

Let's Not Get Started With The He Said She Said:

Effective ALT and JTE Collaboration

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In the early summer of 2009, I was working as an Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) on the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme. I worked at ten schools in a rural town of 4,000 citizens. My role was to assist the Japanese Teacher of English (JTE) as we team taught (TT) together.

On Wednesday's I taught at a junior high school. The school's JTE asked me to arrive at 08:00 AM. This was earlier than my starting time of 08:30, but I complied in the beginning. When I was in the office; however, she was busy and we rarely spoke. Soon enough, I stopped coming early because I did not see the point.

With teachers at some schools I collaborated regularly, but with the junior high JTE, our collaborative preparation was inconsistent. Usually she let me know a day or two before class if she wanted me to prepare anything. Occasionally, she did not ask for my help at all. If asked, I would prepare what she wanted and sometimes fax it to her before class. Our main communication consisted of a few minutes sometime before class on Wednesday, and infrequently a review after class.

Her English level was high and she was quite cordial when she spoke and greeted me in the morning. We did not communicate much, as she seemed to be extremely busy at all times in the office.

One week when the JTE asked me to find an activity, I found one that was difficult but I felt could work, and I faxed it to her. When I arrived at school the next morning, I asked her about it, and she surprised me saying she understood.

We got to the classroom, I handed out the worksheet, gave my explanation in English, then turned to her for the Japanese. She had a blank look on her face, she did not understand. I suggested we simply move on.

She said we could not do that. We had to finish because we had already given them the paper.

She changed the activity, said some words in Japanese and the kids did something different than planned, but finished.

Back in the office we started talking about what happened, and got into a bit of an argument. A big part was my suggestion to take back the handout. She said in Japan we could not do it, because it would confuse the students and was too big a mistake for a teacher to make. I disagreed, she said I did not understand because it was Japan.

Placing the situation beyond my ability to comprehend ticked me off, so I said something about how she said she understood the activity but she did not. She mentioned how I was often late, and so on and so on. Ended poorly and we barely spoke for the next few weeks.

Identification of the Central Crisis

What are the inter-professional and cultural factors in teacher collaboration that could have led to the tense situation?

Alternative Explanations to the Crisis

1. Meeting time for TT planning was not something built into the ALT and JTE's schedule.
2. The ALT and the JTE were not properly trained in TT.
3. The ALT was neither a trained, nor experienced teacher so he could not contribute meaningfully to lessons.
4. The JTE did not properly explain local cultural expectations about work to the ALT.

Contextualization of Explanations

1. For collaborative preparation to occur, there must first be time allotted. A Kawamura and Sloss (1992) survey's results showed 79.9 percent of JTEs lacked a fixed time for pre-class preparation (as cited in Kachi and Lee, 2001, p. 7). Hord (2009) suggests individuals ranking higher than teachers should seek "teachers' cooperation in finding or creating time for meetings"

- (p. 42). Considering both of their schedules, including daily staff meetings for the JTE, were given from above, placing the onus on JTEs and ALTs to negotiate their own schedules for meetings makes them far more difficult to occur.
2. Literature from Tajino & Tajino (1999), notes the lack of TT (as cited in Kachi and Lee, 2001, p. 6). If neither the JTE, nor the ALT have been trained in how to TT it is difficult to expect them to know how to effectively work together.
 3. I was one of many ALTs without proper experience or training. Kachi (2001) reported that 79.4% of ATLs are neither trained in teaching English as a Foreign Language, nor experienced. In any field, it is natural that without any professional background or knowledge someone may not be able to contribute meaningfully.
 4. While I felt not arriving at 8:00 was not serious, considering I never spoke to my JTE, she felt otherwise. Meerman (2003) wrote how this is a problem for others as well "Cultural differences with respect to working hours, contracts and culturally specific senses of obligation with respect to work expectations are exactly what have been keeping Japanese schools from asking more of their ALTs."

Suggested Pathway of Practice: Individual Accommodation

I believe the most effective that the inter-professional and cultural factors in teacher collaboration leading to the tense situation could have been avoided is through individual accommodation. That is, both the JTE and the ALT make the time and effort to adjust their approach to one another.

Scheduled meeting time from school officials and institutionalized teacher training would be nice, but those are outside the control of JTEs and ALTs. On the part of JTEs this implies making the ALT more aware of how Japanese schools work. Meerman (2003) noted how some are collaborating

effectively

according to JLTs, the ability of the ALT to make an impact on lesson content depends primarily on the ALT's sense that students are deriving academic benefit from team-teaching lessons, that they feel meaningfully integrated into school life, and that their efforts are helping in some way to strengthen team-teaching as an enduring practice in their school. (p. 104)

In the case of my situation, the JTE could have explained she did not appreciate me coming late earlier on, and why it was important to her for me to arrive when she asked.

From the ALT perspective Laura Wong, a Hokkaido Prefecture ALT, noted that many JTEs felt uncomfortable speaking directly about their thoughts on her performance (personal communication, April 10, 2010). To overcome this obstacle, she created a feedback form (Appendix) she said writing was more comfortable for them than speaking, and she received a great deal of feedback. Even I did not take this exact approach, I could have searched for alternative ways to communicate with my JTE.

There are certainly institutional changes that should be made in the JET Program, but in the mean time many of the problems that arise in TT can be effectively negated by consistent and earnest effort by JTEs and ALTs. That way, when things inevitably do not go as planned, there is a history to build upon in addressing the problem and discussing solutions and future actions.

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Appendix

ALT Feedback Form, by Laura Wong

Please rank the ALT on the following based on your observations

Either circle the best answer or insert a number using the system below.

1=lowest ranking to 5=highest ranking

Approximations are below:

1-not at all/bad

2-hardly ever/poor

3-sometimes/okay

4-usually/good

5-always/excellent

1) Is this review:

a) based on a single lesson or daily

b)weekly

c)monthly

d)yearly/overall experience with the ALT

2) Does the ALT annunciate clearly and slowly when speaking with the students and choose easy enough words to encourage comprehension and communication? _____

3) Does the ALT participate in lesson planning and contribute ideas/games/activities to the teaching plan?/Is the division of labour between the ALT and the JTE acceptable? _____

4) Is the ALT enthused about teaching? _____

5) Is the ALT using games and activities and teaching content that is appropriate to the level of the students? Appealing to both in interest? _____ And to their maturity level? _____

6) Does the ALT interact with the students in English outside of class? _____

