school students in Japan must take English as a required subject for three years in junior high school and for three more years in senior high school. In spite of the amount of classroom time invested, and in spite of the available learning support services, the foreign Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) system included, the English proficiency level of Japanese students unfortunately continues to rank low in the world. The motivation for this study is to address the problem of low English performance in Japanese schools by soliciting the opinions of ALTs who have unique perspectives based on their experiences in both Japanese and foreign school situations.

One of the issues that arises in consulting ALTs is that, in many cases, the level of oral English proficiency among staff English teachers in Japanese schools appears to be very low. This may contribute to what many ALTs consider a tendency among staff English teachers to rely excessively on Japanese when teaching English lessons, which can lead to a situation in which students as well neglect what should be an emphasis on developing speaking and listening skills in English. Speaking and listening skills are essential for Japanese students' social integration in a variety of international settings. This study examines the strengths and weaknesses of English education, and of staff English teachers in Japan, from the third-person perspectives of ALTs. The 282 ALTs who responded to this survey came from 14 different countries. They offer valuable insight as to how the English education system might be improved in Japan. In our global age, English education should be evaluated by global standards.

1 Background

In today's global society, the international demand for English speakers and English language instruction continues to increase. As a global language, English is a medium for the sharing of experiences and ideas, and a catalyst for participation in international communities. In acknowledgement of this, many Asian countries have already instituted English language education from elementary school. According to Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, and Science and

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Technology (MEXT), in Thailand, English language education from elementary school became a requirement in 1996, and South Korea introduced a similar policy in 1997. In Japan, 97 percent of public elementary schools also offer English language instruction, though often without the use of foreign assistant language teachers (ALTs) or English language textbooks (Murai 2008). According to MEXT, in 2011 an English language education program will be incorporated into the curriculum at the 5th and 6th grade levels in all public elementary schools. A push for English education is also to be seen with Japan's National Center for University Entrance Examinations, which started an English listening test in 2006. All applicants, who choose English language as a subject on the national center examination now have to take a listening test as well as a written test when applying to public and private universities.

Public school students in Japan are required to take English for three years in junior high school and for three more years in senior high school. Nonetheless, MEXT has indicated that Japan suffers from a low average TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) score, ranking second lowest among all Asian countries. Regardless of the amount of classroom time invested and in spite of the available learning support services, the ALT system included, the English proficiency level of Japanese students unfortunately continues to rank low in the world. In order to attempt to account for this shortcoming, I have solicited the views of ALTs. Most ALTs are recruited with no prior teaching experience or certification, and are expected to develop their own teaching skills in the course of assisting a full-time, permanent staff English teacher, who is generally a Japanese national in their schools. Through their participation in English classrooms, ALTs frequently encounter differences of approach between the style of English education in Japan and the way foreign languages have been taught to them in their home countries. Many native English speakers, representing diverse interests in Japanese culture and in their general commitment to English-language teaching and international exchange, are selected by the Japanese government every year. In order to become an ALT, applicants must have at least a Bachelor's degree in any major subject; no prior teaching experience is required. The ALT program also contracts from non-English-speaking countries on a limited basis, and in these cases the eligibility requirements are slightly different, involving submission of a document certifying the individual's English language proficiency level. Each admitted ALT is assigned to help with English-learning programs at public schools in urban or rural communities across 47 prefectures.

Nationwide, ALTs are among the few native English speakers positioned to have an intimate, practical perspective on English language education in Japanese public schools. They are most often the only native English speakers in the school, and frequently even in the towns where they work. ALTs possess experience of school situations both in Japan and in their home countries. Recognizing that ALTs are in a unique position to comment on English education in Japan, the purpose of the ALT survey that I have conducted is to benefit from their diverse perspectives in order to think through ways to develop the current English education system in Japan.

2 The Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) System in Japan

As the demand for English has continued to increase, the demand for ALTs in English language instruction has kept pace. The ALT system is an opportunity for native-English speakers to live in Japan and work in Japanese public schools, assisting staff English teachers and students from elementary to senior high school. In 1987 the ALT system "was started with the purpose of

increasing mutual understanding between the people of Japan and the people of other nations. It aims to promote internationalization in Japan's local communities by helping to improve foreign language education and by developing international exchange at the community level" (*JET PROGRAM*). The duties of ALTs include playing a significant role in the preparation of materials alongside staff English teachers, assisting Japanese students in elementary school, as well as in junior and senior high school, and helping the staff English teachers to elevate their own levels of English proficiency.

Part of the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program, the ALT system in 2007 boasted approximately 5,000 foreign English-speaking participants from forty-one countries (*JET PROGRAM 2007–2008*). This figure is an indication of the huge financial investment made by the Japanese national government as well as the prefectural governments in the improvement of English language proficiency levels among students in public schools. In the effort to increase the role of native-English speakers in Japanese public school classrooms, ALTs have a key role to play and have many responsibilities with regard to their assistant teaching alongside staff English teachers. As the need for native-English speakers has significantly increased, private English language schools have also enjoyed a huge business in contemporary Japanese society. These schools charge high rates to students wishing to study English with a native English speaker. Faced with the prospect of such significant financial investment, public school students are in a position to benefit from the ALT system as a result of their exposure to native English in the classroom.

Local governments may continue to contract more ALTs in developing English language programs and promoting internationalization and international exchange in their prefectures, but just how dramatically will the English proficiency level of students improve as a result? A necessary approach to the question would be to examine the strengths and weaknesses of the staff English teachers and the style of English language education from the perspective of the students and staff teachers themselves. This is beyond the scope of the current paper which seeks insights specifically from the perspectives of the ALTs themselves, focusing on their experiences in order to draw on a diversity of perspectives, opinions and suggestions regarding ways to improve English language education in Japanese public schools.

Recognizing the low level of English language proficiency among Japanese students compared to students in other countries, MEXT has implemented several reforms to improve the English education system. In the 2003 Action Plan to Improve English Education, the use of ALTs has been deemed an important factor in cultivating practical communication skills in English and in actively promoting English language proficiency over a reliance on grammar-oriented and staff teacher-centered approaches to English language education in public schools (MEXT, 2003). The emphasis has shifted to providing Japanese students with more opportunities to communicate orally in English with native-English speakers. This study examines the strengths and weaknesses of English education, and of the staff English teachers in Japan, from the outsider perspective of the ALT. The views of ALTs offer valuable suggestions as to how the English education system might be improved in Japan. In our global age, English education should be evaluated by global standards.

3 Theoretical Framework

Globalization theory can help to deal with the issue of the quality of ALT-assisted English

education. In Japan as well as other countries, English language education at public schools represents a huge financial investment by government, schools and taxpayers. Most schools offer English language courses in acknowledgment of a global state of affairs in which “the use of a single language by a community is no guarantee of social harmony or mutual understanding” (Crystal 1997). People also need English for business in international communities. Bilingualism or multilingualism can inspire individuals to expand their horizons and to build international bridges. One of the aims of the ALT system in Japan beyond the immediate goal of raising English-language proficiency is to develop internationalization in urban and especially rural areas, and to promote international exchange at local levels.

The theory of globalization can also yield important benefits in researching English education from the perspective of ALTs. With respect to the history of the JET program, the ALT system began in 1987, and the 1980s and 1990s were therefore very much a period of change in English language education in Japan. Public schools had to adapt to the presence of foreign teaching assistants in their English language programs. In recent years, up to 70 percent of parents have acknowledged the need for English language education at the elementary school level, but still approximately only 36 percent of elementary school teachers have recognized this as a necessity (MEXT 2006). Parent expectations regarding English language education are high today, and these include expectations regarding access to appropriate learning supports, such as ALTs. There is a heavy emphasis on enhancing the English language proficiency level of students, and on whether schools are meeting student expectations. Also, prefectural governments and schools need to identify where gaps exist between foreign language education in Japan and in other Western countries.

4 Method

4.1. Procedures

My target population for this study is current and former ALTs in the public education system in the 47 prefectures of Japan. I have conducted an online survey of ALTs who have taught English in Japan since 1987. The online survey is a powerful tool that is efficient in obtaining suggestions and opinions from ALTs. Through the survey I was able to gather hundreds of responses in a short period of time. The online survey was distributed through several membership-based JET and JET alumni networking and community websites, as well as to current and former ALTs directly via email. Current and former ALTs who provided contact information through social networking services were selected for this survey. A drawback of the online survey is that there is no built-in identification function capable of determining whether or not an informant is or was actually an ALT. It is also not possible to recognize automatically whether a respondent might have submitted more than once. The data was collected during a one-month period beginning in May of 2008. The results of this research will provide insights into Japan’s English language education system by revealing both its positive and negative aspects from the perspectives of ALTs. In the background section of the survey, I have included each ALT’s country of citizenship, gender, and the highest academic degree that he or she had obtained prior to becoming an ALT.

In the next section of the survey, three questions measured impressions of the quality of the staff English teachers’ teaching skills and the style of English language instruction. I asked, “What is your overall assessment of English language education in the schools where you have taught?”,

“On average, how knowledgeable of English have you found the staff English teachers in your schools?” and “On average, how well-prepared and organized have you found the class presentations of the staff English teachers in your schools?” ALTs were asked to rate them: “very high,” “high,” “average,” “low,” or “very low.” ALTs participate in many English language classrooms from elementary school to senior high school, and any one ALT might have observed several different staff English teachers with diverse teaching styles. It was likely difficult for them to respond in ways that reflected the quality of individual English teachers in their schools. If ALTs had particularly good or bad teachers that did not fit into the average rating, I hoped this would come out in the responses to the subsequent questions. To this end, the questionnaire included the following open-ended questions: “Please identify what you perceive, based on your experience, to be the general strengths and weaknesses of the staff English teachers in your school” and “Please identify what you perceive, based on your experience, to be the general strengths and weaknesses of the style of English language education in your school.”

According to the resolution of the 2003 Action Plan to Cultivate Japanese with English Abilities, “Almost all English teachers will acquire English skills (STEP pre-first level, TOEFL 550, TOEIC 730 or over) and the teaching ability to be able to conduct classes to cultivate communication abilities through the repetition of activities making use of English.” Yet, as I have suggested, it may be difficult for all English teachers to meet these standards and to conduct a majority of their language classes in English. Teachers may provide incorrect information, such as teaching mispronunciations. At the end of the survey, a question was asked in the interest of a more general evaluation: “Based on your experience, how might the English education system be improved in Japan? Please give your opinions.” It was my hope that ALTs would offer diverse opinions and suggestions for improving the current English education system in Japan based on their perspectives of global standards.

5 Results

5.1. Data Analysis

The 282 assistant language teachers who responded to this survey came from 14 different countries. The survey was relatively balanced with regard to gender (55.2% male and 44.8% female). The majority of respondents (63.5%) were U.S. citizens. 11.0% came from the U.K., and 5.7% from Australia. Twenty-five ALTs (8.9%) held Master’s degrees, and only three ALTs (1.1%) held a Ph.D. or Ed. D. degree prior to becoming an ALT in Japan.

5.2. The Quality of the Staff English Teachers

After identifying themselves in this way, the next question assessed impressions of the quality of the staff English teachers’ teaching skills from the perspective of ALTs (see Table 1). In the quantitative data result, 278 ALTs responded on the 5-point scale, with 38.3% indicating that the quality of staff English teachers was average. The mean score was 2.72 (SD = 0.92) when response choices were converted to a 1–5 scale, with 5 representing “very low.”

ALTs in this survey have observed English instruction in many classrooms in Japan, and have had various impressions of the quality of the staff English teachers. In the qualitative data result, most respondents offered more complaints and negative comments than positive, constructive evaluations (see Fig. 1). 35% pointed to the low level of oral English proficiency among staff

Table 1 Impressions of the Quality of the Staff English Teachers' Teaching Skills

| | | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|---------|-------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid | Very high | 22 | 7.8 | 7.9 | 7.9 |
| | High | 94 | 33.3 | 33.8 | 41.7 |
| | Average | 108 | 38.3 | 38.8 | 80.6 |
| | Low | 47 | 16.7 | 16.9 | 97.5 |
| | Very low | 7 | 2.5 | 2.5 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 278 | 98.6 | 100.0 | |
| Missing | No response | 4 | 1.4 | | |
| Total | | 282 | 100.0 | | |

English teachers. According to their observations, a number of the staff English teachers could not speak English fluently and coherently, and did not have confidence to speak English in their classrooms. This also seems to have been the source of poor communication skills on the part of staff teachers dealing with ALTs in creating team-teaching lesson plans. A male ALT (U.S.A.) notes,

When I first arrived in Japan, I was shocked at how little English some of the staff English teachers (could) actually speak. I remember studying languages in High School, and all through University, and my teachers were always very, very proficient in the languages they were teaching, and often would not use English in the classroom at all, even at non-advanced levels.

Another male ALT (U.S.A.) states,

In every language course I have taken, beginning or advanced (including Japanese) the language of instruction has been the language being studied. Even if students don't understand everything the instructor says, they have to listen to the language, to hear it and to derive meaning from context and by recognizing words and phrases. I think that English classes in Japanese schools should be conducted in English, but for that to be productive it would be important to have staff teachers highly skilled in English.

Low English proficiency levels among staff English teachers lead to a lack of confidence in speaking English in class, and in the collaborative creation of team-teaching plans with ALTs. In light of this, development of English abilities among staff English teachers should be considered the most important issue in reforming the style of the English instruction at public schools.

Also, 34.6% of respondents pointed to a lack of creativity in English language classrooms (see Fig. 1). A female ALT (U.S.A.) notes, "I found that some of the teachers were not as willing to try new things in the classrooms and did not want to add to the textbooks by using extra visual aids or allowing students more freedom in their course work." Another male ALT (U.S.A.) notes, "The older-style teachers (regardless of their actual age) tend to teach rote grammar memorization and sentence deconstruction, while the younger-style teachers allow a lot of time for games and auditory study with a great deal of interaction and pronunciation practice." It seems that most staff English teachers tend to expect students all to learn in the same way, and they do not attempt to use any creative materials in class except for the "younger-style" teachers that the foregoing quote mentions.

Furthermore, 13.4% of respondents indicated a lack of confidence in the staff English teach-

ers' English language abilities. Many stated that staff English teachers are too worried about making mistakes and about pronunciation problems to speak English in front of their students and in front of native-speaker ALTs. Another important point that respondents commented on is the ineffective use of ALTs. A female ALT (U.S.A.) notes, "Sometimes the teachers use the CDs while I am in class, and it really bothers me! If you aren't going to use me as at least a human tape recorder, then why use me at all? The CDs sound really unnatural to me." Perhaps, many staff English teachers do not know how to work with ALTs through team-teaching methods, or how to make lesson-plans with ALTs. Frequent miscommunication between staff English teachers and ALTs might even be the source of systematic weaknesses in English education in Japanese public schools. If many staff teachers are in fact hesitant to speak English in front of ALTs, this may only further aggravate the problem that English lessons are conducted almost entirely in Japanese. For staff English teachers, reliance on Japanese is often more comfortable than actually teaching in English, but this likely contributes to the poor oral English abilities of many students.

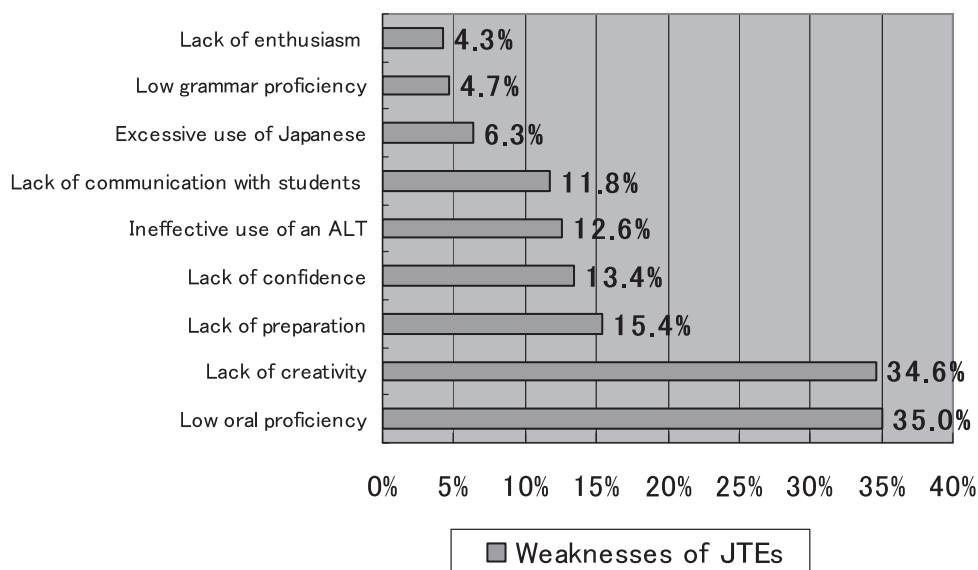


Figure 1 Weaknesses of Japanese Teachers of English

5.3. Style of English Language Instruction

278 ALTs assessed the preparation and organization of English language instruction on the 5-point scale (see Table 2). In the quantitative data result, the largest group (46.4%) responded that the preparation and organization of staff English teacher class presentations were average. The

Table 2 The Preparation and Organization of English Language Instruction

| | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|---------|-------------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid | Very high | 20 | 7.1 | 7.2 |
| | High | 88 | 31.2 | 38.8 |
| | Average | 129 | 45.7 | 85.3 |
| | Low | 36 | 12.8 | 98.2 |
| | Very low | 5 | 1.8 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 278 | 98.6 | 100.0 |
| Missing | No response | 4 | 1.4 | |
| Total | 282 | 100.0 | | |

mean score was 2.71 (SD = 0.84) after the choices were converted from 1 to 5, with 5 representing “very low.”

Respondents were asked, based on their experiences as ALTs, to indicate what they felt were the strengths and weaknesses of the style of English language education in the Japanese school system. While most did not comment directly on strengths, they did comment on the weaknesses of English instruction. In the qualitative data result, 47% pointed to a lack of oral communication in classrooms (see Fig. 2). A female ALT (U.S.A.) notes,

The students do not have chances to speak English during class or use English in a practical way to express themselves: I think it is very unfortunate because many students were interested in English when they were 1st-year students at junior high schools, but now as 3rd-year students they say, “English is boring” and “I can’t speak English.”

A male ALT (U.S.A.) notes, “English seems often taught like ‘science’ rather than as a ‘living language’ for communication.” Another female ALT (New Zealand) says, “Students don’t have a spoken exam, so there is no need for them to be able to communicate and express themselves in English. I feel English is being taught as a ‘passive’ language in Japan, in that they take listening tests and writing tests but oral exams are not a requirement.” It would seem from this that English education in Japan does not look upon practical English skills as important. English education in Japan focuses more on what students need to know for exams than on practical knowledge.

26.3% of respondents strongly indicated dedication to entrance examinations in English education as a systematic weakness (see Fig. 2). A male ALT (U.S.A.) comments, “The style is problematic due to the focus of the program, which is to only prepare for a university entrance exam. English is a language and should be addressed as a communicative tool and not as a ‘subject.’” Much of the problem lies in the entrance examination system, which conditions students to take a test score-oriented approach to advancement rather than promoting academic exploration. Students are encouraged to stake everything on the entrance exam with little subsequent motivation for learning English. Young junior high and high school students spend many years preparing themselves to memorize facts for keen competition.

15.5% of respondents pointed out the reliance on textbooks in English language instruction as a weakness (see Fig. 2). Those who considered this a problem felt that there should be more emphasis among staff teachers on using one’s own creative methods to help students learn. This exclusive attention to the textbook might explain in part why many students consider English a boring subject. A further weakness indicated by 8% of respondents was the heavy emphasis on rote memorization without real understanding of the rules and functions of English grammar. A male ALT (U.S.A.) notes, “While the students had a reasonably good vocabulary, their conversation skills were mainly limited to examples provided on the tapes or in their textbooks because they were unable to fully utilize their vocabulary and apply the rules of grammar and syntax in constructing their own sentences which express their true feelings.” It seems to me that the ALTs’ teaching experiences at public schools in Japan have led them to doubt whether the contemporary English education system, dependent upon the knowledge-cramming rites of preparatory schools, is an effective way of fostering English abilities among students. Based on their responses, the majority seem to share the opinion that the Western teaching style has more educational value for students insofar as it emphasizes critical thinking above fact-cramming. The style discourages the idea of a one-way knowledge transfer from teacher to students. In this respect, collaboration between

staff English teachers and ALTs should be encouraged more as part of the teaching process.

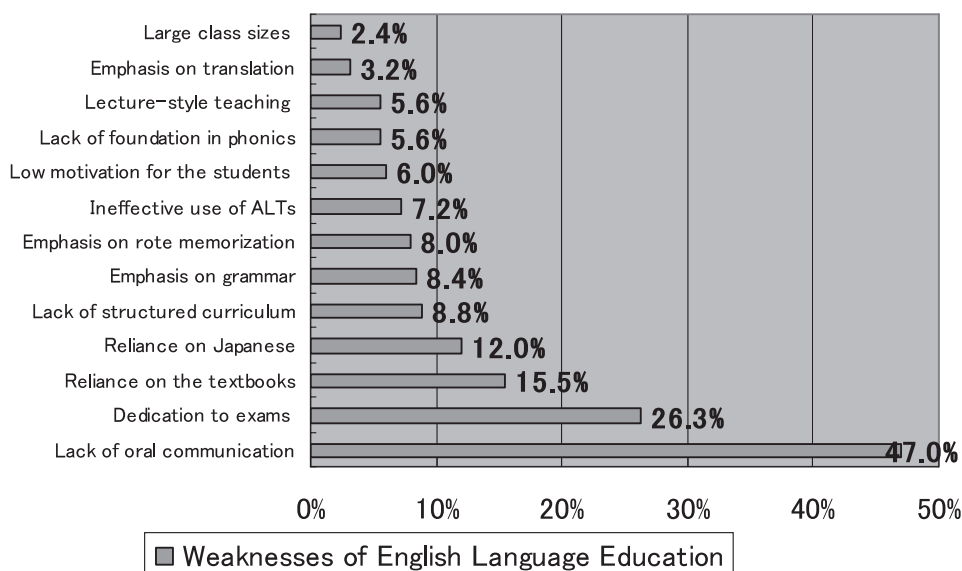


Figure 2 Weaknesses of English Language Education

5.4. Improving the English Education System in Japan

The ALTs were asked to use a 5-point scale to conduct an overall assessment of English language instruction in the schools where they taught. 279 responded. In the quantitative data result, the largest group of ALTs (47.3%) ranked their overall assessment of English education in Japan as average, while an additional 32.6% responded that their overall assessment was low (see Table 3). The mean score was 3.26 (SD = 0.81) when the choices were converted from 1 to 5, with 5 representing “very low.”

Table 3 Overall Assessment of English Language Education in ALTs’ schools

| | | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|---------|-------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid | Very high | 5 | 1.8 | 1.8 | 1.8 |
| | High | 37 | 13.1 | 13.3 | 15.1 |
| | Average | 132 | 46.8 | 47.3 | 62.4 |
| | Low | 91 | 32.3 | 32.6 | 95.0 |
| | Very low | 14 | 5.0 | 5.0 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 279 | 98.9 | 100.0 | |
| Missing | No response | 3 | 1.1 | | |
| Total | | 282 | 100.0 | | |

In considering how to improve English education in Japan, 23.6% of respondents in the qualitative data result suggested that all four English skill sets (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) should be equally emphasized. Furthermore, 19.9% suggested that the Japanese government and the prefectural governments should provide financial incentives for staff English teachers to study abroad in English-speaking countries. After completing such training, staff English teachers might then have more confidence in using English in their classrooms, and would moreover know how effectively to team-teach with ALTs. A male ALT (U.S.A.) notes, “The staff English teachers are the ones who need enlightenment. Most staff English teachers haven’t a clue. If only

they could open their eyes to what lies outside of Japan's waters, then they may truly inspire their students." Emphasis on continuing staff English teacher development, through measures comparable to the ESL training requirements of teachers in English-speaking countries, would be one important step in developing the quality of the English education in contemporary Japanese schools. However, even though many staff English teachers may in fact have spent time in English-speaking countries learning English-teaching methods, systems of teaching English may not be so easily transported from one culture into another.

19.5% of respondents in the open-ended question suggested that English education in Japan should not focus on entrance exams, but should instead focus on improving proficiency towards more practical English skills beyond only grammar and translation. Also, 11.4% suggested that English classes should be taught entirely in English. A female ALT (U.S.A.) notes, "Teaching everything in Japanese will mean that everyone's still thinking in Japanese when they're taking exams. It's one giant translation method, which doesn't work at all for conversation." New teaching styles in English education would offer students greater opportunities to derive value from their English language instruction. This would also be true of the collaboration between staff English teachers and ALTs.

6 Conclusions

According to the opinions of ALTs, not only students but also staff English teachers should be expected to attain higher English proficiency levels and to show greater flexibility in expressing themselves in English. In addition to possessing a sufficiently high level of English knowledge to qualify them as teachers of the subject, staff English teachers should, in the commonly held view of ALTs, also be expected to have a level of English ability that is sufficient for fluent and spontaneous communication with native speakers in order both to collaborate effectively with ALTs, and to cultivate English communication skills in their students. Students at public schools should be expected to acquire the ability to communicate fluently and coherently by the end of their six years of English education. However, judging from the responses of ALTs as native English speakers in a position to evaluate the effectiveness of staff teachers and the progress of students, it would seem that the quality of staff English teachers and the style of English education in Japan are far from reaching such standards. Although the Japanese government and the prefectural governments have looked to the ALT system as a means to improve the quality of English education and to promote internationalization in Japan, it seems that the results have not been as positive as was anticipated at the program's start in the 1980s. To address this problem, the Japanese government has made plans to require tests of practical English proficiency for staff English teachers. However, higher-English proficiency levels alone do not necessarily translate into higher-quality instruction or effective team-teaching with ALTs.

ALT survey responses indicate that in many cases the level of oral English proficiency among staff English teachers is very low, and that their excessive reliance on Japanese in English language classrooms leads students to neglect what should be an emphasis on developing essential speaking and listening skills in English. Also, survey responses emphasize the view that English education in Japan should reduce its emphasis on entrance examinations, and that Japanese schools should give their students more incentive to learn practical English rather than focusing on a test score-oriented approach. However, McConnell (2000) notes that "the contradiction between the

ideal of teaching conversational English and the reality of preparing for entrance exams remains acute” (p. 269), so it is difficult to change the engrained cultural rites of contemporary Japanese society and education.

In response to the acknowledged weakness in English education, ideally all four aspects (reading, writing, speaking, and listening) of language learning should be equally emphasized in English education, but as ALT respondents indicate, measures have not yet been successfully implemented to bring about such reform. New teaching styles for English education in Japan are also needed in the view of many ALTs, but most staff English teachers tend not to study the English as a second language (ESL) teaching methods used elsewhere in the world, perhaps owing to the belief that a culturally specific approach is needed for Japan. ALTs have valuable opinions and suggestions to offer, and they may offer insight into how to resolve many of the problems with English language education in contemporary Japan. Further research is needed to account for the fact that long-term ALTs seem to have different views of the English education system in Japan than those whose experience was limited to a shorter term. For the purposes of this study, I have only sought to recognize the value of the ALT perspective in the hope that it will inspire positive change in English education and in the system of utilizing ALTs in the language classroom.

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