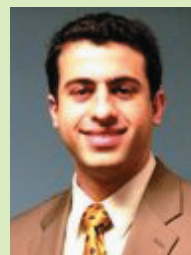


The JET Program's Legacy of Community-level Exchange

By Michael WAIN



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Today, the 24-year-old Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program is something of a household name among many Americans. Having encountered dozens of people with little formal knowledge of Japan's language or culture who are nonetheless familiar with JET – usually through a family member, friend, or colleague who has participated in the program – I believe that it has had a significant impact on Americans' views of Japan. The 1980s were a turbulent decade for US-Japan relations due to American fears associated with the path of Japan's economic rise. Therefore, the time was ripe for the JET Program, which has helped pave the way for the improved relations we have seen since then.

JET's widespread name recognition is a testament to the cooperation of three national ministries, prefectural international relations councils, and local school systems. These government entities have overseen JET's evolution from a relatively small program in the late 1980s into one in which several thousand assistant language teachers (ALTs) are now active at a substantial number of Japanese public schools, and coordinators for international relations (CIRs) help local governments across Japan with international activities. Despite two decades of economic stagnation, Japan's national and local governments have continued their support for JET, underscoring policymakers' commitment to preparing the nation's youth for an increasingly interdependent world. The program also performs an important public diplomacy function from which Japan stands much to gain, as tens of thousands of JET alumni have returned to their home countries with a stronger appreciation of Japanese culture and society.

Photo: Courtesy Joel Zara



ALT Joel Zara teaching colors to 2nd-grade students in Mobara, Chiba Prefecture

Internationalizing Japan's Educational System

Implementing a large-scale teacher exchange program in an ethnically homogeneous nation like Japan was an ambitious endeavor for Japan's government, but one that it has embraced wholeheartedly, much to its credit. JET's goal of "promoting grassroots internationalization at the local level" has meant that local communities across Japan – urban and rural alike – have accepted foreign language teachers, many of them Americans, into their schools and workplaces for quite some time. Although challenging in many ways, the introduction of these foreigners into local communities has exposed ordinary citizens to young non-Japanese who offer a glimpse of life in their native countries, beyond the pop culture and entertainment that are easily accessible on television or via the internet.

The people-to-people interactions facilitated by JET are unmatched, as ALTs share their cultural backgrounds in the classroom, extracurricular clubs and community events. The scarcity of foreigners in many Japanese communities, especially in the countryside, caused some ALTs to be treated almost as celebrity figures in the early years of the program. However, as JET participants have cycled in and out of Japanese schools over the years, many communities have acclimated to the presence of the foreigners so that they now interact on a more "human" level. This is a significant development because, as Japan's economy becomes more intertwined with those of other nations, the likelihood of face-to-face interaction with foreigners will grow, making cross-cultural communication a necessary skill to remain competitive.

JET's "internationalization" of the Japanese educational system does not imply a weakening of Japanese self-identity. In fact, the opposite may be true: interacting with foreigners on a daily basis as a student or colleague has given Japanese the opportunity to showcase their own culture to outsiders, as well as to compare and contrast Japanese customs and values with those of foreigners. The ability to respect and engage with foreign cultures while maintaining one's own sense of self is a sign of cultural confidence and civilizational health.

In addition to deep cultural exchanges, JET has furthered the cause of foreign language study in Japan, which has become increasingly important in the global economy, as evidenced by several Japanese firms recently adopting English as their official business language. JET's placement of ALTs in classrooms brings Japanese students into

much-needed contact with native speakers, who can share insights about their language that are not always available from non-native language instructors. The presence of ALTs may also stimulate greater enthusiasm for foreign language study among students, who are eager to improve their conversational skills.

The team-teaching method for English instruction introduced by JET represented a paradigm shift for Japanese teachers of English, whose teaching style is often focused on “book learning,” including grammar exercises and translations. JET ALTs, by contrast, have tended to emphasize conversational skills for more informal use. This is not to say that either teaching style is superior to the other; both are important components in attaining foreign language proficiency. Rather, Japanese teachers’ exposure to new pedagogies has served to complement more traditional modes of instruction. As someone who has been fortunate enough to participate in a Japanese immersion program in the United States throughout elementary school in addition to Japanese language courses in secondary school and college, I can attest to the need for both learning approaches. In this regard, I consider the JET Program to have contributed a helpful balance to foreign language instruction in Japan.

Enhancing Japan’s Image Abroad

Equally important is the way in which JET has led foreigners to a heightened and more nuanced understanding of Japan’s culture and people, which has benefitted Japan’s international profile and relations with other countries. It is crucial that Americans have the opportunity to gain firsthand experiences with Japan, the third-largest economy in the world and a fellow democracy, and then transmit their perceptions of the country to friends and colleagues back home. While the US-Japan alliance is based on a commitment to mutual security, bilateral trade and common values, the JET Program serves to reinvigorate that relationship through grassroots exchange.

The cultural disparities across Japan’s local communities and the distinct circumstances of each school make each JET participant’s experience unique. In general, however, many return from JET with a level of Japanese proficiency far beyond their initial language ability, preparing them for future personal and professional relationships with Japanese. Immersion in Japanese society also frequently instills them with considerable knowledge of Japanese political institutions and issues, as well as in-depth cultural awareness of Japan. Unsurprisingly, most JET participants come away from their time in Japan with an affinity for the country, its people, and its culture. Marriages between JET teachers and Japanese are not uncommon; a friend of mine who completed the JET Program recently became engaged to a Japanese woman.

These personal experiences and intercultural bonds made possible by JET are not solely for the benefit of the

individual participants; they also develop a basis for more strongly rooted relationships between Japan and other countries. An extensive alumni network keeps former JET participants in touch with one another and able to share information on events and job opportunities, and the presence of JET alumni in graduate school programs and careers focused on Japan creates a cadre of professionals with Japan expertise in government and business. In these fields, JET alumni can draw on their Japan experiences to inform a variety of their decisions and interactions. Thus, JET provides participants with real-life tools that can help them and other foreigners sharpen their sensitivities and avoid misconceptions when working on Japan-related issues. In this way, the JET Program has produced a generation of current and future leaders who, taken together, can affect their countries’ relationships with Japan in an intelligent and positive direction.

Recent Developments & Future of JET Program

Since the program’s peak in 2002, the annual number of JET participants has diminished steadily, to the point at which participation is now about 30 % less than it was at that time. As Japan’s people and policymakers grapple with government spending reforms in an era of slow economic growth and population decline, JET has come under closer scrutiny and some lawmakers have questioned its usefulness. Localities bear many of the financial costs of JET by paying teachers’ salaries and other expenses, creating a heavy burden particularly on communities that are struggling economically.

It is understandable that those concerned with Japan’s fiscal health have expressed doubts about whether JET should remain a priority for the Japanese government. However, I believe that the rationale exists for the JET Program to continue despite these concerns. Even if policymakers determine that changes to the program are necessary, it is important that JET survive because of the Japanese national interests it fundamentally serves. Japan is among the most economically and culturally advanced nations in the world, and for the last 24 years the JET Program has demonstrated Japan’s global leadership by promoting understanding of its way of life as well as its openness to the outside world. Indeed, Japan has reaped countless dividends, both domestically and internationally, from its investment in JET. Because of the program’s legacy, it is my hope that Japan will continue to find the resources to fund JET, even – or perhaps especially – in these tough economic times.

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