

# Early Childhood ALTs in the JET Program

by Martin Gray

The use of Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) in junior and senior high schools through the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) program is well known. Recently, there has also been a well-documented increase in the number of ALT visits made to elementary schools. What is often less talked about is the visits made by ALTs to kindergartens (educational institutions for pre-school children, usually prefectural) and nursery schools (child-minding nurseries for preschool children, mostly municipality-run).

A small yet significant number of ALTs teach in early childhood programs. However, no figures exist at a prefectural or national level to say how many and no training manual or advice is given to teachers working in such programs. Until recently, it has been a noticeable feature of every JET conference and seminar that, in spite of the increase in the number of pre-elementary classes, issues pertaining to teachers working with very young learners are not addressed.

In order to begin to remedy this situation, I and a colleague (Sarah Beecroft) began collecting data on the current pre-elementary situation in order to investigate the numbers and situations of early childhood ALTs in our prefectures (Gunma and Toyama). A survey was constructed and sent out over the prefectural ALT e-mail lists and handed out at seminars.

## The purpose of the survey

The aims of our survey were, firstly, to collect information on how many ALTs work in pre-school programs; secondly, to investigate their situation and thirdly, to use this information to help other kindergarten teachers.

## Results

In Gunma, there are 310 JET ALTs. Thirty-two of these are high school ALTs and are therefore not included in this survey as high school ALTs only teach high school, whereas JHS ALTs often teach elementary as well, and occasionally visit pre-schools. Of the 278 non-high school ALTs, only 20 (approximately 8%) replied that they taught students in early childhood programs. However, many ALTs may not have received or acknowledged the survey due to the fact that it was not officially sanctioned by the Gunma Prefecture Board of Education. It is possible that there are many more ALTs in the prefecture who teach in kindergartens or nursery schools.

In Toyama 13 ALTs responded to the survey. These results are not included in this article, but some of their lesson suggestions are.

Of the 20 respondents who taught in pre-elementary programs, most taught at one school only. However, some taught at multiple schools, and in some cases, in up to six schools. No data was collected as to whether these were kindergartens or nursery schools.

The majority of respondents taught students aged 3 to 6. There was no consistency in the way the classes were grouped. Some schools grouped the students by age, for example, putting 3- and 4-year-olds in one group and 5- and 6-year-olds in another. Some ALTs taught 5- and 6-year-olds only while others taught all age groups together. One respondent's class included 1- to 6-year-olds.

There was also no consistency in class size, which varied from 10 to 120 students. However, the most common size was around 20 students.

Responses indicated a wide diversity in the frequency of visits to the schools. Answers ranged from weekly visits to as few as twice or four times a year.

The majority of respondents reported receiving no instruction or guidance whatsoever. Of the remainder, the most common instruction they were given was "to play" or "have fun". Only 2 ALTs reported any lesson planning in consultation with the Japanese staff. The others all planned the lessons by themselves with no outside input.

### The survey

**Part 1**

- 1) Do you teach in a nursery school/pre-school/kindergarten/playgroup?
- 2) If so, what age groups and class size?
- 3) How often, weekly, monthly, less than monthly?
- 4) Were you given any instructions as to what/how to teach?
- 5) If so, what were they?
- 6) During the lessons, are you a) a team teacher b) a solo teacher c) a lead teacher with assistance from the Japanese staff d) an assistant to the Japanese staff?

**Part 2**

- 1) Can you tell us some games/activities which you have found effective and why?
- 2) What didn't work and why?
- 3) Do you have a syllabus/course of study?
- 4) Please send the best idea/classroom activity that you use in the pre-school classes you teach and a brief statement of why/how it works and its aims. (Ideas sent in will be compiled into a handout for the re-contractor's conference.)
- 5) Is your nursery school/kindergarten teaching experience something you look forward to or dread?

The majority of the ALTS who replied to the survey were lead teachers working with assistance from Japanese staff, volunteers or the children's parents or grandparents. Many ALTS commented on difficulties due to the language barrier; for example, that the Japanese staff did not understand the instructions for activities and thus could not explain games to the children. The language barrier also made dealing with behavioral problems more difficult.

Not one of the respondents said that they dreaded their early childhood teaching experiences. In fact, many said they looked forward to teaching the children and the sentiments "being paid to play" often came up.

### Summary

From these results there appears to be very little consistency in the circumstances in which the ALTs are teaching. The size and frequency of classes, as well as the ages of the students taught and the way they are grouped, vary greatly across the prefecture. Common features of the ALTs' experiences appear to be the lack of instruction given and the fact that the majority were lead teachers.

### Criteria for effective activities

Question 2.2 asked for information about what worked or didn't work in the classroom.

Simple, energetic games with a physical component were the most popular.

Complicated games or activities with little stimulation were

not successful. It was suggested that games that take a long time to set up or have too many instructions should be avoided. Responses indicated that the size and age of the group must be considered at all times. For example, simpler games should be used with younger students. If it is your first lesson, or April when many new students arrive, use many short, very simple activities. You can make things more challenging as the kids get used to you and English.

Games that involve only a few students at a time can lead to boredom and disruption. For example, a game such as "Sticky Fingers", where 3 students play at a time (*see <http://genkienglish.net/Sticky.htm> for full instructions*), may be good for a small group, but is less suitable for a large class as the unengaged children soon lose interest. In addition, children at pre-school age tend to have short attention spans, so long games should be avoided.

Rote learning (for example, having the students repeat the alphabet) is considered a surefire way to send the children to sleep. Any language target can be turned into a game or activity to make it fun.

### Suggested games and activities.

All classes are different. For very energetic classes competitive games may work, while for shy classes they may not. The students' personalities should be taken into account.

"Dog and Bone" was suggested by 3 teachers. Students sit in two lines. A ball is placed between the 2 lines. Students are then given a number, corresponding to a student on the opposite side. When a number is called out, for example "2", the students who are numbered 2 try to grab the ball and get it back to their side without being tagged by the opposing player.

"Karuta" (*See the Games section in this issue-ed.*) was the most commonly mentioned game. It has the advantage of being well known to the Japanese and can be used for many targets, for example, alphabet, colours, moods. It can be played as a whole class or in small groups working with photocopied cards or cards that the students have made themselves.

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"Duck, duck, goose/drop the hankie". The children sit in a circle. Choose any two words. One player is "it" and walks around the edge of the circle touching each player and saying one of the words, for example, "duck, duck, duck..." as he/she does so. When "it" touches another player and says the second word, for example, "goose", that player must jump

up and try to catch "it" before he or she can run around the complete circle and take the "goose's" place in the circle.

While having little teaching merit, it is popular and easy to explain. It is often requested by the Japanese staff, and keeping the staff you work with happy makes the teacher's job easier. The game also requires no material and little set up time so is a useful back-up game.

*Shape/Colour search.* The teacher calls a colour or shape, depending on the target, which the students run around the room trying to find. The object can be a card placed by the teacher or regular objects found in the classroom.

*The "Crocodile Game"* ("What's the magic colour?"). Students line up on an "island" and have to cross the "river" to reach the other side without being eaten by the crocodile. The Students call out "What colour is it?" and the teacher/crocodile gives a colour, for example, "It's red". Students wearing the "magic colour", in this case, red, can walk across the river, while the other students have to run

to avoid being tagged by the crocodile.

*“Left and Right”*. This is commonly known as “Port and Starboard” but uses more common terms, such as “front” and “back” instead of “bow” and “stern”. “Sit down” and “Stand up” can also be used. The teacher calls out a direction or command and the students obey. For example, the teacher says “Left”, and the students run to the left. This can be used as a warm up and at points throughout the lesson. It has the advantage of requiring no preparation and the teacher doesn’t have to be out front to play it so it can be played during transitions between activities, when the teacher is getting out flashcards etc.

*Body Tracing*. Put the students in groups of 3-5, and have them choose a student to lie down on the paper. Get the other kids to trace them and then colour in the body parts. This works well as a follow up activity to the song “Heads, shoulders, knees and toes”.

Picture books such as the Dr. Seuss series or Eric Carle’s books can be read in class. The books should have engaging pictures and simple stories. If the book contains repeated phrases, all the better. Eric Carle’s *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* and Dr. Seuss’s (writing as LeSeig) *Ten Apples Up On Top!* were two examples given by ALTs.

Genki English was mentioned by many of the respondents to the survey. Their CDs and especially their website were popular. Their games page with instructions for simple games such as “Fruit basket” or the “Ladders Game” translated into Japanese is very useful as it can help the Japanese staff to become more involved. This site also has downloadable flash cards and lesson suggestions. Genki English can be found at <http://www.genkienglish.com>

Another suggestion was to get involved in anything else happening at the school. Many schools have a day at the pool or making *mochi* with the parents, concerts, find out when these are and join in. It will make you more accessible to the school community and may improve your rela-

tionship with parents and staff, which should make your job easier. These events offer a break for those who may be feeling a bit bored with the routine and allow teachers to get to know their students on another level.

### Conclusion

Assistant Language Teachers on the Jet Program receive little or no instruction in early childhood teaching. Nonetheless, the majority of these instructors work as lead teachers supported by Japanese teachers who often have little English ability, and plan the lessons alone.

There needs to be more recognition of early childhood teaching within the JET Program. Most importantly, there need to be workshops at the initial orientation or prefectural orientation so that future teachers working on the JET Program are not thrown in completely unprepared.

This year saw the first presentation at national level on early childhood teaching. However, at the moment, it seems that this kind of development has to be initiated at grassroots level by ALTs. If you are an ALT experienced in early childhood teaching, please consider volunteering to do a presentation on this topic at your next conference. By sharing your experience, you can benefit both teachers and students.

### References

- Carle, E. (1999) *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*. Harlow: Longman  
LeSeig, T. (1998) *Ten Apples Up On Top!* New York: Random House

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