

A Preliminary Investigation into Elementary School English Education.

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Abstract

With the change of English language instruction in Japanese Elementary schools shifting from 'Foreign Language Activities' (*gaikokugo katsudoh*) to becoming a compulsory subject, Japanese Elementary school teachers are preparing for this change. This investigation was sparked by a conversation with an elementary school teacher on the cusp of this shift, so in July 2018 the researchers conducted this preliminary investigation to uncover some of the main concerns of the Japanese Elementary school teachers (JT) who are currently teaching English, and to see if there are any of those issues related to working with an assistant language teacher (ALT). The questionnaire was distributed and collected during a one-day local teacher conference for elementary school teachers. Of the eleven respondents, the data revealed that 81% of the teachers lacked confidence in teaching English. The two main reasons for the lack of confidence were due to pronunciation and English ability. In working with the ALTs, as in the literature, teachers chose varying approaches. Merits of having an ALT included helping with pronunciation, exposure to a foreigner and foreign culture, as well as having a positive impact on the pupils in a number of ways. Nevertheless, a number of demerits of working with ALTs surface which indicate underlying causes including a lack in or unclear communication, clarity of roles, and unmet expectations. The number of participants is small in this study. Further investigation is needed to see how prevalent the issues that arose in this study are among a greater number of teachers. Recommendations to reduce issues include creating pathways for more effective communication between the ALT and the JT and so promote clearer goals and more defined roles in the classroom. This research does not take into account the perspectives of ALTs and is therefore limited in perspective. To gain a fuller picture research into perspectives of the ALTs is needed.

1. Background

English was taught in Japanese elementary schools in the Showa Era but then ceased. In 1986 the 'Ad-Hoc Council [for] Education'⁽¹⁾ announced plans stating recommencing English education was under consideration. From 1992-96 research was conducted into teaching English and international understanding. From the results it was decided that in 2002 foreign language education would be implemented in the Elementary school curriculum.

In the 2000 outline of elementary school guidelines, foreign language conversation was mentioned. In the same year, three state elementary schools were chosen to have an English department for research purposes. Two years later, in 2002, English education in Elementary school was deemed possible. It was

proposed that English education would start for upper elementary school-aged children with one class a week (in 2006)⁽²⁾. In 2008 Japan's education council announced the plan to implement Foreign Language Activities (*gaikokugo katsudoh*) in elementary schools. A revision of this stated 5th and 6th-grade pupils were to have 1 class each week. Three years following in the 2011 guidelines that were released, all elementary schools were to have an increase in English as a common language for international communication. In 2013 the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) announced modifications to the English curriculum in order to become more global⁽³⁾.

From the 2013 announcement to the present day,

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2018, the shift in English education in Japanese elementary schools has accelerated. MEXT announced a two-step plan to increase English education in 1. the academic years to receive English education, and 2. the number of classes to be delivered per academic year⁽⁴⁾. Table 1 below details these changes from the 2017 academic year to 2018 the following year, and Table 2 details the changes in the second and final stage of current reforms to what MEXT has termed the 'New Course of Study in Foreign Language Education'⁽⁵⁾.

Table 1: Increase of lessons 2017-2018

Year of pupils	Academic Year	
	2017	2018
6 th Grade	*35	*50
5 th Grade	*35	*50
4 th Grade	0	*15
3 rd Grade	0	*15

*Number of 45-minute classes per academic year.

Data taken from MEXT:外国語教育における新学習指導要領の円滑な実施に向けた移行措置（案）⁽⁵⁾

Table 2: Increase of lessons 2019- 2020

Year of pupils	Academic Year	
	2019	2020
6 th Grade	*50	*70
5 th Grade	*50	*70
4 th Grade	15	*35
3 rd Grade	15	*35

*Number of 45-minute classes per academic year.

Data taken from MEXT:外国語教育における新学習指導要領の円滑な実施に向けた移行措置（案）⁽⁵⁾

These changes mean by 2020 elementary school children in years 3 and 4 will have English classes once a week, and pupils in years 5 and 6 will have classes two to three times a week.

These are not the only changes^(6,7). The textbook is due to change too. The first textbook, *Eigo Note* (or *Eigo Noto*) (issued in 2009), was replaced by 'Hi Friends' in 2011. The new series of textbooks

from 2018 ('Let's Try' and 'We Can') are expected to cover years 3-6 as the new regulations come into practice.

1.1 Implications

The General Union describes MEXT has 'pushing ahead with its plan'⁽⁴⁾. As with any educational policy change concerns about how it will impact the teachers arise. Elementary school teachers in Japan are responsible for delivering the contents of the many subjects taught in elementary schools unlike their peers in Junior High schools who are focused in their field of teaching.

There are two options to choose from to train to become an elementary school teacher in Japan; a four-year university course and a two-year course at a Junior College. In some cases, the course content for English classes is decided by the teacher⁽⁸⁾ who may ensure course content is relevant, and possibly practical. Needless to say, as Butler iterates, elementary school teachers in Japan 'are not English language teachers'⁽⁹⁾ and she continues by saying, 'many of the Japanese teachers of English (JTEs) are novices when it comes to teaching English to elementary school students'⁽⁹⁾.

With MEXT moving forward with plans to increase English in the elementary school curriculum, and with teachers who may have limited experience or training in teaching English as a foreign language, the impact of such government initiatives on the teachers is fundamental to the delivery of the course content in the classroom, which ultimately impacts learner progress.

It therefore comes as no surprise that there are reports of some teachers are anxious about teaching and speaking English⁽¹⁰⁾. This is not a new problem. Fennelly and Luxton discuss the results of a survey conducted in 2008 which revealed most teachers who took part in a survey in Tokushima clearly lacked confidence in their ability to teach and speak English⁽¹¹⁾.

1.2 Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) in Japan

The first ALTs were brought into Japan to teach in secondary schools in 1987 on the Jet Programme

from four countries. Currently recruits include countries where English is not the first language. The aim of the JET programme was threefold: 1. to stimulate internationalization in local communities, 2. to help improve foreign language education, and 3. to help grow international exchange. Initially the programme started with 848 participants and peaked in 2002 with 6,273 in which year 20 were placed in Elementary schools for the first time⁽¹²⁾.

Typical duties of the ALT on the JET programme include team teaching or assisting with classes taught by a JT⁽¹²⁾. However, as Butler points out some ALTs (or native speakers) have 'reported difficulties in ... teaching English'⁽⁹⁾. This raises the question, what kinds of team teaching and approaches are JTs and ALTs choosing?

1.3 Team teaching

Team teaching is a term for different styles of approach to teaching with two or more teachers. It comes under the umbrella of partnership teaching which is defined as teachers taking and sharing responsibility for meeting the students' needs⁽¹³⁾. Co-operative, collaborative, and parallel or team teaching are all types of partnership teaching. Teachers may take it in turns to teach the class⁽¹⁴⁾. Team teaching can be where the teachers are teaching towards a common goal⁽¹⁵⁾.

In Japan, team teaching seems to be used for when two teachers (a Japanese teacher and either a non-Japanese ALT or a Japanese teacher of English) are both involved in teaching the same class. The goals of the teachers may differ, and in sometimes only one teacher may be teaching. In many cases, the ALT may not be a qualified teacher^(9,16). In some cases this has caused concern⁽¹⁰⁾. Furthermore, issues have arisen from bringing a non-Japanese teacher into the Japanese classroom⁽¹⁷⁾ and teachers have been left to work out the most suitable relationship and class delivery⁽⁹⁾. One outcome is varying degrees of leadership balance in the classroom, and in some cases, ALTs teach the classes on their own⁽¹⁸⁾. Literature indicates the system is fraught with problems from the objectives of MEXT for the hiring of ALTs⁽¹⁶⁾ to the lack of preparation for and with the

JT to team teach⁽¹⁷⁾. Further to this is the JT's communication with the ALTs. Having to communicate with ALTs is a concern on top of lacking confidence in speaking English as previously mentioned⁽¹¹⁾. With all these issues what merits do teachers think there are of having ALTs?

1.4 This investigation

This investigation was initiated from a conversation with an elementary school teacher teaching English to 6th graders in a school on Hokkaido. In discussing his main concerns in teaching English, he commented that he had no clue whether what he was saying in English was correct. Unlike maths where $1+1=2$, he said he did not know whether the grammar he was using was correct. This uncertainty made teaching English difficult for him. Furthermore, when an ALT or native speaker would come he would become very self-conscious of his English which made him uncomfortable. In addition, while he could teach he could neither be sure whether his pronunciation nor the pronunciation of the students in his class were correct. These were areas of concerns for this teacher, but was this a unique case, or were other teachers experiencing similar concerns in their teaching of English?

This conversation sparked further questions which led to this inquiry. It was decided to gather data from teachers in the local area as a preliminary study. A questionnaire was drafted and piloted with two teachers for feedback. In the feedback the teachers said the questionnaire was easy to understand, so no changes were made.

Based on the study by Fennelly and Luxton⁽¹¹⁾ uncovering the areas teachers feel a lack of confidence in needed more inquiry. Furthermore, from the same study and parallel to this were factors related to working with an ALT which as mentioned above have been concerns^(10,11).

The aim of this research is to investigate two areas in relation to teaching English in elementary school: the confidence of the teachers, and factors related to working with an ALT. Therefore, the research questions are:

1. What areas did teachers feel a lack of confidence in teaching English?
2. What teaching approaches were taken when working with an ALT?
3. What merits and demerits did the teachers perceive there to be in working with an ALT?

2. Methods

The questionnaire comprised of a total of 29 questions on two sides of A4 paper (see Appendix 1). Closed questions offered answers to select from and spaces to add in extra information, while open-ended questions had spaces for teachers to write in if they wished to provide more information.

The data was collected on 21st July 2018 from willing voluntary participants who were attending the Japan Association of English Teaching in Elementary Schools annual local block seminar held in Sapporo. The questionnaires were included in the welcome pack. A locked post box for the collection of the questionnaires was available for any willing respondent to submit the completed questionnaires. There were two announcements given on the day about the questionnaire. At the end of the day, one of the researchers collected the questionnaires. In completing the questionnaire, the participants agreed to the use of data being used for academic purposes. Participants' names were not taken.

In total there were eleven responses to the questionnaire. After the collection of the questionnaire, two researchers entered the data into the Mac statistical analysis software *Esumi* Version 2, and prepared it for analysis.

3. Results

Data about background information revealed that 7 of the participants were from the Sapporo area, one participant was from the Iburi area and three were from Sorachi. The majority were female (8) and the age range was from being in their twenties (2) to in their fifties (2). The number of participants who were homeroom teachers was 6. Of the eleven respondents, 8 were licenced junior

high school teachers. Also, 5 of the teachers had studied abroad while 1 had lived overseas.

Eight of the participants stated their level of English in relation to a public English exam which spanned from a TOIEC score of 550 points to the EIKEN level 3. In having attended previous training sessions 72.7% said they had, and of the sessions 45.4% were organised by the Ministry of Education; 36.4% had attended training internally, and the remainder had attended educational seminars.

In order to prepare for lessons, 6 of the participants said they attended meetings out of the school, 3 said they went to an English conversation school, and one studied in their school. The answer to experience in learning how to teach English, 8 of the respondents replied yes, and of the eight, 5 said this experience was while they were studying at university. One respondent said they had got this experience from the licensing course they took to become a teacher.

In response to having confidence in teaching English two respondents said they were confident. The areas are where the teachers felt a lack of confidence with the percentage is shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Areas the participants are lacking confidence

Area lacking confidence	participant %
Pronunciation	63.6
English ability	54.5
Grammar	36.4
Teaching method	36.4
Communication with the ALT	36.4
Preparation for class	36.4
With the materials	36.4
Communicating with pupils in English	27.3

With regards to working with an ALT, the questionnaire asked about the frequency of the ALTs visits, the teaching approaches with the ALT, the merits and demerits of working with an ALT, and if the participant had any hopes or wishes in

regards to working with an ALT. The data are as follows.

Data detailing the frequency of ALT visits are shown in Table 4 below. One respondent chose not to answer this question. In answer to teaching approaches with the ALT all but one respondent indicated they only use one teaching approach with the ALT. The one respondent indicated two approaches were used: the ALT teaching alone, and the JT teaching with the ALT. Table 5 below shows the approaches used.

Table 4: Frequency of ALT visits

Frequency	No of participants
8 times annually	1
Once monthly	2
Twice monthly	4
Once weekly	1
Twice weekly	2

Table 5: Teaching approaches with the ALT

Approach	Participant numbers
ALT alone	3
Together with the ALT	5
JTE as facilitator	2
ALT as facilitator	1

The merits and demerits of an ALT were collected as descriptive data. In the merits of having an ALT four main advantages surfaced which were: the pupils having the opportunity to hear native pronunciation of the language; contact with a foreigner or someone from a different culture which provided another merit of the atmosphere this created, and an increase in the motivation of the pupils. Other merits of having an ALT were that it was enjoyable, the pupils became more confident, and that the ALT had many ideas.

The demerits of having an ALT were varied. In two cases the participant mentioned they could not see any demerits. One reason given for this was because their ALT was 'first-class'. However, this was not the case for all of the participants. One participant mentioned that the ALT changed quite

often. Another participant commented that the contract the ALT was on imposed restrictions on the ALT; consequently, time with the ALT was limited which resulted in not being able to discuss and plan the class as the JT would have liked. In another case, it appears the ALT comes for one class per unit of the textbook and as a result planning is difficult. Similar concerns were echoed in the comment, "There's only fun and it ends. The next time there seems to be no follow-up and the result is needing to spend more time on each unit."

Another point made was that the ALT only played games with the pupils. The ALT not understanding the children, and also not being able to get to know the ALT well were other demerits mentioned.

Lastly, there was one comment about the ALT and Japanese. While one JT mentioned communication difficulties with the ALT, another said that the more Japanese the ALT can speak, the more Japanese they use in the classroom.

Four teachers stated no wishes with working with the ALT while there were a variety of comments from the remaining 7 participants. Comments included the desire for the ALT to be a native speaker, to do more activities together, for the ALT to share more about their culture, more opportunities for attending study groups as well as more motivation from the ALT.

Therefore, while there are four common merits stated for having an ALT the demerits are diverse and the desires more widespread. In discussing these points, suggestions for consideration will be offered as a way to improve the various situations.

4. Discussion

In this survey, eleven teachers participated who were mainly from the Ishikari district in Hokkaido. The ages of the teachers ranged 20s – 50s. Most of the participants were female, and about half were homeroom teachers. Again, about half had been abroad, and not only had over 70% attended previous workshops and training session, but about the same number said they knew how to teach English. Therefore, with a range in years of teaching experience and with various situations and

training, the areas participants lack confidence in, the teaching approaches used, and the merits and demerits of ALTs are discussed. Finally, the wishes of the JTs are discussed.

4.1. Areas lacking in confidence

As in Fennelly and Luxton's study (2011)⁽¹¹⁾ this research found teachers lack confidence. The results show the area of greatest lack of confidence is in pronunciation. This correlates to the greatest perceived merit of having an ALT: pronunciation. Thus, it appears that some of the JTs desire the ALT to help in areas they most lack confidence in. General English ability was the second most perceived lack. However, communication with the ALT and speaking in English to the pupils in the classroom were less of a concern. This result does not align with Fennelly and Luxton's results⁽¹¹⁾. Grammar was also seen as less of a concern, although these last three are still areas teachers said they are lacking in confidence. Therefore how 'English ability' is defined, and how to help reduce that concern needs further investigation. Perhaps, as in Fennelly and Luxton's study English ability is seen as the ability to communicate in English⁽¹¹⁾.

4.2. Teaching approaches used

From the results, nine of the eleven teachers used one approach to teaching with the ALT. One teacher used two approaches with the ALT, and one teacher did not answer. Almost half of the teachers were teaching with the ALT. The variety of teaching approaches aligns with what the literature indicates as teachers are left to work out what suits them⁽⁹⁾.

In the data a variety of approaches are used but how the teachers decide on which approach to use, and the extent to which both parties are happy with the situation is unclear.

4.3. Merits and demerits with having ALTs

From the data, it is evident that the participants are actively thinking about their current situation and a number of demerits are mentioned. While the JTs desire to want to have better communication and more time with the ALT hindrances mentioned by the JTs in this survey

include language barriers and contract restrictions. A perceived lack of ability to communicate with the ALT surfaced in Fennelly and Luxton's study too⁽¹¹⁾.

While having an ALT in the classroom is said to motivate the pupils, increase their confidence, and create a positive atmosphere it appears in some cases a balance between having fun and covering the curriculum is lacking.

The advantage of being able to hear a native speaker speaking in their own language is reduced when the ALT speaks more Japanese. Why is the ALT speaking Japanese and how much is acceptable?

One participant stated the ALT did not understand children. A lack of cultural understanding is mentioned in the literature⁽⁹⁾. It is possible that a difference in culture including expectations of classroom behaviour may be a cause.

Some participants said one merit of the ALT was exposure to a different culture. This aligns with the objectives of the JET programme mentioned earlier in this paper⁽¹²⁾. This may mean the ALT shares about their own country or bring realia into the class.

Clear communication may pave a way to resolve issues. Thus, this raises the question as to how expectations are communicated to ALTs. Communication is obviously a critical issue which underpins other issues such as how roles are decided between the JT and ALT in the classroom?

Comments in the data which indicate frustrations at a lack of follow-up or lack of progress are indications of a professional attitude of the participants however, Butler discusses the issue that many ALTs are new to teaching⁽⁹⁾. Thus, to what extent are both parties working towards a unified goal?

4.4 Desires and Wishes

The questionnaire investigated if there were any desires pertaining to their ALT and their situation. Two participants did not write anything, two more wrote 'nothing special' and the remaining seven teachers wrote various comments discussed below.

One teacher would like the ALT to do a 'wrap up' or review of the study. Another teacher wrote they

would like the ALT to understand the goal of the class and teach accordingly. These two comments raise questions as to how 1. the class is planned and how the execution of the plan is communicated and understood by both parties, and 2. the degree of professional understanding in lesson planning and responsibility along with roles in the classroom.

Roles in the classroom and lesson planning may also be underlying issues giving rise to a JT wanting the ALT to give more input on pronunciation. These desires might be achieved by, as one teacher requested, having more opportunities for teacher development.

Desires to be able to do activities together with the ALT and for the ALT to share more about where they are from and their own culture should be achievable through direct communication with the ALT. However, the desire for the ALT to have more enthusiasm, and to have a native speaker ALT are possibly indications of different underlying issues.

One JT said they want a 'native' English speaker. As noted some ALTs are not native English speakers⁽¹²⁾. How do JTs perceive the roles of such ALTs? The literature states that the JET programme aimed to help improve foreign language education, but it does not specify how that should be done. Also, how ALTs meet needs and expectations of JTs and how unmet expectations are being resolved are unclear.

5. Conclusion

This investigation was sparked by a conversation with an elementary school teacher teaching English from which three questions arose: 1. What areas did teachers feel a lack of confidence in teaching English? 2. What teaching approaches were taken when working with an ALT? 3. What merits and demerits did the teachers perceive there to be in working with an ALT?

A preliminary questionnaire was drawn up, piloted, and then distributed at the local annual teachers' seminar in July 2018 where eleven teachers responded.

The quantitative data were taken and entered into *Esumi* version 2, while the descriptive data were

analyzed by theme. The respondents were attending a day conference which indicated their commitment to the teaching profession. The respondents were in their 20s – 50s and about half were homeroom teachers and about half had studied abroad.

The areas in which the teachers felt the greatest lack of confidence were pronunciation and general English ability. Merits of having an ALT included the ALTs providing an opportunity for the pupils to be exposed to 'native English' and another culture. Demerits were diverse and included the ALT only doing games, not wrapping up the class, nor providing continuation in teaching the curriculum.

From this preliminary study difficulties in communicating with the ALTs surface which if resolved may lead to solving other issues. Also, having more defined roles for the ALT and JT might reduce hindrances and lead to a more productive working situation. This is a small study and so generalizations cannot be made, but some information may be of interest to others in similar situations. Interviews would open the way to gather deeper, richer data. Certainly, more research is needed to investigate current concerns of both JTs and ALTs in order to reduce the demerits of working together and to create a more effective learning environment for pupils in elementary schools.

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Appendix 1: Questionnaire

*** 小学校英語教育に関するアンケート ***

私は、日本の英語教育について多方面から研究・調査発表を行なっています。いよいよ2020年度からは、小学校において英語教育が完全実施となります。そこで、小学校教員を対象に「小学校英語教育に関するアンケート調査」を実施いたします。先に回答いただきしアンケートは研究のみで利用し、それ以外の目的で利用することはないとご承諾願います。その際、アンケートの回答は厳格に守られ、個人の特定が可能な情報を公表することはないとご承諾願います。回答、アンケート調査にご協力いただきありがとうございます。

該当する番号に○印をつけてください（複数回答可）。また、（ ）や□内には記述してください。

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Q1 勤務先は？	Q5 担任(学年)は？	Q10 研修会の参加経験は？
1. 札幌市内	1. 1年生	1. ある (Q11へ)
2. 石狩管内	2. 2年生	2. ない (Q12へ)
3. 渡島管内	3. 3年生	
4. 樺太管内	4. 4年生	Q11 Q10の研修会は？
5. 北海道管内	5. 5年生	1. 学校 (文科省主催)
6. 空知管内	6. 6年生	2. 学校 ()
7. 上川管内	7. 複式学級 (年生)	3. 学校 ()
8. 釧路管内	8. ない	
9. 帯広管内		Q12 英語授業の準備は？
10. オホーツク管内	Q6 中学校の英語教員免許は？	1. 学内で研修会に参加
11. 根室管内	1. ある	2. 学内で研修会に参加
12. 日高管内	2. ない	3. 英語授業室に通っている
13. 十勝管内	Q7 留学経験は？	4. その他 ()
14. 釧路管内	1. ある (国、年数、)	
15. 根室管内	2. ない	Q13 英語教授法を学んだ経験は？
		1. ある (Q14へ)
		2. ない (Q15へ)
Q2 性別は？	Q8 海外生活は？	Q14 Q13はどこで？
1. 男性	1. ある (国、年数、)	1. 大学在学中
2. 女性	2. ない	2. 学校 ()
		3. その他 ()
Q3 年齢は？	Q9 英語レベルは？	Q15 英語を指導することに？
16. 20代	1. TOEIC ()	1. 自信がある (Q17へ)
17. 30代	2. TOEFL ()	2. 自信がない (Q16へ)
18. 40代	3. IELTS ()	
19. 50代	4. CEFR ()	
20. 60代	5. Cambridge ()	
	6. GTEC ()	
Q4 教員歴は？	7. 英検 ()	
1. 1年未満	8. その他 ()	

まへつづ

<p>Q16 自信がないのは？</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 発音 2. 文法 3. 英語力 4. 指導法 5. 生徒とのコミュニケーション(英語で) 6. ALTとのコミュニケーション 7. 授業準備 8. 教材について 9. その他() 	<p>Q21 ALTに希望することは？</p>	<p>Q26 JTEに希望することは？</p>
<p>Q17 ALTの来校頻度は？</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 来校なし (Q22へ) 2. 月1回 3. 月2回 4. 週1回 5. 週2回 6. その他() 	<p>Q22 JTEの来校頻度は？</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 来校なし (Q27へ) 2. 月1回 3. 月2回 4. 週1回 5. 週2回 6. その他() 	<p>Q27 今度、英語の研修会があれば</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 参加する (Q28へ) 2. 参加しない (Q29へ)
<p>Q18 英語授業の指導は？</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. ALTのみ 2. ALTと一緒に指導 3. ALTと一緒に指導(担任はフアンリティーターになる) 4. ALTと一緒に指導(ALTはフアンリティーターになる) 	<p>Q23 英語授業の指導は？</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. JTEのみ 2. JTEと一緒に指導 3. JTEと一緒に指導(担任はフアンリティーターになる) 4. JTEと一緒に指導(ALTはフアンリティーターになる) 	<p>Q28 研修会で、学びたい内容は？</p>
<p>Q19 ALTのメリットは？</p>	<p>Q24 JTEのメリットは？</p>	<p>Q29 ご自由にお書きください。</p>
<p>Q20 ALTのデメリットは？</p>	<p>Q25 JTEのデメリットは？</p>	

ご協力ありがとうございました