



The Language Barrier: Exploring the Lived Experiences of Assistant Language Teachers in Japan: A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Study

Imee Lou S. Aswe
New Era University
imeeaswe@gmail.com

Luningning B. De Castro
New Era University
lbdecastro@neu.edu.ph

Ronnie G. Cainglet
New Era University
rgcainglet@neu.edu.ph

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.36892/ijlls.v5i3.1339>

APA Citation: Aswe, I. L., De Castro, L.B. & Cainglet, R.G. (2023). The Language Barrier: Exploring the Lived Experiences of Assistant Language Teachers in Japan: A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Study. *International Journal of Language and Literary Studies*. 5(3).92-99. <http://doi.org/10.36892/ijlls.v5i3>.

Received:
26/07/2023

Accepted:
10/09/2023

Keywords:
Assistant
Language
Teacher,
Language
Barrier, ALT
role, Japanese
Schools .

Abstract

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to describe and interpret the lived experiences of Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) in Japan as they faced some challenges with language barriers. There is still a gap that needs to be addressed because little did these foreign English teachers know that teaching English in a non-native English-speaking country like Japan comes with a lot of challenges, especially with the language barrier. The theories that guided this study were Krashen's (1981) Monolingual Approach and Bandura's (1997) Social Cognitive Theory. The central questions of this study were intended to determine the lived experiences of ALTs with language barriers and how the ALTs ascribed to their experiences. Purposive sampling was used in which nine (9) participants consented to be a part of this study. Six (6) out of nine (9) participants were from Kyoto City, while the remaining three (3) were from Hamamatsu City. The study used in-depth interviews, which were cross-examined through behavioural observations from recorded videos and poetic transcriptions. The findings indicated that ALTs experienced language barriers when communicating with students and Japanese co-teachers, lesson planning, and lack of professional development and training.

1. INTRODUCTION

Language barriers are the root cause of many problems in learning English in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. It greatly affects the teaching and learning process in classes. Language barriers can lead to miscommunication issues for individuals, including uncertainty, misunderstanding, confusion, and frustration. They may result in things that make communication difficult (Buarquob, 2019). The ideal method for promoting successful

communication and conveying messages is to overcome language obstacles by employing multilingual staff, skilled and certified translators or teachers, and utilizing simple, clear, familiar, and meaningful phrases (Buarquob, 2019). The study of the English language in Japanese schools has drawn the attention of several new educational programs implemented at the national level in Japan for both political and social reasons, The Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) program, which began in 1987, was one of them. It deployed native English-speaking "Assistant Language Teachers" (ALTs) in English classrooms at Japanese junior and senior high schools (MEXT, 2018). The main purpose of the JET Program is to strive to foster internationalization in Japan's local communities by assisting in the improvement of foreign language instruction and the development of international exchange at the community level.

As of 2022, there are about 5,723 participants from its original 848 participants from 4 countries in 1987 which is a substantial increase for the JET Program since its beginning (JET, 2022). There are now over 1000 local government organizations, including 17 designated cities and 45 prefectures that host JET participants. Along with the JET Program, there are also ALTs privately hired by dispatch companies all over Japan which makes nearly a total of 20, 000 Assistant Language Teachers in Japan (Gerrard & Rodriguez, 2022). In 2020, the curriculum for English education in Japan changed. The English subject is now taught in third and fourth grade in elementary (Sawa, 2020). Previously from the said year, English was only taught as an official subject to grades five and six in basic education. This change opened more opportunities for foreigners who have what it takes to teach English in the country. ALTs are dispatched to public schools mainly at the elementary, junior high school, and senior high school levels. These teachers, from the title of their working position, assist the Japanese Teacher of English (JTE) and Homeroom Teacher (HT) in doing team-teaching classes and providing English lessons in the classroom.

In recent years, only research studies related to the role of an Assistant Language Teacher in Japan (e.g. Binns, 2022; Pearce, 2020; Hasegawa & Sakamoto, 2023), the problems these ALTs encountered with the educational system in Japan (e.g. Kano & Ozeki, 2018), and their effectiveness as a foreign teacher (e.g. Mahoney, 2022; Smith, 2021) have emerged but no recent studies were conducted concerning about the language barrier that ALTs faced throughout their teaching career in Japan. English in Japan is considered to be a foreign language and it is difficult to retain English skills outside the classroom. According to the majority of bilingual and cross-cultural research, the first language barrier is always present while learning a second language (Khan & Weeber, 2016). In this case, the target learners'

Japanese (L1) background has an impact on their English acquisition (L2). Although ALTs are versatile in English lesson creation and teaching, it was inevitable to determine whether these teachers would be able to sustain in their profession. In a research study conducted by Celik (2017), he acknowledged that teaching in a different setting and environment trains teachers on how to create a classroom that accommodates all kinds of learning. However, in most cases, teachers are urged to use additional caution while handling cultural differences to avoid offending the students and preserve their interest in studying. This could cause language anxiety in students and may demotivate them from learning English. If so, language teachers are challenged physically, emotionally, and socially. In Sumalinog's (2022) study, he concluded that teachers experienced emotional drawbacks in teaching abroad as well as cultural drawbacks due to their students' varied ethnicities, levels of English ability, and vocabulary deficiencies which are just among the examples of language barriers. Despite the existing studies that presented the experiences that foreign English teachers have encountered, there is still more to be discovered especially in terms of language barriers in their teaching career. There is still a gap that needs to be addressed because little did these foreign English teachers know that teaching English in a non-native English-speaking country like Japan comes with a lot of challenges, especially with the language barrier.

The researcher aimed to explore information on how foreign English teachers cope with the challenges they face in their teaching careers. This study will provide a better understanding of the lived experiences of the Assistant Language Teachers who are working and living in Japan. This study was framed by two theoretical frameworks: the Monolingual Approach (Krashen, 1981) and Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1997). The key principle of the monolingual method is that the usage of the mother tongue in the learning process should be kept to a minimum since individuals learn other languages in much the same way that they learn their native tongue. An important concept in Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (1997) is self-efficacy, which is described as "beliefs in one's capacity to organize and execute the courses of action necessary to accomplish specified attainment". Bandura's social cognitive theory of human functioning highlights the crucial importance of self-beliefs in human thinking, inspiration, and actions.

2. METHODS

The study employed a qualitative research design and used interviews, behavioural observations, and poetic transcription as primary methods for data gathering. The purposive sampling method was used by the researcher as a sampling procedure. Data from the interview

were analyzed using thematic analysis and poetic transcription. The researcher's role, data collection procedures, trustworthiness considerations, and ethical considerations were discussed. Each of these areas was supported with research. The procedures outlined are based on known experts in the field of phenomenology (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994).

3. RESULTS

The first research question that was guiding this study was What are the experiences of Assistant Language Teachers in Japan in terms of language barrier? Five (5) themes emerged to address this. Results indicated that the participants felt relieved that they had a comfortable school environment with a light and manageable workload as an ALT. According to the conclusions of Atyah's (2020) research, the physical settings of schools have a significant impact on teachers' health, well-being, productivity, performance, and overall job satisfaction. The results also show that 60% of the participants have proficiency in Japanese, and although they have a background in the language, they described their teaching profession to be challenging in terms of the language barrier.

Many of the participants reported that having Japanese language ability may not be a requirement, but an essential skill to acquire as an English teacher in Japan. While speaking with their foreign English teachers in class, students frequently experience pressure to use the target language to converse. This is why many of the participants have done ways that help lessen the burden that their learners are experiencing. According to Mercer and Dörnyei (2020), teachers who care about their students, develop meaningful relationships with them. This creates an opportunity to close the bonds between students and teachers, which has a good impact on student involvement. Participants mentioned that students' motivation towards learning English was quite low. The results also indicated that most Japanese students (especially at the elementary level) would only use Japanese to communicate with ALTs. This is visible in Krashen's (1981) Theory about the Monolingual Approach wherein the use of the native language of the students is discouraged in the teaching and learning process of the English language which generally causes some stress to the teachers.

It was challenging for the teachers to create fun and suitable lessons that would boost the students' motivation. The results also showed that some teachers have experienced misunderstandings with their JTEs because of the limited use of English as a mode of communication. The second research question that was guiding this study was, "What meaning do Assistant Language Teachers in Japan attribute to their experiences? The four (4) remaining themes have emerged to address this. Results show that teachers were greatly supported by

their employers. Internal support is typically linked to teachers' dedication, sense of belonging, and overall well-being while external support enhances performance and work satisfaction (Collie et al., 2017; Travers, 2017). Next, each teacher has different experiences as to their motivation to become ALTs in Japan. In Liu's (2022) study, they found major results on what motivates EFL teachers. EFL teachers are both motivated and unmotivated by a variety of intrinsic and extrinsic variables, particularly student-related factors. Based on the results of the study, participants ascribed Japan to be the most livable place to enjoy earning money and travelling. The results also indicated that most of the participants have ascribed their experience as being knowledgeable in the Japanese language to break down limitations from language barriers in schools. English teachers' views and perspectives about the role of L1 usage in L2 classes are undoubtedly influenced by their professional experiences and the environment in which they operate (Gallagher, 2020). Many different angles have been used to study the use of native language (L1) in foreign language classrooms (L2), and it has been determined that L1 use is an unavoidable reality in L2 classrooms. While it is advised that language instructors utilize L1 sparingly to promote L2 learning. It has been noted that different English teachers have different perspectives on the usage of L1 in L2 courses and that these perspectives "change according to situation and grow with experience" (Gallagher, 2020).

4. DISCUSSION

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of Assistant Language Teachers in Japan as they faced language barriers and how they cope with them. The results indicated that language barriers were present when communicating with students and JTEs. It was also a challenge for these teachers to create and plan lessons suitable for their learners' level. The most challenging part these teachers have experienced was the use of Japanese language in English classes. As the English-only policy was utilized in English classrooms, it was difficult not to use the native language of the students to support them. To overcome these difficulties support was needed. All of the participants indicated that support was given when in need. However, the results of the study indicated that more structured and reliable training should be given to ALTs to sustain their profession for longer years.

The study recommends the BOE and dispatch companies revise their hiring process, especially in terms of ALTs being hired without proficiency in Japanese. It is also suggested to create more available professional development programs for ALTs about Japanese language acquisition. These professional development programs should be done at least thrice a school year to ensure the sustainability of the ALT's skills and knowledge suitable for the Japanese school system. A deliberate revamp in the working guidelines and ALT's professional development is

required if these employers wish to employ more ALTs in the future. This study also recommends current ALTs to create relevant lessons that the students could relate to. These lessons may contain easy and understandable activities related to Japan's seasons and Japanese school norms. It is also recommended that ALTs should assist students, especially in elementary, with the Japanese language limited to words or simple phrases. It is recommended that the current study should be replicated in future studies, but using a comparative research technique. For instance, to fully understand whether there is an effect of language barriers in the teacher's experience as an ALT, future research could compare foreign English teachers who are qualified and proficient in the Japanese Language to teachers without qualifications (e.g. teaching license and teaching experience) and no proficiency in the Japanese language. The current study was restricted to qualitative research among a small participant pool. Such a strategy limited the capacity to generalize to a wider population and instead permitted generalization to just very comparable factors. Future research should consider using a quantitative technique and surveys that could be examined using statistical methods that would allow the research to be done among a broader population that could be more widely surveyed, with data that could be processed more quickly than qualitative methods allow.

REFERENCES

- Atyah, R. (2020). The Effects of the Physical Environment Design on Teachers' Workplace Comfort: A Critical Review. *The International Journal of Architectonic, Spatial, and Environmental Design*. 14. 17-30. 10.18848/2325-1662/CGP/v14i03/17-30.
- Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. W H Freeman/Times Books/ Henry Holt & Co.
- Binns, A. (2022). Impact of Assistant Language Teachers on English Education in Shizuoka. JALT Postconference Publication. 2021. 89. 10.37546/JALTPCP2021-11.
- Buarquob, I.A.S. (2019). Language barriers to effective communication. Retrieved April 3, 2023 from: <https://www.redalyc.org/journal/279/27962177008/html/>
- Celik, S. (2017). In the discussion on "doing diversity" in education, how do English language teaching programs measure up? Paper presented at the 4th annual Conference on Sustainable Multilingualism: Language, Culture and Society, Kaunas, Lithuania.
- Collie, R., Martin, A., & Frydenberg, E. (2017). *Social and Emotional Learning: A Brief Overview and Issues Relevant to Australia and the Asia-Pacific*. 10.1007/978-981-10-3394-0_1.
- Creswell, J.W. and Poth, C.N. (2018) *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design Choosing among Five Approaches*. 4th Edition, SAGE Publications, Inc., Thousand Oaks.

- Gallagher, F. (2020). Considered in context: EFL teachers' views on the classroom as a bilingual space and code switching in shared-L1 and in multilingual contexts. *System*, 91, 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2020.102262>
- Gerrard, K., & Rodriguez, R. (2022). New Deal for ALTs. Retrieved April 2, 2023 from <https://www.altopedia.net/articles/4g5i-new-deal-for-alts>
- Hasegawa, H. & Sakamoto, N. (2023). Narrative Research on the Internal Cognition of Assistant Language Teachers at the Preparation Stage of the Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme. https://doi.org/10.57359/jailajournal.9.0_32
- JET (2022). History. Retrieved May 1, 2023 from <https://jetprogramme.org/en/history/>
- Kano, A., & Ozeki, H. (2018). Insights from elementary school ALTs in Japan. *JES Journal*, 18, 116–131.
- Khan, I., & Weeber, S. (2016). Barriers in the Learning of English: An Exploratory Study. *British Journal of Education, Society & Behavioural Science*. 15. 10.9734/BJESBS/2016/23743.
- Krashen, S. (1981) *Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning*. Pergamon Press, New York.
- Liu, F. (2022). English teaching in China. EFL teacher motivation and demotivation at the university level. <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1646800/FULLTEXT01.pdf>
- Mahoney, S. (2022). A New Era: Non-native English-speaking Assistants. Retrieved from https://www.jstage.jst.go.jp/article/jesjournal/20/01/20_210/_pdf/-char/ja
- Mercer, S., & Dörnyei, Z. (2020). Engaging Language Learners in Contemporary Classrooms. 10.1017/9781009024563.
- MEXT. (2018). Survey on the implementation of public elementary English education for the 2018 academic year. Retrieved from http://www.mext.go.jp/a_menu/kokusai/gaikokugo/1415042.htm
- Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological Research Methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Nasution, A. K. R. (2019). YouTube as a media in English language teaching (ELT) context: Teaching procedure text. *Utamax: Journal of Ultimate Research and Trends in Education*, 1(1), 29-33. <https://doi.org/10.31849/utamax.v1i1.2742>
- Pearce, D. R. (2020). Interaction in the Team-taught Classroom: An Investigation of HRTs, ALTs, and Learners. https://doi.org/10.20597/jesjournal.20.01_132
- Sawa, T. (2020). Japan going the wrong way in English-education reform. Retrieved from <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2020/01/21/commentary/japan-commentary/japan-going-wrong-way-english-education-reform/>

- Smith, E. (2021). Effectiveness of English Teaching with JET Programme Assistant Language Teachers and Japanese Teachers of English. Retrieved from <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1574558/FULLTEXT01.pdf>
- Sumalinog, G. (2022). Lived Experiences of the Filipino English Teachers Abroad: The Drawbacks in Focus. *International Journal of Science and Research (IJSR)*. 11. 41-47. 10.21275/SR211113010609
- Travers, C. (2017). “Current knowledge on the nature, prevalence, sources and potential impact of teacher stress,” in *Educator Stress: An Occupational Health Perspective*, eds McIntyre T., McIntyre S., Francis D. (Cham: Springer;), 23–54. 10.1007/978-3-319-53053-6_