

ALTs are hired to teach English*

ALTs are hired as ASSISTANT language teachers. Their role in the classroom is to assist the JTE in teaching. This role is very flexible, and depends on the expectations of both ALT and JTE and their relationship, but normally involves some of the following elements:

- Providing an example of native speaker language in use.
- Providing both reason and opportunity for students and JTEs to use English for communication.
- Assisting with classroom administration (passing out and collecting papers, monitoring students and correcting errors, marking student work, writing the JTEs comments on the blackboard, etc.).
- Assisting with lesson preparation (preparing activities, making resources and props, lesson planning, etc.).

ALTs are also hired as participants on the Japan EXCHANGE and Teaching Programme. This role as promoters of internationalisation and cultural ambassadors means that teaching is but a part of the job. Some typical elements of the exchange part of the job include but are not limited to:

- Interacting with staff and students at school outside of lessons. This can range from chatting with people to getting seriously involved with extracurricular activities and depends very much on the personality and interests of the ALT, as well as their work environment.
- Semi-official duties involving visiting local schools or community centres, and participating in local events.
- Getting involved with the local community, either through personal friendships or through joining cultural or social groups.

Indeed, the exchange part of the programme means that in some ways ALTs are actually on duty 24/7 and should try to behave accordingly. Never forget that your position as a public servant, as a JET participant, and as a foreign resident of Japan carries with it the responsibility to uphold the reputation of these groups. Some things to bear in mind:

- Follow rules and regulations, especially in front of students. This also applies to social norms such as not littering, not using cell-phones on public transport or while driving, not eating or drinking in public, and even not jaywalking!
- Don't jump to conclusions or act without making sure you understand what is going on. Even more so than in other countries, emotional responses are taken badly in Japan. I almost always regret it when I react emotionally: it rarely improves the situation and normally just leaves me feeling stupid.

Your attitude is possibly the most important factor in determining whether you have a fulfilling time as an ALT. Enthusiasm, an open mind, flexibility, and initiative are the qualities that make for successful ALTs.

**some ALTs teach other languages instead of/as well as English.*

ALTs should only speak English at school

Many first year ALTs don't really have a choice in this matter at the start of the year as they have non-existent Japanese language skills. However, for those who came with some previous experience of the Japanese language, as well as for everyone else once you start acquiring more proficiency, it is important to decide what your policy will be regarding Japanese use.

I would like to describe three case studies here:

- A friend of mine: a fourth year ALT, spoke good Japanese, in a medium-ability high school. His policy was to speak only English at school to everybody: to the students, the teachers, the principal, the tea ladies. Only English. He understood Japanese but replied in English. Everybody at the school seemed used to this and it didn't seem to bother them.
- My situation: a third year ALT with intermediate Japanese, in a very motivated elementary school. I spoke Japanese to most of the staff, sometimes English to teachers who I knew wanted to practice their English, and as much English to the students as I thought they would understand (which ended up being more than I expected!). In class, I used almost all English to students, but outside I would often use Japanese in order to have more complex conversations with them.
- Another friend: a fifth year ALT, very good spoken Japanese, in a low-level junior high school. He spoke Japanese to teachers and students outside of class, used Japanese in class to introduce activities and control students. He used English to model and to practice the target language with students. He also had a very close relationship with students due to a program he instituted where he interviewed every student in English and Japanese for about 10 minutes in order to get to know them.

Of course, how you decide to approach Japanese use at school will depend on your particular situation, your level of Japanese (can't use it if you don't have it!), and your goals (people who want to get good at Japanese need to practice, people who are really serious about the teaching side of their job might prefer to use as much English as possible). Whatever your approach, I believe that at least during English class, you have a responsibility to your students to provide them with as much comprehensible English input as possible. Merely speaking English is not enough; in order for students to have a chance to understand you will need to speak at an understandable level, as well as to use gestures and props to help them guess the meaning.

Finally, regardless of whether you choose to interact with people around you in English or Japanese, bear in mind that it is your attitude that will determine how successfully you communicate and relate with those around you. I have seen people with almost no Japanese who had excellent relationships with the teachers at their school, because they were bright and cheerful and made an effort to say hello and chat to people and were considerate and brought in snacks to share with other teachers. I have also seen people with excellent Japanese who had terrible relationships at school because they never made the effort to talk to people or get involved in school life.

ALTs should take responsibility for maintaining order in class

Officially JTEs are fully responsible for disciplinary issues. It is most definitely not something that ALTs are expected to deal with. If you notice problems with the class that you feel need to be addressed, please discuss them with your JTE. Another possible source of support is the homeroom teacher (HRT) of the class or student, who is ultimately responsible for their behaviour.

Often JTEs and ALTs have different expectations when it comes to student behaviour. It can often be helpful to sit down with your JTE and talk about what is acceptable behaviour and what is not, as well as what you are both going to do about it when unacceptable behaviour happens. This kind of dialogue can be very difficult, and it is important to be sensitive when addressing these kinds of issues, as JTEs can take it personally. Please make sure you make it clear that you are discussing a common problem rather than criticising the JTE!

Occasionally ALTs may choose to take a more active role in assisting their JTE with class control. This is something that can happen if both parties agree and are comfortable with the arrangement.

For ALTs looking for advice on discipline, there are two essays in the JHS and SHS handbooks. I strongly recommend you read these and think about them as you teach your classes. As with most teaching skills, the tips therein are only useful if adapted and applied to your particular situation.

Lesson planning and curriculum design are the sole responsibility of the JTE

Again, officially this could be said to be true. The JTE is responsible for the class; ALTs are responsible for assisting the JTE in any way that both of you agree on. If a JTE is not open to ALT input on lesson planning or curriculum design there will be no ALT input.

However, most JTEs are open to suggestions, and find their ALTs an invaluable source of new ideas and approaches. Many ALTs also find their jobs more fulfilling when they are actively involved in planning classes.

An essential first step is to gain the trust and respect of your JTE. Do not assume that you will be able to play a major role in class from the very beginning. You will have to demonstrate that you are enthusiastic, responsible, competent, and willing to work together with your JTE before you can expect them to trust you. Some ways to demonstrate your enthusiasm/helpfulness include:

- Offering to help with marking student work.
- Looking ahead in the textbook and suggesting activities for upcoming chapters.
- Being active in class: walking around and helping students with their work, writing up points the JTE makes on the board, joining in with the students when they do activities, choral reading, etc.

Try to improve your teaching abilities by actively seeking out information from such sources as seminars, books, other ALTs, and most importantly, your JTEs themselves. The teachers around you in your schools are probably your best resource when it comes to learning about teaching. Watch them and ask questions. If you demonstrate an interest in teaching it is far more likely that you will be perceived as a teacher by those around you, which will make your job more satisfying.

ALTs should strive to reform the educational practices at their school(s)

ALTs are generally not qualified to determine appropriate educational practices for Japanese schools. In Japan, teachers base their teaching on the course of study published by the Ministry of Education, on the textbooks chosen by the board of education or school, and on the curriculum developed by the English department of a school. Their hands are tied by these various ropes.

Moreover, JTEs have both qualifications and experience of being a teacher in a Japanese school. They juggle their teaching duties with pastoral and administrative duties, and often with coaching duties as well.

For a trained and experienced professional, unsolicited advice from someone who has yet to prove themselves in any meaningful way is often unwelcome. ALTs who rush into their first year determined to rescue English language education in Japan run the risk of alienating the very people they should be learning from: their JTEs.

ALTs do have a role to play in introducing new ideas, activities, and techniques into Japanese schools, but doing so successfully requires both time and tact. ALTs should start by listening, by asking questions, by observing the teachers around them. If asked for ideas, seize the opportunity and try and come up with something. Don't be pushy. Don't assume that you are always right, but on the other hand don't give up when confronted with an unreceptive JTE.

Whatever happens, you have to work with your JTEs, so devote all your efforts to building and maintaining relationships with them. Once you have a good working relationship with your JTEs, it will be much easier to persuade them to try out new ideas or approaches.

From the perspective of attempting to improve educational practice in Japan, the greatest influence ALTs have is by encouraging JTEs to implement new ideas. A JTE who introduces more communicative activities into their class based on advice from their ALT will continue teaching for many years after the ALT has gone home, and many thousands of students will benefit from more engaging classes. Reform happens slowly in Japan, but you can make a difference.

Schools/JTEs are responsible for informing ALTs of work duties and scheduling

This is certainly true, and in an ideal world ALTs would consistently be given clear and timely notice of work duties, changes in schedule, and events.

Unfortunately in the real world, the people around ALTs are busy, forget things, assume that somebody else told the ALT, assume that the ALT read the poster on the notice board, or forget that the ALT will be at school that week.

This issue is possibly one of the biggest causes of ill-feeling between ALTs and their schools/BOEs. Not being informed of something that affects you can:

- Make you feel like you are not appreciated or valued.
- Make you feel paranoid (“they didn’t tell me on purpose!”).
- Disrupt travel or leisure plans (“Tomorrow is the school sports day.” “But I’ve arranged to go rice picking with my host family!”).

In the vast majority of cases there is no ill will whatsoever, just an unfortunate combination of people being busy, and no-one really being in charge of keeping the ALT up to date.

In order to avoid the stress and inconvenience of not knowing what is going on, you must be proactive! The following is a list of resources that you should seek out and get a copy of at your school:

- The yearly plan for the school, which contains details of all special events, as well as when classes will be rescheduled, cancelled due to exams, etc.
- A seating chart of the staff room, with teachers’ names in a form that you can read. Once you have this, learn the names by using them!
- Photo book of all the students. Most schools have small books with all the students’ mugshots in. This is great to learn students’ names.
- Seating chart for each class. The HRT is often a good person to approach for this.
- Your weekly/monthly schedule. Armed with this, you can plan lessons ahead of time, giving you the chance to find better activities/resources.

Armed with these resources you will be well on the way to self-sufficiency. There is only one more obstacle to be overcome: the board in the staff room includes an amazing amount of information, from which teachers are absent to which classes have been rescheduled, from details of official trips to the monthly schedule for the school. At first glance it will seem extremely daunting, but remembering what kind of information goes where will allow you to avoid unpleasant surprises (such as the class you thought you had three hours to prepare for starting in 2 minutes, for example). A good way to start is to find someone with free time to teach you what the various parts of the board mean (not necessarily your supervisor). Asking other members of staff to help you is a good way to form relationships with them.

ALTs should conform to Japanese cultural and workplace values

To a certain extent, yes. In Japan, like in many other countries, appearance and punctuality are very important in the workplace. It is therefore very important that ALTs not start off on the wrong foot by being late or dressing inappropriately for work. An easy rule of thumb is to look around and see what other teachers are wearing. If all the other teachers are wearing shirts and ties, and you are walking around in board shorts and a tank top, you will not be seen as a professional and serious member of staff.

Similarly, if you are five minutes late for the morning meeting every day, you will not be seen as a reliable or hardworking person, regardless of how much work you put into your classes.

I have seen many ALTs destroy their chances to have a fulfilling school life by not taking these two issues seriously. At least at the beginning, please make every effort to be on time and dress appropriately (if you are at an elementary school and all the teachers are wearing t-shirts, it would be just as strange to turn up in a three piece suit every day!).

Of course, the previous examples are not exclusively Japanese, but rather apply to a work environment in most countries.

However, other cultural or workplace values or customs are less straightforward. Some examples you might choose to conform to or not include:

- Doing overtime, whether it is strictly necessary or not, in order to prove your commitment/enthusiasm (this is something you will often see younger teachers doing).
- Not using all of your paid holiday for the year because colleagues might disapprove.
- Jumping up to serve drinks to guests/other staff members, regardless of how busy you are at that point (women only).
- Bringing small gifts or snacks for your colleagues after you go on a trip.
- Picking up litter/shovelling snow/weeding around the school if you have free time (something principals seem to be partial to).

The important thing to keep in mind when it comes to cultural values, is that it is up to you to decide whether you are comfortable with them or not. Taking the serving drinks as an example, I have known ALTs who have accepted that particular role as part of their Japanese experience, and others who rejected it as something they were not prepared to do. Both had successful and fulfilling experiences, and didn't encounter problems. In a way, we are extremely lucky here in Japan, as to a certain extent we can choose our level of involvement in society.

Conclusion

Most of the questions in this workshop could be said to have common sense answers. Others could be said to have no answers at all, but rather depend on the attitude of the person concerned. It was not my intention to provide yet another workshop based on the eternal JET slogan ESID (every situation is different) but rather to draw your attention to some common problems that all ALTs seem to end up facing at some point, and give you some perspective on how you might address them.

I hope that you found the workshop useful, and that you had the chance to reflect on how you will approach some of these situations.

I believe the common theme for most of these is communication. The importance of making an effort to communicate and develop a good relationship with your JTEs and other teachers, as well as with your students, cannot be overstated. Be proactive while you are at school, and don't let your (perceived) lack of Japanese skills stop you: I spent my first year having conversations based on "atsui desu ne" ("it's hot, eh"), and "samui desu ne" ("it's cold, eh"). There were several teachers who I never said anything else to all year long, but the fact that you are making an effort will be recognised and appreciated.

Good luck with your teaching career in Japan!

Please contact me if you have any questions or comments:

Ben Shearon
ko-ca@pref.miyagi.jp