

# **“ASSISTANT LANGUAGE TEACHERS” AS A CATALYST FOR COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE IN JAPAN: POLICY AND OUTCOMES REGARDING THE “JET PROGRAM”**

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## **Abstract**

The Japan Exchange and Teaching Program is one of the largest exchange programs of its kind in the world. The primary purpose of the program is to invite young native-English speaking University graduates to work in Japan as Assistant Language Teachers in the public school system. English education in Japan is often criticized for not being communicative enough. Inviting native-English speaking teachers into the classroom is seen as a solution to that problem. The program, however, has political motives at its roots, and has waxed and waned based on a variety of political factors. The effectiveness of the program must also be questioned with respect to internal limitations within the program, as well as systemic issues within English education in Japan. This paper describes the program from its inception in 1987 and outlines some of the main issues. Given that other East-Asian countries have considered similar, smaller-scale programs, issues arising from the Japan Exchange and Teaching Program are pertinent in the current climate.

## **1 Introduction: Into the heyday of the JET program**

The Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) program began in 1987 and was unveiled at a summit between then-American president, Ronald Reagan and Prime Minister Nakasone of Japan in 1986. Described by McConnell (2000). The program was inaugurated at a time when anti-Japanese sentiment among Americans was growing. Japan's automobile and other industries were competing directly with American industry and Japan was enjoying an increasing trade and current account surplus. The JET program was something that Nakasone was able to bring to the table to show that Japan was serious about opening up to the west. The generous salary could also be seen as a small step toward levelling the current account surplus.

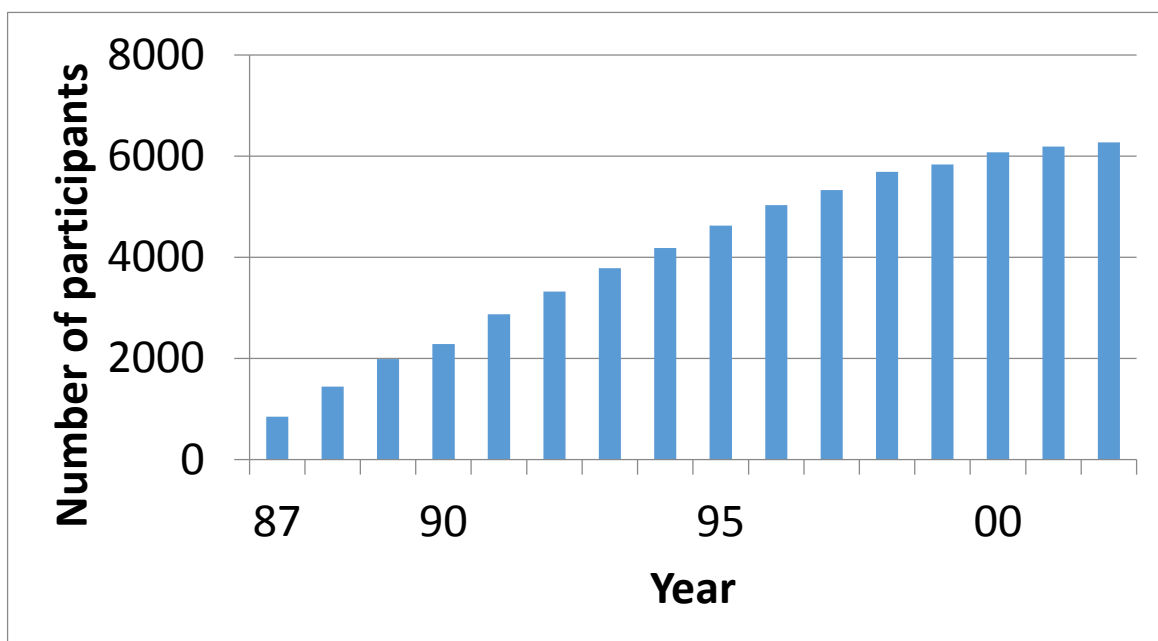
The primary stated aim of the program was to improve English education in Japan, making it more communicative by inviting native-speaker teachers of English to team-team with Japanese teachers of English (JTEs). The program began small, with just under 1000 participants and was scheduled to grow year after year. The majority of participants came from the United States and would be given the title Assistant Language Teacher (ALT). Participants were also recruited from the other core English speaking countries; The U.K., Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Ireland. Coordinators of International Relations (CIRs) were additionally recruited to foster intercultural relations in a variety of unspecified ways, depending on local needs. CIRs accounted for less than 5% of the participants. This paper

focuses on the role of ALTs. The overall goal of the program, according to the JET Program official website, is as follows:

The JET Program aims to promote grass roots internationalisation at the local level by inviting young overseas graduates to assist in international exchange and foreign language education in local governments, boards of education and elementary, junior and senior high schools throughout Japan. It seeks to foster ties between Japanese citizens (mainly youth) and JET participants at the person-to-person level (JET Program Official Webpage).

Typically, duties of ALTs include team teaching or assisting with classes taught by JTEs; assisting in the preparation of teaching material, and participating in extra-curricular activities with students.

As promised, the number of JET program participants increased steadily, year after year up until around 2002. This increase went hand in hand with calls by the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Technology (MEXT) to improve the communicativeness of English education in Japan (MEXT, 2003). In 1989, Oral Communication (OC) classes were introduced into the curriculum for all high school students. In 2002 MEXT released the new course of study. In response to the advance of globalization English education should focus on developing students' practical communicative abilities, including the ability to exchange information and conduct daily conversation. Then, in 2003, MEXT announced an "Action Plan" to create "Japanese with English abilities" (MEXT, 2003). Accordingly they called for increased use of ALTs and suggested that teachers should make a greater effort to realize the aims of the new course of study. They also recommended that English teachers should use English as the medium of instruction and that special English programs be created at designated elementary schools also. (At that time, English was taught from junior high school through university.) By 2002, according to the JET Program official webpage, there were more than 6000 participants, as indicated in Figure 1.



**Fig. 1. Number of JET program participants by year from 1987 to 2002 (JET Program Official Webpage)**

While the primary aim of the program is to update Japanese English education, the political origins of the program are important to recognize. Furthermore, we see that the direction of program has been influenced by politics within the education as well as at the national level, which becomes apparent later. It would be difficult to argue that the program has not had a positive effect to some extent, but because of various compromises and a lack of understanding, it could be argued that it does not represent the best allocation of resources. The purpose herein, is to describe the program over the years and let the reader evaluate the program.

## 2 Roles and rationale in the classroom

### 2.1 Theoretical role division between ALTs and JTEs

Research has sought to justify the program, describing the various roles that ALTs and JTEs can adopt. Bailey (2002), for example, suggests that the success of a teacher can be illustrated graphically, shown in Figure 2.

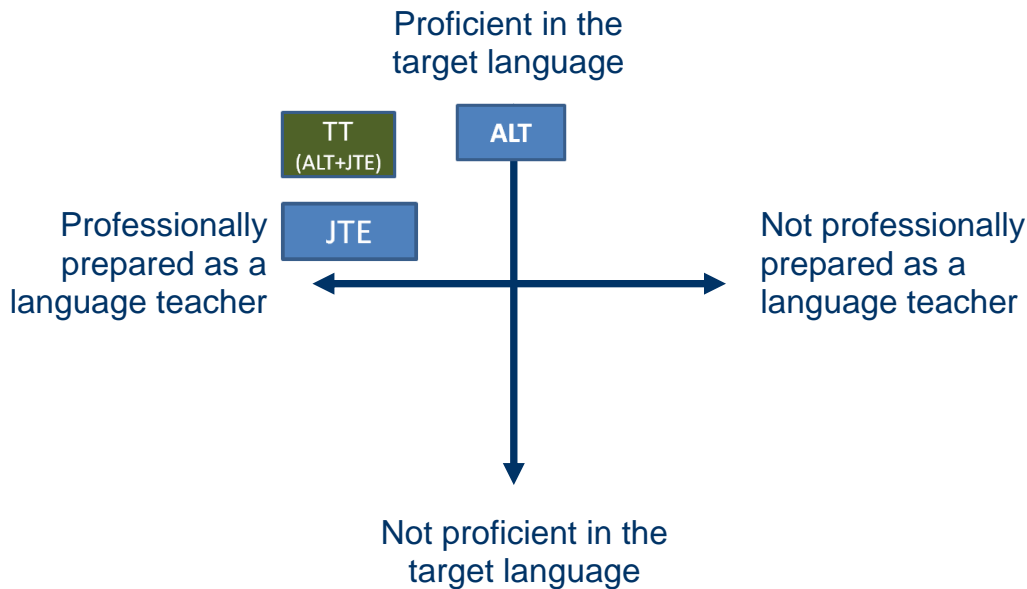
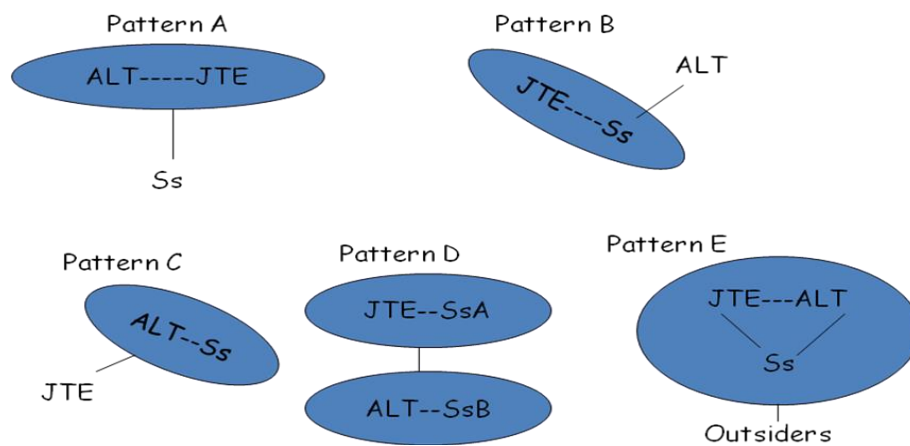


Fig. 2. Proposed roles for ALTs and JTEs

As native speakers of English, ALTs are expected to have a high proficiency of English. However, ALTs are not qualified to have a teaching licence and usually view teaching English in Japan as an excursion between University and more permanent employment, more often than not in another field. Therefore, they are less professionally prepared as language teachers. JTEs, meanwhile, are professional teachers, but often their English ability represents a relative weakness. With two teachers co-teaching, they are able to compliment each others' strengths and weaknesses so that the team functions high in the upper left quadrant.

Tajino and Tajino (2000) also showed enthusiasm for team teaching. They reviewed 10 years of team-teaching in Japan and suggested various roles which ALTs and JETs should play. Consistent with modern views, they suggest teachers should de-centralize the classroom, proposing the term "team learning" rather than "teach teaching". They propose several patterns indicated in Figure 3. Pattern A represents a traditional role where the class is teacher

fronted and the teachers pass knowledge to the students. In pattern B however, the students play an active role teaching the native speaker. We see an alliance between the JTE and the students such that the Japanese teacher may help or facilitate the students, in teaching the JTE. The students may for example, wish to teach the ALT something about Japanese culture, or perhaps more interestingly, about their favourite TV programme, etc. Pattern C has the ALT working with the students, perhaps to teach the JTE something, or to translate what the JTE is saying in Japanese. In pattern D half of the students work with the ALT and the other half work with the JTE. Finally in pattern E, all of the participants work together toward one common goal. This pattern might be practical for group projects such as correspondence with a sister school in an English speaking country or introducing students' hometown in English.



**Fig. 3. Roles for ALTs and JTEs (Tajino & Tajino, 2000)**

## **2.2 Conflicting views regarding the roles of JTEs and ALTs**

Among the limited amount of literature dealing with team teaching and the JET Programme, *Studies in Team Teaching* (Wada & Cumino, 2004), provokes constructive discussion, presenting a variety of sometimes contradicting views as to what role ALTs and JTEs should assume. Many suggest that the ALTs role should be restricted to stimulating communicative competencies such as speaking and listening. (Browne & Evans, 1994; Garant, 1994). Browne and Evans (1994) cast the ALT in the narrow role of cultural informant to stimulate conversation. Their argument is based on linguistic research into communicative competence and assumes that students have little opportunity to communicate with JTEs. Others however, suggest that ALTs can and should be able to assist the JTE with reading and grammar classes. Law (1994) for example discusses the impact, or *washback* effect of entrance exams on team teaching. Although reluctant to criticize the exams, he states:

If the role of the AET in team teaching is conceived simply as that of improving listening and speaking skills, the above may merely serve to confirm that college entrance exams are an insurmountable obstacle to reform. I wish to argue here that this represents a historically and theoretically inappropriate view of team teaching, and instead advocate an active role for the AET in encouraging fluency reading within an integrated curriculum (p. 92).

There is a clear indication that the role of the ALT is influenced by the washback effect of University entrance exams. Yukawa (1994) suggests that given the priority that reading

competence takes, ALTs should be able to assist with reading classes. She found however, that when reading passages became progressively more difficult, the JTE found it difficult to incorporate ALTs into the lesson, resorting to Japanese translation to ensure that students understood the content of reading passages. She also suggests that in exam track high schools, JTEs prefer not bring ALTs into the classroom because time spent on ‘chatting’ is not efficient for preparing for exams.

Leaving the issue of entrance exams aside for the moment, a pattern emerges regarding the role of ALTs and JTEs, namely that there is no clear consensus. Given their relative strengths one would expect that JTEs would focus on grammar and ALTs on communication but the roles have not been clearly defined. Though the ideas put forth are sometimes conflicting, the prevailing pattern is that in the absence of concrete guidelines about how to teach, every case is different. For teachers looking for answers to the questions; “What should I do with my ALT?” this might not seem to be a satisfactory answer but is not necessarily a bad situation. JTEs and ALTs all have different styles and in most cases they have been able to adapt and settle into a variety of roles, sometimes through compromise, depending on the circumstances. Student needs and external constraints such as entrance exams are other variables which influence classroom practice. Therefore it is probably not appropriate for MEXT to define ideal roles and then tell teachers that *this is the way they should all teach*. Research concurs that any success that the JET program has seen has been in the absence of more concrete guidelines, or perhaps *due to* the absence of guidelines. (Gillis-Furutaka, 1994; Hogan, 2004; Smith, 1994)

### **3 Mounting criticism and decline of the program**

The majority of JET Program participants recently graduated from University and do not speak Japanese. Although there is generally more information readily available on-line and through word of mouth about the working conditions in Japan than there was in the past, it can be difficult to adequately prepare for the experience. It is unrealistic to expect ALTs to become fully integrated into their working environment and this leads to stress for both ALTs and their Japanese counterparts. Voci-Reed (1994) summarizes some of the stress factors that both sides face. Stress factors for ALTs include:

1. Uncertain or differing role expectations between school staff members and the ALT
2. Poor communication
3. The ALTs limited sphere of influence, often including limited interpersonal relations

JTEs stress factors include:

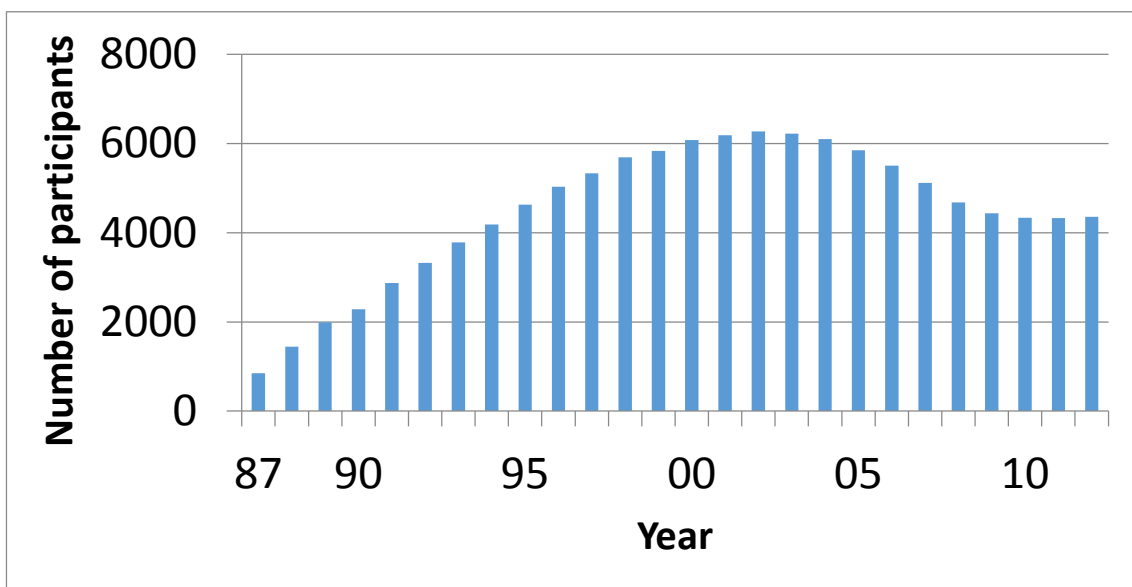
1. Pressure from external sources such as parents and other school staff to ensure successful performance on University Entrance Exams.
2. Cultural differences.
3. Lack of support for creativity in class.

Ohtani (2010) as well as the author, having participated on the JET program, indicate similar tensions. The salary which ALTs receive (approximately 3,600,000 yen per year) is adequate for recent University graduates and the workload is not strenuous. In contrast, JTEs are under enormous pressure, as mentioned above, and they often work in excess of 60 hours per week.

Clearly, ALTs cannot complain about those conditions. Yet, ALTs often feel a keen sense of alienation in the workplace, combined with the stresses of living in a foreign country and not understanding the language. Others have called for a decrease in the numbers of ALTs (Kan, 2002), citing various problems and frictions which arise from bringing foreigners into the Japanese workplace.

Providing further perspective, it could be argued that the JET program plays into the “Native Speaker Fallacy” (Phillipson, 1992), which has been well-documented in Japan (Goto-Butler, 2007; Murahata, 2004). Japanese students, parents and even JTEs often have the perception that Native English Speaker Teachers (NESTs) are better than non-Native English Speaker Teachers (non-NESTs). It is felt that a Japanese teacher will focus on knowledge of the language, while NESTs will enable the learner to actually *use* the language, and that the former is of more value than the latter. Essentially, identity as a native or non-native English speaker becomes the salient quality of the teacher, with a high premium places on NESTs, regardless of their individual qualifications or background. While there may be a tendency for Japanese teachers to focus more on form such as grammatical knowledge and for NESTs to focus more on communication, this is not necessarily the case. There are other more important factors which determine the quality of a teacher. Good teachers should be able to effectively focus on both form and meaning (communication) depending on the situation. Some of the criticism leveled specifically at ALTs (Kan, 2002), are in part, a response to the imbalance created by the Native Speaker Fallacy.

After 2002, criticism of the JET program seemed to take root. As indicated in Figure 3, over the next several years, the number of JET participants declined steeply from over 6000, to just over 4000 by 2010. It is also important to note, that at this time, the Democratic Party of Japan became increasingly influential in Japanese politics and assumed power after the national election in 2009. They had identified the JET program as a source of wasteful spending, and suggested that the program should be reviewed.



**Fig. 4: JET Program participants up to 2012 (JET Program Official Webpage)**

## **4 Resurrection**

While, on the one hand, some were trying to reign in the JET program, the importance of English, particularly communicative competence in English was keenly recognized in Japan. Compulsory English lessons began from junior high school, but primary schools increasingly began to incorporate English classes into their curriculum as well. In 2012, English became mandatory for all grade five and six students under the auspices of “Foreign Language Activities”, as the class is called. Elementary school teachers had not received pre-service training to teach English. To compensate, schools increasingly requested ALT visits to implement Foreign Language Activities. Furthermore, at all level, the association of ALTs with Communicative Language Teaching was persistent. Despite the decreasing supply of ALTs, the demand likely rose along with the profile of English in the climate of globalization. Then in 2012, the Liberal Democratic Party regained power in Japan. Perhaps in part to demark themselves from the previous administration, they called for more ALTs as a major step towards improving English education in Japan. The number of JET participants, they suggested, should be more than doubled to reach 10 000 within the next three years (Mie, 2013). The primary reason they cited was the need to make English education more communicative, but this was also seen as a measure to improve relations with the United States, which, they claim, had deteriorated under the previous government.

The government continues to call form more ALTs, suggesting that all elementary schools should have their own ALT by the 2019. As of 2014, there are 4,476 JET participants in Japan (JET Program Official Webpage). Judging by this number, the government is not on track with their forecast. However, over the last ten to fifteen years, the number of ALTs outside of the JET program, referred to as non-JET ALTs, has risen continuously. This shadowy group of non-JET ALTs has lead to a number of other issues which are not commonly understood by schools (Takahara, 2008).

## **5 Current issues**

### ***5.1 Non-JET ALTs***

Some non-JET ALTs are employed directly by local school boards, but many work for an agency or private English school. Elementary, junior and senior high schools enter contractual arrangements with the agency to provide ALTs. Since they are outside of the jurisdiction of the JET program, it is difficult to estimate the number of non-JET ALTs, but by some estimates, the number of non-JET ALTs has surpassed the number of JET ALTs. In the absence of quantitative statistics, they have been largely ignored, but recently they have become enough of a social phenomenon to receive attention in the media (Takahara, 2008). As reported in the Japan Times, their conditions are drastically different from JET participants: their salaries are generally lower, they often work on a part-time basis, being paid per classroom hour, and they do not receive many of the benefits that JET participants receive. Given their poor working conditions, schools cannot expect the same level of performance or enthusiasm from non-JET ALTs. They are often not given preparation time and are not able to remain at school to plan with JTEs. Furthermore, because the agency exists between the school and the ALT, it is unclear who ALT is reports to. Ultimately the ALT works for the agency, but it is questionable whether the agency has the school’s best interest in mind. The government’s call has been specifically for more JET Program ALTs, rather

than non-JET ALTs, but with dwindling resources and less central control, non-JET ALTs have ultimately been used to fill the gaps. It is important that educators as well as the government are aware of this issue, as an unintended result of government policy and rhetoric.

### ***5.2 Systematic problems in Japanese English education***

Kan (2002) suggested that as Japan increases the number of ALTs, problems with ALTs have largely been unaddressed. Perhaps more serious problems, however, are systemic within Japanese English education. Many researchers have observed that classroom practice does not reflect the goal of fostering communicative competence (Hagerman 2009; Nishino, 2011; Taguchi, 2005). Teachers still rely on the outdated teaching methods by which they learned English as children. Grammar translation remains a preferred method and Japanese is still by far the dominant classroom language even in Oral Communication classes, despite MEXTs requests that teachers use English as the medium of instruction. While MEXT stresses the importance of “communication”, effective Communicative Language Teaching seems to be beyond the reach of Japanese teachers.

One of the biggest influences on teachers is the Entrance Exams which students are required to take to enter high school and university. These tests are multiple-choice and include a short listening section but require no output from the student in the form of speaking or writing. They are almost entirely based on grammatical knowledge, rather than any construct of communicative ability. They are very high-stakes tests for students and remain the most obvious quantitative measure of teaching and learning. The washback effect that testing has on teaching has been often speculated and documented (Hagerman, 2009). It is unreasonable to expect that teachers teach skills or abilities which are not related to assessment.

Interestingly, the central government seems to recognize that testing has had a bad influence on language teaching and learning, and has proposed that the TOEFL iBT be used as an entrance and exit test for universities (Hongo, 2013). Universities would stipulate a minimum TOEFL requirement for entrance and exit, and all students would have to take the test at least twice. Since the TOEFL requires output (verbal and written), teachers and learners would then have to develop those skills in the classroom. This suggestion indicates that government seems to recognize that there is a problem, but one should question whether it is appropriate to turn to an American testing institution to solve it. The TOEFL measures test-takers’ ability to perform in English in an American academic environment. Although this may be related to the goal of fostering communicative competence, clearly the context is not the same.

## **6 Conclusion**

The JET Program is most often associated with communicative competence. Japanese English education has been criticized for its lack of communicativeness and adherence to traditional, outdated methods. ALTs are seen as the solution, bringing English to life in the classroom as if, by their very existence, students will be able to communicate in English. The JET Program, however, was partially rooted in politics, and we have seen that policy regarding the program has shifted with the political climate of the times. The reality is that ALTs are not professionally trained as English teachers and are limited in their reach as assistants with little knowledge of educational culture in Japan or Japanese. If JTEs were truly able to use ALTs effectively, team teaching might still be a viable solution. However, JTEs face their own set of



challenges. While MEXT advises that they should be teaching communicatively, they are ultimately a product of their environment and are under a great deal of pressure from the broader community to prepare their students to take Entrance Exams. The JET Program has likely had some positive impact, but the current governments' policy of simply increasing the number of ALTs ignores other problems within English education in Japan.

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