

# **Team Teaching in the English Classroom in Japan: A Call for Intercultural Communicative Competence Development**

**Jonathan David Brown<sup>1</sup>**  
*Yamanashi Gakuin University*

## **ABSTRACT**

This study looks at the problems of team teaching in Japan through a review of earlier studies and a brief survey of elementary school Japanese and native-English teachers that was conducted by the author. The results of the survey corroborate earlier studies and suggest team teachers need Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) development to make team teaching more effective. Accordingly, this paper encourages those who are in a position to incorporate ICC development into teacher training programs to do so.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Team teaching has become a common practice in English classrooms across Japan, but since its inception, a number of problems have been observed. Cultural clashes between native and non-native speakers involved in team teaching are quite common (Kwon, 2000). The teachers' cross-cultural team-teaching relations and the native-English teachers (NETs) learning how to manage the social and cultural expectations of them in Japan cause serious problems, and are the root of most, if not all, other issues found in the team teaching classroom in Japan. Thus, for the purposes of this paper, attention is directed toward the "false expectations, unrealistic goals, and uncommunicated ideas" (Voci-Reed, 1994, p. 66) that often lead to discordance between NETs and Japanese English teachers (JTEs).

Consider, for example, the following statement (Tajino & Tajino, 2000, p. 5) made by a JTE concerning an NET's qualifications:

[T]he [NET] is not properly trained to lead the class, has no experience as an educator, has little in-depth knowledge of the English language, and is not responsible for the class.

Like their Japanese counterparts, NETs also have complaints (Tajino, 2002, p. 31):

---

<sup>1</sup> Jonathan David Brown is a full-time lecturer in the International College of Liberal Arts at Yamanashi Gakuin University. He holds an MA in English with an emphasis in literacy, technology, and professional writing and is currently working on a PhD in Linguistics at Leiden University (the Netherlands). His research interests include L2 writing, intercultural communication, contrastive rhetoric, rhetoric, discourse analysis, and corpus linguistics. Correspondence should be sent to brownj@ygu.ac.jp

Many [JTEs] don't know what to expect of [NETs] and this is a major problem. Japanese people tend not to express what they feel openly. This has to change . . .

With such remarks like those made above, it is therefore clear that for team teaching in Japan to be successful NETs and JTEs must learn to effectively communicate across cultures (Romanko & Nakatsugawa, 2009; Tajino, 2002; Tajino & Tajino, 2000). However, despite the research that has been conducted on team teaching demonstrating the problems that arise due to cross-cultural communication (or lack thereof), very few have argued a need for ICC development among NETs and JTEs. Therefore, those who in fact could initiate ICC development programs to help NETs and JTEs (local boards of education, the Ministry of Education, or even the teachers themselves) have yet to be given a reason why ICC is beneficial. Thus, the purpose of this study is to do exactly that: give the powers that be not only theoretical but practical reason to incorporate ICC development into NETs' and JTEs' training.

Unlike earlier studies on team teaching in Japan, however, this study will not be examining the junior high school and high school settings, because such a study would be redundant (see Galloway, 2009; Gorsuch, 2002; Igawa, 2009; Sick, 1996). Furthermore, it is the belief of the author that junior high school and high school teachers are too accustomed to the two-plus decades of the team-teaching approach that is commonly found in these contexts. Thus, presuppositions and bias regarding English and team teaching are prevalent and influence teachers' perspectives. For these reasons, this study surveys NETs and JTEs currently involved in team-teaching practices in Japanese public elementary schools. This is particularly relevant for this paper as team teaching at this level, i.e., in elementary schools, is a relatively new practice. Consequently, very little research has been conducted concerning team teaching in elementary schools in Japan at this time, but more importantly these teachers do not hold preconceived notions of the way things are or should be, nor are they accustomed to any one particular way of teaching. Everything is new, which means their perspectives on team teaching have not been influenced by past experiences and knowledge. They are, in essence, a blank slate and, accordingly, excellent subjects for this study, because they can better represent the current issues NETs and JTEs are facing in team teaching in Japan and demonstrate the importance of ICC development. Before proceeding with the study, however, it is first necessary to understand how ICC development is applicable to the team teaching context in Japan.

## **THE IMPORTANCE OF ICC DEVELOPMENT**

In this ever-globalizing world, being bilingual is growing increasingly necessary. It is evident, however, that in order to communicate with people of other cultures it is not enough to be able to piece together a list of vocabulary words, utter grammatically correct sentences or even use colloquial phrases, but rather, additional competences, which comprise attitudes, knowledge, skills, and critical awareness (Byram, 1997) are needed. This is because language is a vehicle for the transmission of culture (Kramsch, 1997), and in order for an exchange of information to occur it must be understood that such an exchange is not deemed successful solely in terms of its efficiency (i.e., were the utterances received and understood?). On the contrary, to be regarded as a competent intercultural communicator, the ability to establish and maintain relationships is held in high regard. Therefore, in this sense, as Byram (1997) argues, "the efficacy of communication depends upon using language to demonstrate one's

willingness to relate [to others]” (p. 3). Fundamentally, then, the foundation of ICC is, unsurprisingly, relationships.

Consider, for a moment, from where the push for ICC development emerged: as a training program for American Foreign Service officers (see Hall, 1959). From there ICC has expanded into a wide variety of academic disciplines, e.g., business science, cultural anthropology, behavioral psychology, communication studies, and, of course, foreign-language education, and each discipline has always stressed the role of relationships. In business science, for example, ICC is concerned with international business arrangements, which involve relationships between companies, and these relationships always start at the individual level (an employee or small group of employees from two or more companies meet and establish a relationship, albeit a professional one) (Goby, 2007; Huang, Rayner & Zhuang, 2003). Additionally, according to Matsumoto and Hwang (2013), a number of studies in behavioral psychology have sought how to assess ICC, with relationships being a criterion in numerous studies’ assessments. And, most relevant to this study, in foreign-language education the role relationships play in ICC is rather obvious. In Europe, for example, this concept is being incorporated into the work of the Council of Europe, a transnational body that provides education policy guidelines for member states.

## TEAM TEACHING IN JAPAN

In Japan, however, the importance of relationships, and consequently ICC, in effective language learning has not been as widely embraced, as can be seen in MEXT’s (2008) overall objectives of a mandatory foreign language course for fifth- and sixth-grade elementary school students called *Gaigokugokatsudo* (Foreign Language Activities):

To form the foundation of pupils’ communication abilities through foreign languages while developing the understanding of languages and cultures through various experiences, fostering a positive attitude toward communication, and familiarizing pupils with the sounds and basic expressions of foreign languages (p. 1).

What is concerning here is not so much the objectives themselves but how these objectives are supposedly accomplished. MEXT (2002) advises JTEs to teach in collaboration with a native speaker of the foreign language. It is common knowledge that English is generally the foreign language being taught in “Foreign Language Activities, and so the most typical arrangement is for a JTE and a native-English speaker (Romanko & Nakatsugawa, 2009) to work together as a team. However, it is not the team-teaching arrangement that is worrisome. In fact, team teaching can be very beneficial to both teachers and students, because teachers can better model dialogues, demonstrate question and answer routines, as well as provide students with more one-on-one time—a result of the lower teacher-student ratio—when part of a teaching team (Carless, 2006). The concern here, therefore, is the fact that neither the JTE nor the NET are given any training in communicating with one another, that is, ICC development, and there are a number of reasons why a lack of ICC development among team teachers is a problem.

In Japan, team teachers differ from each other in numerous ways—in professional status (lead teacher versus assistant), linguistic proficiency (non-native versus native speaker), and, of course, cultural background (native Japanese versus non-native Japanese, i.e. foreigner) (Miyazato, 2009). These differences can pose challenges for the teaching team since team teaching, according to Carless (2006, p. 345), demands several enabling features in order to

be successful: “pedagogic,” “logistical” and “interpersonal.” These factors are perhaps even more vital in an intercultural teaching team.

## **ENABLING FEATURES OF TEAM TEACHING**

### **Pedagogic**

According to Shimaoka and Yashiro (1990) a lack of established methods and guidelines that the NET and JTE may follow has resulted in many of the problems seen in team teaching. One of the major concerns of team teaching addressed in numerous studies has been that of the teachers’ roles (Carless, 2006; Fujimoto-Adamson, 2010; Gorusch, 2002; Mahoney, 2004; Tajino, 2002; Voci-Reed, 1994). Though both NETs and JTEs have shown concern about what roles they should play in the classroom, generally this is more of a concern among NETs, as they are usually defined as the “assistants.”

While NETs are generally regarded as language and cultural informants (Tajino, 2002), the majority of NETs feel they are being used more as “tape-recorders” and “game machines” (as cited in Kachi & Lee, 2001). Consequently, the ineffective utilization of NETs has resulted in many of the problems seen in team teaching in Japan (Tajino, 2002). For example, the uncertainty of their roles and conflicting role expectations have frustrated NETs and made many seem uncooperative, something JTEs often raise concern about (Voci-Reed, 1994; Kachi & Lee, 2001).

Wada (1994), one of the primary designers of the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme, has provided suggestions for teacher roles—the NET communicates (in English) and interacts with students as much as possible while the JTE explains facts about the English language and assists in answering students’ questions. Additionally, familiarity with their students’ needs and abilities, as well as knowing what it is like to learn English as a second language, sets JTEs in an opportune position to act as a mediator between the NET and students (Carless, 2006). Unfortunately, however, such ideal team-teaching situations do not always come to be (Tajino, 2002).

### **Logistical**

While confusion over roles seems to be the primary concern of NETs, JTEs are more concerned with the lack of time for preparing team-teaching lessons, and, according to Nunan (1992), preparation is very important for the success of collaborative language teaching; however, even those who have the time to prepare often express their desire for methods and ideas that can be utilized in the classroom. Additional training and team-teaching workshops have been suggested and even implemented; however, evidence shows such training rarely results in profound improvements (Duff & Uchida, 1997).

### **Interpersonal**

There is certainly no doubt that both role designation and careful lesson preparation are essential to effective implementation of team teaching (Carless, 2006); however, when considering Carless’ definition of interpersonal factors—“the ability to cooperate with partners, allied to sensitivity towards their viewpoints and practices, particularly when differences emerge” (p. 345)—it can be deduced that of the three features Carless identifies—pedagogic, logistical and interpersonal—“interpersonal” is the most significant as it could have the greatest impact on the other two. In fact, Carless’ study of good practices in team teaching found the most successful classes were where the teachers, i.e., non-native and

native speaker, were sensitive and displayed goodwill towards one another, were willing to let “points of tension subside,” and were willing to compromise (p. 350)—all exhibiting evidence that having a good relationship with their teaching partner is key to overcoming such issues. Roles, preparation, and methods, i.e., pedagogic and logistical features, did not emerge as an issue because, assumedly, these rectify themselves if teachers are able to cooperate (again, by putting their relationship before such issues); however, because of NETs’ and JTEs’ different cultural backgrounds (as discussed earlier), this is not always easy to accomplish—thus the need for ICC development among NETs and JTEs, which will be further corroborated in the following study.

## **CONTEXT**

### **The Participants & Method**

A survey with twelve open-ended questions [see Appendix A] was distributed among four JTEs and four NETs. The participants were all volunteers and remained anonymous throughout the study. NETs received the survey in English, while the JTEs’ survey was in Japanese. The participants were encouraged to answer in their native language so that the answers would be as accurate as possible and would not be hindered by language barriers. As a result, all NET respondents provided their feedback in English, while JTEs responded in Japanese. The author translated the Japanese responses to English and then categorized the data according to predetermined categories based on Carless’s (2006) three features of successful team teaching: (a) pedagogic, (b) logistical, and (c) interpersonal. The data were transcribed and coded according to these three features associated with the teachers’ perceptions of team teaching through methods from discourse and metaphor analysis. The author located lexical and thematic similarities in the data and then arranged them accordingly.

## **FINDINGS**

The findings from the survey suggest that most if not all of the concerns raised in past research in regards to team teaching remain constant among JTEs and NETs at the elementary level. Thus, the following study will be used to further support what has already been discussed in the sections above rather than present new findings. What follows is a brief investigation of the data in consideration with the pedagogic, logistical and interpersonal features identified by Carless (2006). This is done so that we may observe how the data from this study serves to corroborate the findings from earlier studies discussed.

### **Pedagogic**

Most of the respondents expressed uncertainty about their roles in team teaching. Though JTEs accepted the fact that they are the “class leader,” many felt uncomfortable in that role, generally due to a lack of confidence in their English-language ability. As a result, the JTE respondents admitted to supervising the class or even assisting the NET rather than actually leading lessons. Thus, their role became more of what they felt capable or comfortable fulfilling. This, however, resulted in confusion over the role NETs should play.

Most NETs agreed that the JTE should lead the class, however, they also admitted JTEs did not always do this. Nevertheless, both JTEs and NETs recognized the need for one teacher to act as leader in team-teaching lessons, and, consequently, NETs found themselves filling this role. This, not surprisingly, led to more confusion about the NETs' roles in particular in team teaching. Though the NETs acknowledged their role as a "language" and "cultural" informant, many were unsure of how exactly to go about accomplishing this role. Moreover, some NETs expressed annoyance at JTEs who were unable to lead classes.

Despite having trouble defining their own roles, NETs seemed more capable of offering descriptions of the roles they felt their JTE-teaching partners should play. The NETs commented on the JTEs' low English skills; however, they did not suggest that the JTEs' language abilities prevented them from fulfilling their role in team teaching. In fact, the NET respondents did not identify teaching English as a role they expected of JTEs at all. Rather NETs felt JTEs were more suited as classroom manager, since JTEs know their students' needs better and can relate to learning English as a second language. JTEs also seemed to agree with this as their role as demonstrated by the following quotes:

- JTE should be controller commander [sic] of the classroom.
- JTE helps students remain in classroom mode and keeps control of the class.
- JTE are familiar with the class and know the individual needs of each student, so we can discipline students appropriately.

As for NETs' roles, JTEs commented on the benefits of having an NET present because of the authentic pronunciation they provide, and the opportunity students have to hear "natural" English spoken in the classroom. Considering this then to be a common perspective JTEs have of NETs' roles, it is unsurprising that many utilize their NET teaching partner for pronunciation. Though NETs acknowledged that their native pronunciation was a benefit to the class, they also felt they had more to contribute and did not appreciate being limited to the role of "pronunciation machines."

## **Logistical**

As with earlier studies, the survey conducted by the author found JTEs in particular to be concerned with lesson preparation. More specifically, JTEs found it particularly beneficial for the lesson when planning was a collaborative effort. NETs also seemed to appreciate opportunities to work with the JTE in planning lessons; however, as some of the JTEs and NETs explained this is not always possible due to a lack of time: "There is no time to meet together to prepare for classes." "There is no time to meet so we always do whatever the FET decides."

## **Interpersonal**

Considering the findings of other similar studies in team teaching, specifically team teaching in Japan, it was not very surprising to find that though roles and preparation were a cause of concern for team teachers, what was of greatest concern to both JTEs and NETs was communication. In fact, the majority of the respondents admitted that the underlying issue of misconstrued roles and lack of lesson planning time was more times not the result of miscommunication or misunderstanding, and many felt this could be attributed to cultural differences. When discussing successful lessons, both JTEs and NETs remarked on the importance of communicating with one another, of mutual understanding and of positive

attitudes. The following excerpt taken from one of the NET's surveys sums up what must occur to bring about the success of a team-teaching lesson:

Communicate. Discuss the lesson purpose and delegate roles . . . Discuss expectations of each other and the students and find a reasonable balance. Sacrifice your own sense of entitlement in order to work together and find balance.

## LIMITATIONS

When conducting surveys in Japan, such as the one in this study, one of the greatest challenges is getting respondents to express their true feelings or *honne*. In Japan, to learn a person's *honne* requires a good relationship with that person (Japan External Trade Organisation, 1999). In other words, Japanese usually are not willing to express their *honne*, even in a survey, to someone they do not know. Because of the author's previous professional relationship with many of the participants, however, a rapport had been formed and thus trust established. This permitted the JTEs to be more open in their responses to the author regarding team teaching, greatly improving the chance that the answers received were honest and the teachers' true feelings. Admittedly, however, the author's personal experience in team teaching may have had some influence on the coding. Nevertheless, every effort was made to keep the data as authentic as possible by assuring all respondents remained anonymous.

A final concern that must be considered is the effects the size of the survey may have had on reliability, as it was a rather small study (only eight respondents in total). Accordingly, the author acknowledges the difficulty of gathering general conclusions from such a limited data set.

## DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

It is clear that communication is vital for creating a successful teaching team and seems like a fairly obvious answer to a rather complicated situation; however, it is not as simple as it may first appear. As mentioned earlier, JTEs and NETs differ from one another in a number of ways—the most significant being cultural. Thus, when the two come together, simply telling them to “communicate” is ineffective. In an intercultural relationship such as the one between the JTE and NET basic communication will not suffice, even if they are linguistically proficient in the other's native tongue. Thus, what is needed is the skill to communicate across cultures, i.e., ICC, which brings us back to the purpose of this study: To clearly present, in both a theoretical and practical way, why ICC development is necessary among JTEs and NETs and why educational institutions (university departments of education) and employers (schools, boards of education, and even MEXT), must incorporate ICC development within their curriculum and/or training programs.

When considering that ICC development is predominately concerned with relationships and that interpersonal factors play a huge role in assuring the success of team teaching, it is clear then that NETs and JTEs could benefit greatly from an ICC development program. If educators, schools, and boards of education want the English classrooms that are team-taught to be effective, there must be a call for implementing ICC development into teacher training programs. It is the hope of this author that this study has made this quite evident. Further research is now needed, however, that will guide such programs and provide NETs and JTEs

with the best skills and knowledge to develop the intercultural communicative skills needed to overcome the current issues in team teaching in English classrooms in Japan.

## REFERENCES

- Byram, M. (1997). *Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence*. Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters.
- Carless, D.R. (2006). Good practices in team teaching in Japan, South Korea and Hong Kong. *System*, 34. 341-351.
- Duff, P. & Uchida, Y. (1997). The negotiation of sociocultural identity in post-secondary EFL classrooms. *TESL Quarterly*, 31. 451-486.
- Fujimoto-Adamson, N. Voices from team-teaching classrooms: A case study in junior high schools in Japan. *Business Communication Quarterly*. 200-205.
- Galloway, N. A critical analysis of the JET Programme. *The Journal of Kanda University of International Studies*, 21, pp.169-207.
- Goby, P. V. 2007. Business communication needs a multicultural perspective. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, 21(4): 425-437.
- Gorsuch, G.J. (2002). Assistant foreign language teachers in Japanese high schools: Focus on the hosting of Japanese teachers. *JALT Journal*, 24(1), 5-32.
- Huang, Y., Rayner, C and Zhuang, L. 2003. Does intercultural competence matter in intercultural business relationship development? *International Journal of Logistics*, 6(4), 277-288.
- Hall, E.T. (1959). *The Silent Language*. New York: Doubleday.
- Igawa, K. (2009). Views on team-teaching: In the case of Japanese secondary school teachers. *Shitennoji Daigaku Kiyo*, 47, 145-172.
- Japanese External Trade Organization (1999). *Communicating with Japanese in business*. JETRO.
- Kachi, R., & Lee, C. (2001). A tandem of native and non-native teachers: Voices from Japanese and American teachers in the EFL classroom in Japan. Paper presented at the *Second International Language Teacher Educators' Conference*, Minneapolis, MN.
- Kramsch, C. (1997). Language teaching in an electronic age. In G. M. Jacobs (Ed.), *Language classrooms of tomorrow: Issues and responses* (pp. 105-117). Singapore: SEAMEO Regional Language Centre.
- Kwon, O. (2000). Korea's English education policy changes in the 1990s: Innovations to gear the nation in the 21st century. *English Teaching*, 55, 47-92.
- Mahoney, S. (2004). Role controversy among team teachers in the JET Programme. *JALT Journal* 26(2), 223-244.

- Matsumoto, D., & Hwang, H.C. (2013). Assessing cross-cultural competence: A review of available tests. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 44(6), 849-873.
- Ministry of Education, Science, Sports, Culture and Technology. (2002). *Handbook for team-teaching* (Rev. ed.). Tokyo: MEXT.
- Ministry of Education, Science, Sports, Culture and Technology. (2008). *The revisions of the courses of study for elementary and secondary schools*. Tokyo: MEXT.
- Miyazato, K. (2009). Power-sharing between NS and NNS teachers: Linguistically powerful AETs and culturally powerful JTEs. *JALT Journal* 31(1), 35-62.
- Romanko, R., & Nakatsugawa, M. (2010). English education in elementary schools: team-teaching approaches. *The Language Teacher*, 34(5), 36-42.
- Shimaoka, T., & Yashiro, K. (1990). *Team-teaching in English classrooms: An intercultural approach*. Tokyo: Kairyudo.
- Sick, J. (1996). Assistant language teachers in junior high school. *JALT Journal*, 18(2), 199-210).
- Tajino, A. (2002). Transformation process models: A systematic approach to problematic team-teaching situations. *Prospect*, 17(1), 29-44.
- Tajino, A., & Tajino, Y. (2000). Native and non-native: what can they offer? Lesson from team-teaching in Japan. *ELT Journal*, 54(1), 3-11.
- Voci-Reed, E. (1994). Stress factors in the team teaching relationship. In M. Wada and A. Cominos (Eds.), *Studies in team teaching* (pp. 61-71). Tokyo: Kenkyusha.
- Wada, M. (1994). Team-teaching and the revised course of study. In M. Wada and A. Cominos (Eds.), *Studies in team teaching* (pp. 7-16). Tokyo: Kenkyusha.

## APPENDIX

### Questionnaire

1) In your opinion, the role of the Japanese homeroom teacher should be to:

英語の授業におけるティームティーチング（以下 TT）において、日本人の教員がすべき役割とは何だと思えますか？

2) In your opinion, the role of the Foreign English Teacher (FET) should be to:

TT において、外国人の教員(以下 FET)がすべき役割とは何だと思えますか？

3) In your opinion, some strengths of Japanese homeroom teachers in the English classroom are:

英語の授業における日本人教員の長所・強みは何ですか？

4) In your opinion, some strengths of the FETs in the English classroom are:

英語の授業における FET の長所・強みは何ですか？

5) In your opinion, some weaknesses of Japanese homeroom teachers in the English classroom are:

英語の授業における日本人教員の欠点・弱みは何ですか？

6) In your opinion, some weaknesses of the FETs in the English classroom are:

英語の授業における FET の欠点・弱みは何ですか？

7) In what ways do you believe team teaching assists in teaching English?

英語を教えるにあたり、TT の補助役とはどうあるべきだと考えますか？

8) In your opinion, what are certain things that both the FET and Japanese homeroom teacher should do in order to create and teach a successful lesson as a teaching team?

より良い成功した TT の授業を作り上げ教えていくために、FET と日本人教員の両方がすべき事の秘訣などは何ですか？

9) What difficulties and problems can team teaching cause? Is there anything that can be done to decrease or prevent these problems from occurring?

TT ではどのような難しさや問題が起きますか？そのような問題を減らしたり、防ぐ方法は何かありますか？

10) If you were given the opportunity to train other teachers in team teaching, what are some key elements you would focus on? Why?

もしあなたが TT のトレーニングを受ける機会があるならば、関心を向けて学びたいと思う事柄は何ですか？それはなぜですか？

11) In what ways do you believe team teaching is effective in teaching English? In what ways do you feel it is ineffective?

英語を教える上で、T.T は効果があると思いますか？

12) What about team teaching do you personally find to be most beneficial and rewarding? What do you find to be most problematic and challenging?

TT において、最もやってよかった効果があったと、個人的に思われたのはどのような事ですか？また、最も問題があった大変だったと思われたのはどのような事ですか？