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Articles

**Wrongful Moves in Unfamiliar Meaning Spaces: Gesture Usage and Implications for
Cross-Cultural Gestural-Pragmatic Failure 7**

Bruce Miller

Narrative Similarities in Detective Fiction 19

Jeroen Bode

**A Tentative Classification of Rhetoric in Japanese Linguistic Expressions
in Advertising Contexts 25**

Tetsuji Tosa

A Journey to the American Dream: Okinawan Family Histories in the New World 30

Norman Fewell

Language Learning and Teaching

Explicit Politeness: Language Instructors' Attitudes in Comparative Perspectives 36

Kiyomi Fujii and Etsuko Inoguchi

**Capitalizing on the Strengths and Complementing the Weaknesses of Native and Non-Native English
Speaking Teachers 46**

Takaaki Hiratsuka

**Recent Innovations and Improvements to Feedback and Collaboration Options for English as a Foreign
Language Courses 54**

George Robert MacLean

Preparing Students for a Debate Festival 65

David Kluge

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Capitalizing on the Strengths and Complementing the Weaknesses of Native and Non-Native English Speaking Teachers

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Abstract: *There has recently been a growing interest in teachers' and students' perceptions of Native English Speaking Teachers (NESTs) and Non-Native English Speaking Teachers (NNESTs). It has been believed that, by enhancing the understanding of particular aspects of NESTs and NNESTs, teachers and students can come to better understand, both linguistically and culturally, their own experiences in language teaching and learning. This study investigates students' perceptions in English classes taught by both foreign assistant language teachers (ALTs) (i.e., NESTs), who were hired through the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) program, and local Japanese teachers of English (JTEs) (i.e., NNESTs), thereby adding valuable insights to the discussion of N/NESTs. Data were collected from four Japanese students at two public high schools using myriad qualitative methods in order to examine the perspectives of JTEs and ALTs. Findings suggest that political, cultural and educational contexts, as well as the teachers' traits as N/NESTs, crucially affected the participants' perceptions. In conclusion, I discuss the importance of capitalizing on the strengths and complementing the weaknesses of NESTs and NNESTs and, based on the study, provide suggestions for language teachers, students, teacher educators and policy makers.*

Keywords: N/NESTs, JTEs and ALTs, student perceptions

Introduction

Considerable interest exists in the perceptions of Native English Speaking Teachers (NESTs) and Non-Native English Speaking Teachers (NNESTs) (e.g., Braine, 2010; Farrell, 2015a; Kamihi-Stein, 2004; Llurda, 2014; Mahboob, 2010; Moussu, 2016). Various reports of the advantages and disadvantages of having N/NEST language teachers can now be found. NESTs are considered to be reliable informants of linguistic knowledge but lack shared cultural knowledge with their students (Widdowson, 1992). NNESTs are said to provide a better learning model for their students but have challenges in linguistic competence (Medgyes, 1992). By advancing the understanding of particular aspects of NESTs and NNESTs, teachers and students can come to better make sense of, both linguistically and culturally, their own experiences in language teaching and learning. This study looks into students' perceptions in English classes taught by foreign assistant language teachers (ALTs)

(NESTs), who were hired through the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) program (CLAIR, 2016), and local Japanese teachers of English (JTEs) (NNESTs) and therefore adds valuable insights to the discussions of N/NESTs. Native and non-native English speaking teachers have been teaching English classes together as a team for three decades in Japan (CLAIR, 2016). Based on the discussions surrounding N/NESTs heretofore, it is somewhat clear that teachers and students involved in team teaching in Japan hold perceptions of JTEs as good learner models but less competent English speakers. Conversely, ALTs are perceived as being less familiar with the Japanese educational system but as fluent English speakers. The students in this study indeed had these perceptions. However, the particular significance of this study lies in the unique contexts in which the team teachers are situated. That is, JTEs are the 'main' teachers in team-taught classes although they are not always proficient speakers of English, whereas ALTs are language 'assistants' despite being fluent English speakers. What was thus revealed was the importance of the political, cultural, and educational contexts the teachers are placed in, as well as their traits as N/NESTs, in contributing to the students' perceptions of JTEs and ALTs. Suggestions for team teachers, students,

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teacher educators and policy makers arising from this study are presented.

Non-Native/Native English Speaking Teachers (N/NESTs)

Stereotypes about native and non-native English speaking teachers (N/NESTs) have long been in existence. In Japan, a strong preference for a standard variant of English (e.g., American and British) spoken by NESTs was voiced by secondary students (Matsuda, 2003). In the recent past, however, awareness of the N/NESTs issue has expanded our understanding about language teaching and learning. Attempts to prevent discrimination against NNESTs in the field of TESOL have been made by highlighting teachers' teaching skills, experience and preparation rather than their language proficiency or native/non-native status (Farrell, 2015a; Llurda, 2014; TESOL, 2006). Phillipson (1992, 2009) criticized the reality that the status of NNESTs vis-à-vis that of NESTs is considered to be lower because NESTs are automatically exalted due to their native language abilities, a value-laden notion which he calls the native speaker fallacy. There is thus currently a continuing movement toward greater recognition of NNESTs (Braine, 2010). Although there have been several studies conducted on teachers' (self-) perceptions of N/NESTs thus far, studies on students' perspectives of N/NESTs are scarce in comparison. I therefore focus on students' perceptions of N/NESTs in this article and introduce below a review of such studies.

Studies on Students' Perceptions of N/NESTs

The main purposes and goals of previous studies about students' perceptions of N/NESTs have been on shedding light on the advantages and disadvantages associated with N/NESTs. For example, Cheung (2002) (see also Cheung & Braine, 2007) investigated 420 Hong Kong University students' perceptions of NESTs and NNESTs through numerous methods (i.e., questionnaires, interviews and classroom observation). The participants recognized language proficiency, fluency and cultural knowledge as advantages of NESTs, whereas they regarded empathy, shared cultural background and L1 use as advantages of NNESTs. Using a discourse-analytic technique, part of Mahboob's (2003) study explored the perceptions of 32 students in an inten-

sive English program in the United States. NESTs received positive comments on oral skills, vocabulary and cultural knowledge, but negative comments on their inability to provide appropriate explanations about grammar. NNESTs, on the other hand, received positive comments on their teaching skills and on having experience as learners, but negative comments on their oral skills. In a Japanese university, Miyazato (2003) found through interviews that the students in her study felt fearful of NESTs because NESTs did not share their linguistic or cultural backgrounds. Due to the teachers' 'foreign' appearance as well as their 'genuine' English, however, the students experienced more joy when they could successfully communicate with NESTs. Part of Mullock's (2010) study examined students' conceptions of a good language teacher. Data were gathered through short, open-ended questionnaires from 134 undergraduate students in Thailand. The students expressed a preference for NNESTs with high levels of proficiency in English and for NESTs who had acquired knowledge of the host language and culture. In Walkinshaw and Duong's (2012) study, 50 Vietnamese learners evaluated the importance of native speaker status in comparison with seven different English language teacher qualities (i.e., teaching experience, qualifications, friendliness, enthusiasm, the ability to deliver interesting classes, understanding of local culture and English competence). All the qualities but one (English competence) were more valued by the students than native speaker status. The students thus seemed to have placed more weight on professional, personal and pedagogical qualities than native speaker status in deciding a good language teacher. Ma (2012) reported on a study which analyzed students' perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of N/NESTs by interviewing 30 secondary students in Hong Kong. As with previous studies, her study showed that the participants viewed NESTs positively because they have good English proficiency and more relaxed teaching styles. On the other hand, NNESTs were perceived favorably because they share the same language as their students and understand their difficulties in language learning. According to Ma, and as appears to be the case with other studies, both advantages and disadvantages associated with NESTs are often the reverse of disadvantages and advantages associated with NNESTs. For example, one advantage associated with NESTs is

their high proficiency in English, and one disadvantage associated with NNESTs is their lack of high proficiency in English. Aslan and Thompson's recent study (2016) provides interesting insights into the N/NESTs discussion. In their study, the student participants in a university-level English language program in the United States completed a semantic differential assessment scale that consisted of adjective pairs (e.g., approachable vs. unapproachable). Findings suggested that NESTs and NNESTs are perceived as equals in the eyes of the students. The findings, however, might not be applicable to high school students in EFL contexts such as Japan, which is the focus of this study.

As seen, the studies concerning N/NESTs include a variety of methods, participants and contexts: (a) the data collection and data analysis methods used vary (i.e., from questionnaires to in-depth interviews to classroom observation, from thematic analysis to discourse and linguistic analysis); (b) the student participants are not only at universities but also in other institutional sectors; and (c) the contexts include a number of ESL as well as EFL classrooms. However, the English education field still longs for more research examples which take into account the N/NESTs' particular dispositions and circumstances in diverse contexts. It is also necessary to employ a wide variety of data collection methods over time rather than one-off questionnaires or individual interviews.

Methodology

Participants of the study were four second-year students from two public high schools in Japan. For reasons of anonymity, the names of the participants and their schools have been changed. Kanon (female) and Tatsuya (male) at Sakura High School were chosen with the help of their teachers. Similarly, with the support of their teachers, Sayaka (female) and Yousuke (male) at Tsubaki High School were selected to join the study. The data collection lasted from December 2011 to March 2012 and employed the following qualitative methods.

Semi-structured Interviews (SI)

At the beginning and the end of the data collection phase, each participant took part in semi-structured interviews and talked mainly about their experience in their English classes taught by a JTE and an ALT as a team. Each interview continued for about one hour and was carried out in Japanese.

Pair Discussions (PD)

Each pair of the students in the same high school had one pair discussion in Japanese at each school. Each discussion continued for about half an hour.

Field Notes (FN)

At the research sites, I kept field notes detailing events, incidents and the participants' comments whenever possible.

I transcribed all the data and translated Japanese into English. I then analyzed the data through a qualitative content analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007), which concentrates on the meaning of the participants' comments and behavior, in order to identify conspicuous and recurrent themes. This analytic process was applied to individual participants over time (e.g., Kanon, at the beginning and at the end of the data collection phase) as well as across different participants (e.g., Kanon and Tatsuya, two students in the same school; Kanon and Sayaka, two students in different schools). The results of this analysis were separated into a number of themes, as described below.

The Study: Students' Perceptions of NESTs (ALTs) and NNESTs (JTEs)

On the whole, the participants regarded JTEs (NNESTs) as language models, language learners, and bridges between ALTs and students. They viewed ALTs (NESTs) as being 'native' speakers of English who are the authorities and providers of the target language and cultures as well as students' motivation boosters or hinderers.

JTEs as Language Models, Learners and Bridges: Reliable or Doubtful?

The students in my study valued JTEs for fulfilling the role of Japanese language models of English. One of the students at Tsubaki, Yousuke, shared his perception of his JTE as a model: "My JTE and ALT sometimes chit-chat next to me, and I can learn how some English expressions are naturally used ... My JTE is a Japanese language model of English for us" (SI). Yousuke perceived that his JTE had acquired enough English to communicate appropriately with a foreigner and thus successfully play the role of being "a more achievable model" (Cook, 1999, p. 200). On this point, Medgyes (2001) contended that "only non-NESTs can be set as proper learner models, since they *learned* English after they

acquired their native language, unlike NESTs who *acquired* English as their native language” (p. 436, emphasis in the original). Yoshida (2009) also maintained that JTEs are more ideal language models for Japanese learners of English than ALTs. Since JTEs are themselves ongoing learners of English and had once been in the same Japanese educational system as their students, the participants perceived JTEs as being able to understand and relate to students’ learning. For instance, Sayaka from Tsubaki made the following observation about her JTE: “My JTE may be the most effective teacher of all the teachers I have had ... because she knows the difficulties we have with English” (SI). JTEs as Japanese-bilinguals were also perceived to have a significant responsibility for realizing effective interaction between ALTs and students in class. Kanon at Sakura, for example, considered translating what an ALT says to be one of the most crucial jobs performed by JTEs. Sayaka was another student who valued the part her JTE played in helping her to learn English: “My ALT plays a leading role in team-taught classes, and my JTE helps from time to time ... by translating some of the parts we don’t know.... Learning becomes easy that way” (SI). By the same token, Yousuke commented, “When we don’t understand what our ALT said, the JTE takes over and explains” (SI). One of the students at Sakura, Tatsuya, perceived JTEs to be a psychological anchor: “When I have a difficult time in understanding the ALT’s instruction, I can ask my Japanese teacher what is going on in Japanese without hesitation, but I cannot do that with a foreign teacher” (SI). Complementing the ALT’s explanation in this way supposedly made the language learning of the students easier and more productive. The students thus found JTEs to be helpful not only pedagogically but also psychologically because they felt more at ease asking them questions in Japanese when they encountered difficulties. The pivotal roles of JTEs in team-taught classes are being able “to fill the gaps” between ALTs and students in the classroom (Miyazato, 2009, p. 50).

Despite the fact that the majority of the participants appreciated the JTEs performing these roles, challenges were also noted. There was some doubt as to the degree to which all JTEs are good language models for students’ English learning since JTEs are (and perhaps always will be life-long) learners of English (Medgyes, 1992). Yousuke said

bluntly, “I assume there are some Japanese teachers who can speak English well and some who cannot” (SI). Kanon described this issue by saying, “I was sometimes unsure about some JTEs’ pronunciation” (SI). Tatsuya expressed his dubious impression of JTEs as language models: “I heard that the English we learn at school from Japanese teachers would not be useful when we talk to foreigners” (SI).

The English proficiency of JTEs is thus a critical factor for all those concerned when considering team-taught classes. It might also affect the relationship between the team teachers. The student participants regarded JTEs as language models and English learners in their own right. They also thought that JTEs were able to grasp the English abilities and learning processes of their students, thereby providing appropriate support for them. In addition, JTEs as Japanese-English bilinguals were considered to be able to aid ALTs and students in properly interacting with each other. These perceptions were generally held although there was an awareness of shortcomings in linguistic areas on the part of some JTEs.

ALTs as ‘Natives’: Enlightening or Frightening?

Overall, the student participants considered ALTs to be the authorities and providers of the target language. They praised their ALTs’ English, using a rich array of adjectives to do so, such as: “good”, “real”, “natural”, “actual”, “first-hand”, “faster”, “foreign”, and “non-Japanese” (FN) (see also Jenkins, 2005). Yousuke’s comments summed up their distinct perceptions about ALTs and their English: “The native pronunciation can only be acquired by living in foreign countries for a long time. For example, there are some words or expressions that are used only in foreign countries, which we don’t know here” (SI). In addition to the target language, ALTs were also believed to be the authorities and providers of cultures in English speaking countries. For example, Tatsuya talked about the differences between JTEs’ solo classes and team-taught classes:

Since junior high school, when a foreign teacher came to teach, unlike the classes taught only by Japanese teachers, I was taught not only English but also a different culture. When an ALT came to the class for the first time, the ALT showed pictures of his family and friends. It was fun and interesting. (SI)

When I asked Sayaka what she wanted her team teachers to do, she responded, “Although we are studying English, I don’t think we know a lot about English speaking countries like the United States or Australia. So I want to learn more about foreign cultures from ALTs” (SI). ALTs appeared to be motivation boosters for the students because (a) they were regarded as the authorities and providers of English and target cultures, (b) they were often monolingual speakers of English and (c) they had a foreign appearance. Sayaka, for instance, shared with me her initial interest in her ALT: “The very first motivation I had for wanting to speak to my ALT in English was because he is a handsome foreign person!” (SI). Yousuke noted, “Team-taught classes are fun.... My ALT speaks English to us in team-taught classes at a natural speed like a machine gun. We always have to deal with that, so I concentrate on the class to catch up with that speed” (PD). Although the participants frequently viewed ALTs to be motivational boosters, they sometimes had reservations. Tatsuya, for instance, commented that he felt anxious when communicating with ALTs: “When the ALT came, the class was fun. But I was nervous when I had to speak to the ALT in English” (SI). Yousuke confessed how nervous he and other students become when a new ALT joins their class for the first time: “I get really nervous, and the class becomes really quiet and tense” (SI). In a similar vein, Sayaka pointed out that she often hesitated to speak to ALTs and would feel more comfortable to be around ALTs if they could spend more time with their students inside and outside the classroom and if they could speak Japanese (even in a limited way) rather than only English (FD). Phillipson (1992) contends that teachers of English “should have proven experience of and success in foreign language learning, and that they should have a detailed acquaintance with the language and culture of the learners they are responsible for” (p. 195). On the contrary, ALTs do not generally have any experience of Japanese language learning or deep knowledge of the culture of their students (CLAIR, 2016).

The participants thus perceived ALTs to be the authorities and providers of the target language and cultures. They also often saw ALTs as motivation boosters because they can create a natural atmosphere in class for listening to and speaking English. At the same time, they sometimes thought of ALTs

as possible motivation hinderers. For the most part, ALTs had little Japanese ability, and the imposed ‘English-only’ communication with them was intimidating to the students at times.

Discussion

Corroborating the findings of previous studies on NNESTs (e.g., Ma, 2012), JTEs as NNESTs were perceived to be invaluable not only as language models but also for their understanding of students’ learning and as bridges between ALTs and students. NNESTs provide an achievable model, as students can look to their JTE and imagine their future-self (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009) being a proficient Japanese speaker of English. JTEs also appear to be able to understand students’ learning processes and experiences because they themselves are growing English learners and former students in Japanese schools (see Cook, 2005). In Braine’s (2010) words, NNESTs have “a better ability to read the minds of their students and predict their difficulties with the English language” (p. 28). At the same time, the participants observed that JTEs as Japanese-English bilinguals could offer effective translation work for ALTs and students in class (see Cheung, 2002; Reves & Medgyes, 1994). In each respect, the level of English proficiency of JTEs was considered to be of paramount importance. This point was also discussed in Gorsuch’s (2002) study. The JTEs appeared to be constantly judged on their level of English abilities both by others and themselves; the higher their level of English, the better. Medgyes (1994) contends that if all other variables are equal, the ideal NNESTs are those who have “achieved near-native proficiency in English” and that one of the most pressing professional duties of NNESTs is “to improve their command of English” (p. 74).

Also in line with the findings of previous studies on NESTs, the participants in this study viewed ALTs as the authorities and providers of English and cultures in English speaking countries (see Moussu, 2006) as well as motivation boosters or hinderers due to their native English and lack of knowledge about students’ first language or background (see Miyazato, 2003). It is, however, questionable whether English provided by ALTs is the only ‘right’ kind and conversely whether ‘any’ NESTs (including ALTs) could teach English grammar, reading and writing. The over-reliance on native speakers of English is seen to be problematic by

other researchers (e.g., Miyazato, 2012; Phillipson, 1992, 2009) particularly because it is believed that in the near future English “will be a language used mainly in multilingual contexts as a second language and for communication between non-native speakers” (Graddol, 1999, p. 57; see also Hino, 2009). It is also noteworthy that despite being regarded as the best providers of cultural information about English speaking countries, usually ALTs are well acquainted with only one English speaking country, the one in which they were born and raised. ALTs might arguably be less familiar than the JTEs with the target cultures (besides that of their home country). Besides, JTEs are typically older than ALTs. They are also foreign language teachers, presumably with an interest in the culture of those foreign language users, whereas ALTs vary greatly in terms of university majors and areas of interest. Since ALTs are expected to share their culture with local communities as stated in official documents (CLAIR, 2016), however, it was hardly surprising that everybody was instilled with the idea that ALTs should be the authorities and providers of the target cultures. Another point of concern is whether ALTs can create real motivation in the students because of their unique linguistic and pedagogical contributions or if they merely generate excitement on a superficial level due to their rare (and exotic) presence in the classroom. In any case, as recommended by Phillipson (1992) and others (e.g., Hiratsuka, 2013), NESTs should strive to demonstrate the excitement of learning a foreign language and great familiarity with the language and culture of the learners of whom they are in charge in their classrooms.

Suggestions

I offer four suggestions based on the findings from this study. First and foremost, JTEs’ workloads should be reduced so that they could make time to brush up, maintain and improve their English skills. All the people concerned need to acknowledge how challenging it is for JTEs to satisfactorily perform their duties as full-time teachers in Japanese schools and simultaneously fulfil their roles as English teachers when they themselves are learners of English (NNESTs). More Japanese English teachers need to be placed at each school, and teachers of other subjects should take on more of the work related to general school affairs. To further

reduce the amount of JTEs’ work, JTEs should allocate their English teaching-related work (e.g., test making and marking) to their ALT without assuming that their ALT does not want to have extra work or cannot manage it. JTEs might then be able to ensure the improvement of their English, thereby better fulfilling the important roles of being an adequate linguistic model and an effective translator for their students. Furthermore, instead of the Japanese government blindly hiring a large number of ALTs just because they are ‘native’ English speakers, it could spend the tremendous amount of money and resources involved in the recruitment of ALTs on pre-service and in-service JTEs by, for example, allowing them to go study abroad even for a short period of time (Hiramatsu, 2005; Hiratsuka, 2013).

Second, the Japanese government should revise the hiring methods and processes of ALTs in order to acquire better equipped candidates, linguistically and culturally, for the ultimate purpose of securing conducive English language learning environments and enhancing students’ English abilities. In its current form, ALTs do not need to have any Japanese proficiency or cultural awareness; however, they should acquire them “even in a limited way” so as to efficiently communicate with their students and make their students feel comfortable and at ease in interacting with them. In addition, ALTs, like JTEs, should be more rigorously evaluated by their colleagues and possibly by their students regarding their professional commitments and development each year so that they are not merely the authorities of the target language and cultures but are also developing language teachers. They should then be provided with an opportunity to stay at their school as long as they want if they are thought to be desirable professionals. If the needs of the school and ALTs hired through the JET program are not met, schools and boards of education could consider employing foreign teachers from private companies where costs (e.g., salaries) are lower and where foreign teachers are more carefully monitored in terms of their job performance (see, for example, Altia central, 2016; Interac, 2016).

Third, students should be given the chance to read and listen to the characteristics, including the strengths and weaknesses, of JTEs and ALTs in English team-taught classes in order to better prepare themselves to participate in the classes, communicate with the teachers and figure out the strate-

gies that they think are best suited for their English learning. The students should also be shown ways in which they could capitalize on the strengths of each teacher and exploit the team teachers' collaboration, inside and outside the classroom. Moreover, their voice should be heard by both JTEs and ALTs so that the team teachers could tailor their classes to students' interests, needs, wishes, and expectations in their particular contexts (Hiratsuka, 2013; Hiratsuka, 2014a; Hiratsuka, 2017).

Last but not least, JTEs and ALTs should hold collaborative professional workshops or engage in teacher research through which they, as researchers, scrutinize their teaching and students' learning by constructing a research plan, obtaining classroom data, being involved in reflective practices and examining the outcome for further cycles (Borg, 2013; Burns, 2005, 2012; Farrell, 2015b). Although we all know that JTEs and ALTs can learn from each other, linguistically, culturally and pedagogically, as far as I am aware there is no such opportunity, at least officially, for them to tap into their teaching partner's expertise (e.g., JTEs' knowledge about their students and Japanese language, and ALTs' English speaking skills and cultural information about their home country) (see Hiratsuka, 2014b; Hiratsuka, 2017; Hiratsuka & Barkhuizen, 2015). Such workshops or teacher research can only be realized if JTEs have more free time than they do now, if ALTs are treated as professionals more than they currently are and if students are included, at least partly, in the endeavours. Since this is a particularly essential point that needs to be recognized and valued by team teachers, students and all the other staff members, the specified time for the workshops or teacher research should be determined and put on display in the weekly timetable at the beginning of the school year.

Conclusion

In this article, I investigated students' perceptions of NESTs (ALTs) and NNESTs (JTEs) in the context of team-taught classes in Japan. The findings of this study, which used multiple qualitative data collection methods, were for the most part congruent with the previous studies on N/NESTs: JTEs as NNESTs were found to be well acquainted with students' language learning and culture and played an imperative role of being a linguistic and psychological bridge, but not as proficient in English;

ALTs were viewed to be superior in their English and understanding about target cultures, but lacking knowledge of students' learning backgrounds. A particular addition to the literature from this study is a discussion about how political, cultural and educational contexts in Japan affected the participants' perceptions of NESTs and NNESTs. The Japanese high school educational system, expectations of the local community, teachers' job status, and teachers' hiring processes and contracts all appeared to have contributed to the participants' particular perspectives. The two major themes of the findings and four suggestions in this study may perhaps be obvious to some but less so to others. We should continue in this effort by conducting more empirical research sensitive to team teachers' and their students' circumstances. In particular, studies with different types of student participants from this study—for example, elementary school students, private secondary school students and returnee students in Japan—will help us further facilitate the understanding of the individual lives of N/NESTs (JTEs/ALTs) and their students. To conclude, I would like to emphasize that future research on the topic of N/NESTs should put forth recommendations that aim to capitalize on the advantages and compensate for the shortcomings of NESTs and NNESTs because at the end of the day our primary goal should be centered on the growth and prosperity of language teachers and learners, not on the belittlement or discrimination of them.

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