

Finding a Niche in Japan Research: JET Program Participants and Alumni

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Nagano, 2008–2011



Abstract

Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) and alumni are valuable sources of knowledge on workplace relations in Japanese schools. Despite the long history and large number of participants and alumni of the JET Program, limited research on and with JET ALTs and alumni has been conducted. In this paper, I will recount the process of turning a replication study project for a graduate-level sociolinguistics class into a JET-themed qualitative study, highlighting the connections found between the participants and my own experience on JET. These findings have not only shed light on many research gaps, but also opened the door to my research in Japan.

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Scholarly Inspirations

This past semester, I enrolled in a graduate-level sociolinguistics course, having no idea that it would be the first step in connecting myself to Japan as a researcher. As part of the final project, we were assigned the task of replicating a previously published sociolinguistics study. Finding out that a classmate was applying for the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program to be an Assistant Language Teacher (ALT), I brainstormed ways to bring JET and ALTs into a research project.

As any current or former ALT will tell you, ALTs can have myriad duties within their placement schools, from assisting Japanese teachers of English (JTEs) with classes to preparing lesson materials and helping with extracurricular activities,¹ all of which involve working with people in intercultural and interpersonal communication situations. Deciding to “do JET research,” as we called it, not only prepared my classmate for his future endeavors in Japan by helping him learn firsthand what working as an ALT is like, but was also profoundly impactful on me, helping me reflect on my JET experience and stay connected to other alumni, especially during the pandemic.

Diving into the Research

Research replication entails “conducting a research study again, in a way that is either identical to the original procedure or with small changes to test the original findings.”² By replicating a research study, the researchers can validate previous findings, and in the case of graduate students, it is a powerful way to learn research techniques. However, one of the biggest challenges of doing a replication study for a graduate-level course is the time frame. Studies that have taken place over the course of months, if not years, need to be framed so that findings are presentable, even publishable, by the end of the semester. With that in mind, I searched for qualitative studies where researchers interviewed a small number of ALTs or JET alumni to draw inferences, keeping in mind that the study needed to connect to sociolinguistics. After conducting a literature review of forty-three research articles, dissertations, and books that focused on or mentioned the JET Program, a paper published in 2018 by researchers Ishihara, Carrol, Mahler, and Russo titled, “Finding a Niche in Teaching English in Japan: Translingual Practice and Teacher Agency”³ stood out as a study to both replicate and learn from.

¹ “Positions,” JET Program USA, accessed March 1, 2021. <https://jetprogramusa.org/positions/>

² Allison Mackey and Susan M. Gass, *Second Language Research: Methodology and Design*. (London: Routledge, 2016).

Taking two JET ALT alumni interviews from a larger study, Ishihara et al. analyzed themes surrounding translingual practices and agency in Japanese schools that the two interviewees specifically focused on during their interviews. Through narrative analysis, the researchers analyzed individual experiences as recounted in story form by the individuals,⁴ which seemed a fitting way to qualitatively capture the lived experiences of JET alumni who had worked in Japan for years. Even more fittingly, the study added the two JET alumni as co-authors of the paper, allowing the alumni to take a greater role in the research and adding depth and personal voices to the study. With our first author a JET alumni and the possibility of including our interviewees as co-authors, we found that upon closer inspection, our study was proving to be quite the replica.

Finding Our JET Alumni Participants

Considering how well connected JET alumni are through their local chapters and the U.S. JET Alumni Association (JETAA), it is surprising that more researchers do not utilize JET alumni. With nearly 36,000⁵ American JET alumni and their availability across the U.S., JET alumni are highly knowledgeable resources concerning Japanese workplace culture, society, and the local contexts in which they were placed. JET alumna Allison Crump, in her 2007 Australian-based JET thesis preferred interviewing JET alumni, stating that current ALT's culture shock and acculturation could affect their responses while alumni reflections might be more consistent in retrospect.⁶ However, despite the many perceived benefits in using JET alumni as participants in Japan-related research studies, only four articles in our literature review utilized JET alumni as participants.

Deciding to add to the existing JET alumni research, we posted a survey to the Heartland JETAA chapter Facebook group to find participants interested in an interview. Like other studies that documented JET alumni's enthusiasm to participate,⁷ we were pleasantly surprised to receive dozens of responses from JET alumni and current JET ALTs in Japan who were already connected

³ *Noriko Ishihara, Sherrie Carrol, Dennis Mahler, and Amy Russo, "Finding a Niche in Teaching English in Japan: Translingual Practice and Teacher Agency," *System* 79 (2018): 81-90. An asterisk preceding a study denotes research articles on JET alumni.

⁴ John W. Creswell and Cheryl N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*, 4th ed. (Los Angeles: Sage, 2016).

⁵ "Japan Exchange and Teaching Program," JET Program USA, accessed March 1, 2021. <https://jetprogramusa.org/>

⁶ *Alison Crump, "Examining the Role of Assistant Language Teachers on the JET Programme within the Context of Nihonjinron and Kokusaika: Perspectives from ALTs" (master's thesis, McGill University, 2009), 45-46.

⁷ *Kimberly McMillen, "'Perceptual Mismatches' and the Pace of Culture and Politics in Teaching English: Perspectives of Six U.S. EFL Teachers in Japan" (master's thesis, University of Colorado, 2012).

with their region's alumni association. While the survey was not part of the replication study—just a means of finding potential interviewees—it was impressive to see the diversity of our respondents, with local placements stretching from Hokkaido to Okinawa, and time on JET beginning as early as 1988. Narrowing our interviewees to three, hoping that at least two would lead to interviews comparable with Ishihara et al., we began the process of creating open-ended interview questions in line with the study's design and setting up appointments to interview our participants virtually via Webex. My partner and I interviewed one participant together, as a means of establishing reliability—an important task when multiple interviewers or raters work on a research project—before each of us separately interviewed another participant. Because of the uneven interview results, as well as the model study having two participants, we later chose to analyze the two interviews for which I was present.

Insights from JET alumni

As the study we replicated focused on agency and translanguaging, our findings focused on these same themes. Agency refers to the socioculturally mediated capacity to act.⁸ In a teaching context, an ALT with a high level of agency could bring their ideas to the classroom, whereas an ALT with low agency in a particular context might not be given such freedom. Translingual practices refer to the capacity and disposition to co-construct meaning across languages and language varieties,⁹ in other words, to use one's entire linguistic repertoire when communicating. ALTs who use translanguaging may do so to better communicate with others in their school or demonstrate their knowledge of the language by using a mix of Japanese and English. In addition to those themes, a secondary goal was to focus on the JET qualities that emerged from the participant interviews and relate these ideas to my own experiences on JET. These qualities, which are highlighted in JET promotional materials and in the application process, may help applicants like my colleague reflect on how to best prepare themselves for their JET interviews and for life as an ALT.

In terms of agency, all participants explicitly stated that their JTEs had a lot of influence over their experience in the classroom and that their agency varied greatly, depending on the JTE with whom they were working. One participant specifically mentioned being used as a “human tape recorder” at times, saying English words and phrases for their Japanese students to repeat, while others were given a lot of freedom in lesson planning. This variance can be attributed to the differing

⁸ Laura Ahearn, “Language and Agency,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 30 (2001): 109-137.

⁹ Suresh Canagarajah, *Translingual Practice: Global English and Cosmopolitan Relations*. (London: Routledge, 2013).

nature of JTEs in terms of how they position ALTs in the classroom as well as the many different types of classrooms in which ALTs work—from “one-shot” visits to classrooms they might only visit once a month to classes they regularly support. As a high school ALT who worked at a school with an international studies program, I found myself both in classes where I was designing units and lessons for the program as well as visiting classes where I mostly helped with pronunciation and preparing students for tests, acting as a “human tape recorder” too at times. Looking back, all of these experiences in Japanese classrooms with JTEs added to my understanding of Japanese education and school life.

Because of the nature of being an ALT and coming in as an outsider to work in Japanese schools, all the interviewees mentioned finding ways to build relationships within their schools. All participants directly mentioned staying later than their contracted hours dictated as a way to improve their rapport with the JTEs and position themselves as professionals within the school. In addition, the JET alumni spoke of compromising, “picking your battles,” or being careful not to step on others’ toes in order to build relationships with JTEs. I found myself in many similar situations, such as when the teacher made a mistake in class. While I could have corrected the teacher in front of the class, in order to build a long and productive relationship with my JTE it was best to talk to them before or after class about most issues. Staying a half hour after my contracted time, when students were not present, was ideal for these kinds of discussions.

In terms of translanguaging practice, every single interviewee used Japanese words and phrases during their interviews even though they were not asked to do so. The specificity of using Japanese words allowed the participants to give exact details regarding Japanese culture and their unique contexts. The ability of each of our interviewees to translanguage, or code switch between Japanese and English, speaks volumes to the level of engagement they experienced in Japan. Indeed, as one immerses themselves in Japanese culture, one tends to use more Japanese words within English, switching back and forth between the languages with others who understand both. For me, it took some time to stop doing this once I returned to the United States.

When conducting the first interview with my research partner, I unexpectedly found myself reflecting on my JET alumni subchapter and what more we could do. At one point, when an interviewee was telling stories from the early days of the JET Program, I realized that my partner had not spoken for 10 minutes. As it turns out, he was enthralled by the stories, forgetting about the research task and was just enjoying learning about what he hoped would be his job after graduation. Realizing how comfortable everyone has become at using Zoom and Webex during the pandemic, I

started working with my JET alumni subchapter to host several events on Japanese culture and JET, targeting Iowa-based JET applicants and alumni. As I write this article, five out of six of the students who attended our events were granted JET interviews.

Looking Forward

Focusing on the experiences of JET alumni has not only demonstrated the vast knowledge JET alumni possess but also helped revitalize my interest in conducting research in Japanese contexts. Ideally, I would love to publish a comprehensive article on research that has been done on and with JET ALTs, create a larger alumni study that focuses on teacher identity and language use, and find deeper ways to connect my primary research interest of second language assessment with Japan. As seen in studies like Milstein's on sojourning and self-efficacy, which utilized 212 JET alumni participants, it is very possible to conduct meaningful large-scale work.¹⁰ Moving forward, many potential avenues can be explored and much can be learned from JET alumni.

¹⁰ *Tema Milstein, "Transformation Abroad: Sojourning and the Perceived Enhancement of Self-Efficacy," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 29 (2005): 217-238.

Author Biography

Jeanne Beck (2008-2011, Nagano ALT) is a PhD student in Applied Linguistics and Technology at Iowa State University. She holds an Educational Specialist degree (Ed.S.) in Education Administration from William Woods University and an M.Ed in TESOL Education, a BS in Middle School Education, and a BA in International Studies with an East Asia focus from the University of Missouri. After JET, she worked as a study abroad advisor; taught undergraduate, graduate, and teacher training courses in South Korea; and taught ESL, language arts, and technology classes in rural K-12 Missouri public schools. Her interests include second language assessment, teacher-training, computer assisted language learning, and project-based learning.

About the JETs on Japan Forum

The JETs on Japan Forum is a partnership between USJETAA and Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA (Sasakawa USA) that features selected articles of JET alumni perspectives on U.S.-Japan relations. The series aims to elevate the awareness and visibility of JET alumni working across diverse sectors and provides a platform for JET alumni to contribute to deeper understanding of U.S.-Japan relations from their fields. The articles serve as a resource to the wider JET alumni and U.S.-Japan communities on how alumni of this exchange program are continuing to serve as informal ambassadors in U.S.-Japan relations.

