

INTERCULTURAL "HOT SPOTS" AND IMPROVING ALT-JAPANESE TEACHER RELATIONS

by Adam Komisarof

About the Author

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Note: The references in this paper have been included so JETs who are interested in reading more about intercultural communication with the Japanese have a list of further resources. Furthermore, the author has published longer articles about his JET Program research and would be glad to forward his articles from academic publications if JETs request him to do so.

Over the past thirteen years, as a JET Program participant (1990-92) and active JET Alumni Association (JETAA) member, I have spoken to many ALTs about both their struggles and successes in Japan. After meeting with hundreds of current and former JET Program participants, I often wondered, "Why do some people feel positively about their relations with their Japanese colleagues while others do not? Is there some aspect of Japanese culture which, if better understood by ALTs, would help them to improve these relationships?" I shall attempt a response to these questions in this article, which is based upon three years of academic research about the JET Program that I conducted from 1997-2000.

In this essay, I will pinpoint five intercultural "hot spots," or unwritten rules for building relations among Japanese coworkers, that pose great challenges to ALTs. These hot spots challenge ALTs because the ways in which Japanese workers build positive collegial relations differ from those in the home cultures of many JETs. However, if ALTs adapt well to these rules, positive relations with coworkers

often result; furthermore, since ALTs spend many hours at work, their overall experiences in Japan tend to improve as do their collegial relations. This paper shall not only identify these intercultural hot spots, but also include an analysis of how ALTs tend to perceive and adapt to them. Finally, recommendations will be proposed for ways in which ALTs can work to improve collegial relations.

Hot Spot #1: Treatment as a Foreign Guest

Many American, Australasian, and European JETs are granted extra status as foreign guests in Japan (Council of Local Authorities for International Relations, 1990; McConnell, 2000), which results in both positive and negative reactions among ALTs. During my research, all of the Caucasian ALTs that I interviewed described receiving extra attention and status as foreign guests. ALTs of Asian heritage, such as Asian Americans, reported similar treatment, but they said that compared to their Caucasian JET colleagues, they "blended in" more and received comparatively less special treatment. Unfortunately, in this particular study, I was unable to locate any JETs of African heritage to be interviewed. In future research, I hope to compare their experiences to those of European and Asian heritage.

Such treatment as guests was viewed both positively and negatively by ALTs depending upon the context. In general, they felt closer to colleagues when they received benefits or help which fulfilled needs that they highly valued. For example, ALTs appreciated when their workloads were lightened by exemptions from meetings which they thought were superfluous. Furthermore, ALTs felt close to coworkers if they were helped when unable to accomplish tasks alone (e.g., teachers helping ALTs who couldn't speak Japanese to buy *shinkansen* tickets or translating documents so the ALT could read them).

If ALTs felt relatively self-sufficient and did not need such support, which typically occurred after their initial periods of adjustment to Japan, then they usually felt excluded by treatment that was either unusually positive or negative based solely upon their nationality. Instead, they wanted to be treated similarly as their Japanese coworkers. As one ALT explained:

Basically [my colleagues] treating me like anybody else makes me feel included--not really treating me specially or treating me negatively. . . I think both kind of make you feel like an outsider. . . So the times that they just treat me as another teacher . . . are the best.

This culturally-ingrained preference among JETs for consistent treatment stands in stark contrast to the meaning in Japan behind such behavior toward foreign guests, which is to convey respect, care, and kindness. The contrast between Japanese and ALTs' interpretations of the same behavior is a striking example of intercultural *miscommunication*.

Specifically, ALTs felt excluded in two types of situations: first, when they were helped by colleagues in matters in which they felt self-sufficient. One common example occurred when colleagues spoke English to ALTs who were at the time communicating competently in Japanese, as when this ALT was conversing with a group of coworkers and was suddenly joined by an English teacher:

Someone told me in Japanese, "It's still raining out." And the English teacher said in English, "It's still raining out." I think that's offensive because I was actively engaging with another Japanese teacher in Japanese, so I obviously understood, but she still made a point of translating.

Also, compliments by coworkers about JETs' abilities to perform everyday functions in Japan, such as sitting in the traditional Japanese position of *seiza*, speaking Japanese, and using chopsticks often made ALTs feel like outsiders after they acclimated to Japan. As one JET participant explained, "With these comments, even though they're small, they never let me forget that I'm a foreigner and that their expectations for me are different." In other words, since Japanese would not compliment each other on their ability to use chopsticks, sit *seiza*, or speak Japanese, many ALTs interpreted these comments negatively since they wanted to be treated similarly to the Japanese.

Recommendations for Improving Relations:

1. ALTs and Japanese need to recognize the different meanings of special treatment for guests in their cultures. As previously explained, such behavior has a positive, respectful meaning in Japan. At the same time, in many of the countries represented on the JET Program, equal and similar treatment extended to all people is seen as a prerequisite to a truly multicultural, accepting society. Therefore, Japanese teachers and ALTs should attempt to accept such differences.

2. JETs should recognize the positive side of special treatment as guests, as they often depend upon help to get important needs met.

3. Since the Japanese cannot always know when ALTs want to be treated as guests or the same as the Japanese, it is important that JETs be patient when their expectations are not fulfilled.

4. When favors or other acts of kindness are done by Japanese teachers for ALTs (for example, giving gifts, making invitations to after school clubs, and translating documents into English), these are attempts to build positive relations. If JETs reciprocate, they can build relationships through a common method in Japan: the cycle of giving and receiving kindness and favors ("on"). ALTs whom I have interviewed, for example, practiced English conversation with colleagues, volunteered to assist coworkers to reduce their workloads, and bought souvenirs for coworkers (especially food) while traveling.

Hot Spot #2: Conflict Avoidance vs. Direct Expression of Feelings

Japanese are expected to communicate in a style that is non-confrontational and conflict-avoiding (Barnlund, 1989; Hofstede, 1991; Tezuka, 1992; Gudykunst & Nishida, 1994; Morisaki & Gudykunst, 1994; Goldman, 1994; McConnell, 2000). This pattern conflicts with the communication styles of many JETs, who tend to more directly and openly express their opinions and feelings. Most of the ALTs interviewed thought that daily communication was ineffective and frustrating due to their colleagues' indirect, non-confrontational communication style. One ALT described:

I tell people, "If you don't like my idea, please tell me, it's really OK," but they won't tell me if they don't like it. I'm always second guessing what they're thinking. . . It's really tiring.

On the other hand, a small minority of the ALTs regularly employed a conflict-avoiding communication style with colleagues and thought this helped them gain trust among colleagues. As one ALT stated, "If I tried to . . . act more easygoing, accepting, and go along with the flow, then I would be part of the group more often."

Recommendations for Improving Relations:

1. Misunderstandings often occur with ALTs when Japanese do not directly express their thoughts. However, Japanese have their own clearly defined ways of expressing disagreement; even if they do not disagree explicitly, they may use nonverbal signals to do so, such as hesitating when being asked if they agree, or

showing a slightly uncomfortable facial expression. If JETs watch for these signs, they will understand Japanese communication better.

2. If ALTs want to know a colleague's true opinion, then a good strategy is to ask an open-ended question, for example, "What do you think of this topic?" This should be done *before* JETs offer their own opinions; this will circumvent colleagues who typically adjust their ideas to match those of the ALT in order to maintain harmony.

3. ALTs can adopt a non-confrontational, easygoing communication style with coworkers, which may help Japanese teachers feel comfortable to openly express their opinions.

Hot Spot #3: Culturally-Appropriate Levels of Self-Disclosure

Japanese tend to speak in less depth about themselves and about fewer topics than many other Western peoples, such as Americans (Barnlund, 1989). Among teachers, it is also common to shift with the same person between a formal mode at school, in which little personal information is shared, and more intimate, relaxed conversations outside, for example at bars or restaurants (Lebra, 1976). These patterns prove confusing and even frustrating for many ALTs.

Most of the ALTs interviewed wanted to engage in self-disclosure with colleagues by discussing a broad range of topics, including hobbies, teaching philosophy, opinions about work-related issues, and family information. Generally, they felt accepted and included if they could do so regularly and excluded if they could not. One ALT, however, felt that receiving acts of kindness from colleagues was a satisfying substitute for self-disclosure:

[The Japanese] might be more willing to give you something or do something for you than Americans would. . . . In the beginning, maybe the lack of open friendliness [among coworkers] made me feel excluded and felt cold. . . . But at the same time, before I came they had donated so many things to me. They might not be very friendly face to face, but then they did something like that. So I felt included because they've taken care of me.

Another interesting pattern was that ALTs who frequently interacted with coworkers outside of school (for example, at restaurants, teachers' homes, and faculty trips) tended to feel satisfied with the level of information shared with colleagues. Conversely, those who interacted with teachers almost exclusively at

work reported that levels of self-disclosure were unsatisfying and caused them to feel distant. This is likely because Japanese tend not to engage in much self-disclosure at work. Therefore, JETs who went out with coworkers put themselves in situations where self-disclosure became more socially acceptable and likely to occur, while JETs who encountered colleagues mostly at work found self-disclosure limited and experienced more difficulties developing satisfying human relations.

Recommendations for Improving ALT-Japanese Teacher Relations:

1. ALTs should not take personally a perceived lack of sharing by colleagues, as Japanese tend to be reserved about sharing personal information and opinions.
2. Rather than sharing personal information, Japanese may show affection through generosity and other kind, helpful acts. Therefore, it is important that ALTs recognize such substitute signals for caring.
3. If more personal conversations are desired, ALTs should meet colleagues outside of school.

Hot Spot #4: Attendance and Social Dynamics at Social Events After Hours

Japanese workers are expected to attend social events with colleagues after work hours and on weekends (Sato & McLaughlin, 1998; Stewart & Bennett, 1991). Invitations to these events generally made ALTs feel included among colleagues, while the perceived lack thereof made them feel excluded. ALTs described invitations to many types of social events, including faculty parties, trips with coworker friends, and meals at teachers' homes.

While invitations to social events were important in making ALTs feel included, they were only one of several important criteria. In order to feel comfortable, the participants also indicated that relaxed, informal communication with colleagues was necessary. On the other hand, communication characterized by hesitation and social restraint made them feel excluded.

Recommendations for Improving Relations:

1. In order to demonstrate a commitment to building positive collegial relations, ALTs should attend social events whenever possible.
2. Among Japanese, hesitation ("enryo") to express their needs or opinions often has a positive meaning of courtesy and respect (Gudykunst & Kim, 1992); so when JETs see such self-restraint among Japanese at social events (as opposed to

the informal, relaxed, and spontaneous behavior that makes many ALTs more comfortable), JETs may be interpreting greater social distance than their Japanese colleagues and missing the intended meaning. If ALTs recognize self-restraint's positive meaning, then they can avoid unnecessary misunderstandings.

Hot Spot #5: Collaborative Projects

The organizational structure of Japanese schools is tremendously interdependent, with teachers working together on many projects to achieve group goals concerned with school administration and program planning (White, 1987; LeTendre, 1998; Sato & McLaughlin, 1998). All of the ALTs interviewed recognized the importance of working in collaborative teams in forming collegial relationships, for example, in planning team teaching lessons, participating in English department meetings, and running student clubs.

According to their interviews, ALTs could be categorized into two groups. A small minority of ALTs wanted only minimal involvement in collaborative tasks with coworkers. However, all of the other JETs wanted to engage in such work with colleagues, hoping to contribute to projects at the levels of planning, decision-making, and execution. For example, one ALT was invited to act as the assistant coach of a student sports team under the guidance of a Japanese teacher. Not only did he help the head coach at daily practices, but he was also given the responsibility to supervise the team when the head coach could not attend. In this manner, to the extent that their limited Japanese ability would permit, most of the ALTs interviewed wanted to enact similar roles as Japanese teachers.

Conversely, ALTs felt excluded when they lacked opportunities to participate in collaborative projects or were prevented from doing work for which they perceived themselves as qualified. As one JET described when she and her colleagues were marking exams together:

I was only allowed to do one small pocket of work. After that, they were tallying the scores, and I said, "I can add this stack." And they were really adamant that I couldn't. . . Ultimately the responsibility rests on them if I make a mistake, but it's frustrating that I've got to sit at this table and just watch. . . All of the teachers at that table were doing it. . . So I'm always included, but not really.

Recommendations for Improving Relations:

1. Most ALTs are unable (in terms of Japanese linguistic ability and/or knowledge about the Japanese educational system) to perform all of the duties that are required of Japanese teachers. Therefore, it may not be reasonable for ALTs to expect all of the same rights and responsibilities as Japanese teachers. However, ALTs interested in more collaboration and responsibility can inform colleagues about the types of contributions that they would like to make and ask permission to become involved. When making proposals, ALTs can "sell" valuable contributions that their status as native non-Japanese speakers *enhances* (rather than seeking roles that end up in extra work for their colleagues, which some Japanese teachers fear). Furthermore, desire to become involved can be communicated by showing "team spirit," e.g., spending more time at school, attending more meetings, and participating in communal rites such as school cleaning.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, insight has been gained into how ALTs perceive Japanese rules for building collegial relations, as well as how JETs can more positively adapt to such norms. Presumably, the next step in improving intercultural relations is for both ALTs and their Japanese colleagues to identify what hot spots may be affecting their interactions and make mutually satisfying adjustments. Because the readership of this journal is mostly non-Japanese, this paper has focus upon ways that ALTs can engage in this process. Ideally, however, the effort to improve relations and better work with each other should be mutual. With both sides attempting to understand each other, communication between ALTs and Japanese teachers should only become stronger and ALTs' tenures in Japan more successful.

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