

# **Professional Development for JTEs and ALTs, A Non-Intensive Approach**

Julia Christmas

## **Abstract**

*In 2008, the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Technology (MEXT) has established a “New Course of Study” for elementary, junior and senior high schools in Japan. The key changes in this document include a requirement that English will be required for the elementary fifth and sixth grades (from 2011), and also include major alterations to secondary school course descriptions which further the official goals of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). These MEXT driven directives have serious implications for classroom practices, however an analysis of the literature regarding training and professional development of Japanese Teachers of English (JTEs) and Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) demonstrates that there is still a large gap in knowledge and understanding of CLT. Furthermore, although professional development for teachers involved in elementary, and secondary English teaching endeavors has come a long way since the inception of the JET program in 1987, there is still much room for improvement. The following paper offers alternative ideas for professional development based on an examination of programs throughout Japan and investigation of the needs of JTEs and ALTs who have taught or are currently involved in teaching English.*

## **Introduction**

Since the introduction of the “JET” program in 1987, the presence of native English speakers alongside primary and secondary Japanese teachers of English (JTEs) in the classroom, and the use of English in the classroom either for communication or pedagogy, has become a given thing. Recent changes in the “New Course of Study” (national curriculum guidelines handed down by MEXT) have further complicated the approach that teachers are required to take regarding English language teaching in primary and secondary schools throughout Japan (MEXT, 2008). As a result of these changes, teachers have had to receive training in areas related to English language teaching. Although very sketchy during the initial phases of the “JET” program, professional development regarding team teaching, communicative language teaching (CLT) and language acquisition have come a long way. Nevertheless there are still many weaknesses in the administration and implementation of in-service training.

## **The Current Situation in JTE and ALT teacher training**

Teacher training for in-service Japanese Teachers of English (JTEs) and Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) is often in the form of “intensive” workshops and seminars offered or required by local boards of education. This approach does offer some benefits, however in most cases these sessions, rather than actually providing professional development, become a high speed English (“machine-gun” English that most JTEs are unable to follow), venue for griping, lesson plan sharing, and story-swapping between native English speaker (Matheny, 2005; personal observation JET Mid-year seminars 2006, 2007, 2011). Additionally, the lack of

cohesion inherent in these once or twice a year seminars leads to a sense among JTEs and ALTs alike that their time is being wasted (Matheny, 2005; Crooks, 2001). In light of these issues, a more effective method would be to offer a set of courses based on quantitative and qualitative teacher needs-analysis and which offer clear, systematic and easily accessible instruction.

Teacher training, both in-service and pre-service, regarding CLT, EFL, team teaching, or general language learning for Japanese teachers is lacking (Gillis-Furutaka, 2004). The pre-service training of secondary level JTEs in these areas is haphazard (Izumi, 2007; Lamie, 2000; Yonesaka, 1999) or in the case of elementary level currently virtually non-existent (Kusumoto, 2009). The pre-service training for ALTs involves mostly survival tips (McConnell, 2000, Crooks, 1991) and their opportunities for in-service training have become further limited as city and prefectural budgets shrink (Gillis-Furutaka, 1994, personal communication, S. Matsumoto, E.T.C., Wakayama Pref. B.O.E., 2006, personal communication, T. Ishii, Supervisor Miyazaki Pref. B.O.E. Educational Policy division, 2011). In addition to the shortcomings of pre-service or in-service training programs, JTEs have very little chance of going abroad for language study or training programs. Lack of funding, lack of institutional support at peer and supervisory levels are key barriers preventing participation in overseas educational opportunities (Matheny, 2004; McConnell, 2000, Tanabe, 2004).

## **A Professional Development Semi-Success Story**

In answer to the present haphazard and non-coherent actualities of pre and in-service teacher training, some prefectures are taking serious measures to improve the situation. One example of this occurs in Sendai where the prefectural B.O.E has developed a system of professional support for its JTEs and ALTs. As Crooks (2001) explains, in many prefectures attendance of professional development workshops can be hit or miss. Seminars and lectures organized by local governments are a tricky thing. They are either mandatory and therefore grudgingly attended, or are not required (and not connected with salary increase (McConnell, 2000)) and thus frequented by teachers who need them least. Sendai's approach to all of these problems was to create a more cohesive system that addresses the needs of JTEs and ALTs alike.

The program created by Sendai includes an initial orientation for newly arrived ALTs in the shape of an "overview of ESL/EFL techniques along with cultural and survival tips for working and living in Japan" Crooks, 2001, p.38). In addition, two hour, bi-monthly seminars are offered in English, on topics relevant to teaching language and EFL, to both JTEs and ALTs (ibid, p.39).

The shortcomings of the Sendai program seem to occur in spite of efforts taken by the planners who have tried to offer workshops that are accessible to JTEs, (i.e. simplification of spoken English or pre-assignment of longer texts used in the seminars). A number of factors appear to hamper JTE attendance including lack of language ability (real or perceived), lack of time, lack of support from peers and superiors and lack of positive associations with previous professional development experiences (Crooks, 2001).

## **Proposal for Further Success**

A program to foster development of JTEs needs to consider the factors mentioned above. Japanese teachers are dedicated to their jobs, constrained by their curricular and extra-curricular duties, and suffer from peer-pressure to stay at their desks even if they want to attend workshops or seminars. Creative ways to work around these issues could include

1) “demaе” or “take out” workshops where the seminar instructors deliver their classes in situ at the school where the target teachers are employed. This would help to cultivate a school-wide acceptance of attendance.

2) top-down measures that include creating bonds between universities and local boards of education which would allow individual schools to ask for seminars whenever timing is convenient.

3) invitation of principals and other administrators to take part in mini-workshops that help them better understand changes in MEXT policies regarding language education. These would have a better chance of taking place if the bonds mentioned in 2 above were in place.

4) bi-lingual seminars or seminars that are separated into English and Japanese streams that would allow teachers to choose a workshop based on the language that they feel comfortable using. Determine who will be the better teacher—experienced JTEs (see Cross, 2005), native-teachers of English or a team-taught combination of both.

5) specific English skills workshops that allow English teachers or elementary teachers to improve their own personal language skills and at the same time these workshops could allow participants to pick up techniques regarding the

delivery method of those skills.

6) mimic and improve—examine successful and non-successful programs throughout Japan. Determine what their weak points were and discuss with local Boards of Education and teachers for ideas to create better models.

These six examples are by no means an exhaustive list of ideas, but are meant to be a simple illustration of possibilities—of ways to improve the existing conditions of professional development for primary and secondary teacher of EFL/language in Japan.

## **Conclusion**

Whoever plans and delivers any type of in-service program for Alts and JTEs needs to be very aware of the obstacles that impede success. Awareness teamed with creativity has helped to greatly improve the situation during the past 20 or so years of the “JET” Program and while the wheels of bureaucracy (and a few “sour grapes” individuals) can give one a sense of despair for the entire system, it is more useful to remember that there are many, many dedicated teachers who truly want to improve their understanding of CLT, and language acquisition. It is for these beleaguered colleagues and their students that we should keep striving to design fruitful development programs.

## References

- Crooks, A. (2001). Professional development and the JET Program: Insights and solutions based on the Sendai City program. *JALT Journal*, 23(1), 31-46.
- Cross, J. (2005). Taking the first step -CLT teacher training in Gifu, Japan. *Asian EFL Journal*. Teaching Articles. Retrieved January 5<sup>th</sup>, 2011 from:  
[http://www.asian-efl-journal.com/pta\\_may\\_05\\_jc.php](http://www.asian-efl-journal.com/pta_may_05_jc.php)
- Gillis-Furutaka, A. (1994). Pedagogical preparation for JET Programme teachers. In M. Wada, & A. Cominos (Eds.), *Studies in team teaching* (pp. 29-41). Tokyo: Kenkyusha.
- Izumi, E. (2007). The role of homeroom teachers and teacher training in English language education in elementary schools. *Bulletin of Kyoto University of Education*, 131-147.
- Kusumoto, Y. (2008). Needs analysis: developing a teacher training program for elementary school homeroom teachers in Japan. *Second Language Studies*, 26(2), Spring 2008, pp. 1-44.
- Lamie, J. (2000). Teachers of English in Japan: Professional development and training at a crossroads. *JALT Journal*, 22 (1), 27-45.
- Matheny, (2005). Professional development workshops for JTEs: impressions from the implementation. *Explorations in Teacher Education JALT Teacher Education SIG Newsletter* 13(1), pp. 4-17.
- McConnell, D.L. (2000) *Importing Diversity: Inside Japan's JET Program*. Berkeley, CA : University of California Press.
- MEXT (2008). *Atarashii gakushu shidou youryou* [The course of study for foreign languages]. Retrieved January 18, 2011, from:

[http://www.mext.go.jp/a\\_menu/shotou/new-cs/youryou/syo/gai.htm](http://www.mext.go.jp/a_menu/shotou/new-cs/youryou/syo/gai.htm)

Yonesaka, Suzanne. (1999). The Pre-service Training of Japanese Teachers of English.

The Language Teacher. Vol. 23, No. 11. November, 1999: 9-15.