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Revisiting the Identity Framework of JET ALTs in Japan

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ABSTRACT

The presence of expatriate language teachers has gained increasing relevance in global educational systems, particularly in contexts where English is taught as a foreign language. The Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) program, as one of the most extensive initiatives of its kind, has played a paramount role in directing English language education in Japan by hiring foreign assistant language teachers (ALTs). I revisit the identity framework of these JET ALTs by critically assessing and expanding upon Hiratsuka's (2022) conceptualization of ALT identity. Drawing on narrative inquiry, I examined the lived experiences of 10 former JET ALTs representing assorted national and professional backgrounds. The findings engaged with and appraised the existing ALT identity framework, which comprises two primary identities—Foreigner and Dabbler—each encompassing distinct sub-identities. Furthermore, the findings identified the emergence of a third significant identity, the Japan Enthusiast, which encapsulates the pre-existing and ongoing cultural affinity many JET ALTs possess before, during, and oftentimes after the program. This new identity category brings attention to how cultural motivations influence JET ALT experiences, professional self-conceptions, and integration within Japanese society. The implications of these findings are far-reaching—offering valuable insights for policy-makers, educational institutions, and JET ALTs themselves regarding recruitment, training, and role clarification. All in all, I call for a reconceptualization of ALT identity as a tripartite rather than dual framework so that we can advance a well-rounded understanding of the professional and personal dimensions configuring the experiences of foreign language teachers in Japan.

Keywords: identity; expatriate L2 teacher; Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) program; assistant L2 teacher

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Introduction

The presence of expatriate language teachers in educational systems worldwide has attained heightened relevance, particularly in contexts where English is taught as a foreign language. Although some expatriate teachers remain in their host countries as long-term instructors, my focus here is on systems designed for short-term participants—those expected to return to their home countries after one to several years. Such short-term arrangements are extremely common in Japan; in fact, within the government-sponsored Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) program, they represent the majority of participants (see CLAIR, 2025; Hiratsuka, 2022). I focus specifically on JET ALTs in this article for two primary reasons. First, among the myriad initiatives worldwide, the JET program stands out as one of the most established and extensive (Metzgar, 2017). Since its inception in 1987 with 848 participants from four countries, the program has experienced dramatic expansion and welcomed 5,861 participants from 51 countries in 2024—affirming its persistent impact on Japan’s language education sector (CLAIR, 2025). JET foreign assistant language teachers (ALTs) provide language instruction in public and some private schools and currently constitute “more than 90% of JET participants” (CLAIR, 2025). Although a small portion (less than 5%) teach foreign languages other than English, such as Chinese, German, Korean, and Russian, the vast majority assist with English classes (Hiratsuka, 2022, 2023a, 2023b). Thus, JET ALTs operate as a foundational pillar in the JET program by working alongside Japanese teachers of English (JTEs) in team-teaching arrangements—a defining feature of English language education in Japan today (Hiratsuka, 2022, 2023a, 2023b). Second, I focus on JET ALTs (as opposed to ALTs hired by private dispatching companies)—despite the fact that roughly just one in three ALTs in Japan are JET ALTs (see MEXT, 2024)—because of the sheer scale of direct taxpayer investment in the program, with an annual budget exceeding 40 billion yen (approximately US\$270 million) over the past four decades (see CLAIR, 2025; Hiratsuka, 2022).

The historical trajectory of English language education in Japan exhibits a series of reform efforts, mirroring shifts in pedagogical priorities and broader socio-political influences (see Hiratsuka, 2022). During the Meiji period (1868-1912), English language education was dominated by grammar-translation methods, which proved ineffective for real-world communication (Friedman, 2016). Attempts to improve language instruction included initiatives such as the English Language Exploratory Committee (ELEC) in the 1950s, the Fulbright Program in the late 1960s, and the Monbusho English Fellows (MEF) and British English Teaching (BET) programs in the late 1970s (McConnell, 2000). The JET program came forth as a culmination of these efforts with the dual purpose of enhancing English language education and fostering international exchange (CLAIR, 2025).

The eligibility criteria and employment conditions for JET ALTs complicate their professional positioning. While JET ALTs must hold a bachelor’s degree, no formal teaching qualifications or Japanese language proficiency are required (CLAIR, 2025). Their annual salaries—starting at approximately 4.02 million yen and rising to about 4.32 million yen from the fourth year—are relatively high given their limited qualifications and teaching experience. They also receive comprehensive benefits, including insurance and subsidized housing (CLAIR, 2025). However, their instructional opportunities remain limited; JET ALTs in junior high schools teach only 22.1% of English lessons, a figure that drops to 9.7% in high schools (McCrostie, 2017). Given the program’s substantial financial cost and human resources, debates continue regarding its effectiveness and value (see Hiratsuka, 2013, 2015, 2017, 2022, 2023b). Although the JET program has undeniably contributed to cross-cultural understanding and international diplomacy, with over 70,000 participants since its inception and an active alumni network in 18 countries, its educational impact requires closer scrutiny (CLAIR, 2025). The program’s focus on cultural exchange, while important, should be balanced against its effectiveness in language education.

A closer look at the program's historical and institutional foundations helps explain the tensions underlying its educational outcomes and the professional realities faced by JET ALTs. In particular, three key issues have affected the JET program's evolution and thereby continue to influence ALT identities. First, the program was launched not solely for educational purposes but also as part of Japan's diplomatic strategy to alleviate trade friction with the United States during its economic boom (Hiratsuka, 2022; McConnell, 2000; Reesor, 2002). Second, the program was established and proceeds to operate with limited consultation with principal stakeholders, particularly JTEs and local communities. Third, ALTs are contractually designated as assistants rather than full-fledged teachers, a decision initially made to avoid undermining JTEs' professional authority. This structural limitation has tremendous implications for JET ALTs' professional identities and their perceived role in language education within their contexts (Hiratsuka, 2016; McConnell, 2000).

Due to the prevalence of the JET program, currently there are also numerous private dispatch companies and other programs, such as Interac and Altia Central, which employ ALTs from overseas for English language education in Japan on behalf of institutions like local boards of education (Hiratsuka, 2022, 2023a). Meanwhile, the implementation of team-teaching approaches has gained great empirical attention across various countries. Researchers have reviewed these arrangements in diverse contexts, from Slovenia's early adoption of the practice to Hong Kong's integrated approach, and from Brazil's expanding programs to South Korea's established systems (see Alderson et al., 2001; Carless, 2006; Corcoran, 2011; Heo, 2019). Studies in Taiwan, Thailand, and China have further enriched our grasp of how these collaborative team-teaching methods between ALTs and local teachers of English function in different cultural and educational settings (see Islam, 2011; Moore, 2017; Wang, 2014). Nevertheless, the complexity of JET ALT experiences, particularly regarding identity formation and negotiation, demands continued scholarly attention. While Hiratsuka's (2022) framework provided valuable insights into ALT identity construction by showcasing that ALT identity in Japan was composed of two primary categories (i.e., foreigner and dabbler) and six incumbent sub-identities (i.e., celebrity, sojourner, English expert, assistant, greenhorn, and Japanese novice), there remains a need for empirical examination and refinement of this conceptual framework. By applying and appraising Hiratsuka's (2022) framework of ALT identity construction, this exploration seeks to fill a crucial gap in our understanding of the expatriate language teachers' (i.e., JET ALTs') identity formation in Japan by reporting and updating the experiences of a different cohort of participants from those of Hiratsuka (2022). As a result of an exploration of institutional structures, professional roles, and personal experiences, I will yield further insights into the manners in which JET ALTs' identities are formulated, maintained, and contested within the unique constraints and opportunities of the JET program. Hence, this interrogation not only contributes to existing discourse on transnational teaching experiences but also offers added implications for wider discussions on language teacher identity and educational policy.

Literature Review

Language Teacher Identity in Global Contexts

Language teacher identity has become a flourishing field of educational investigation, including professionals navigating foreign and transnational environments (Norton, 2013). Scholars conceptualized identity as an adaptive, multiform process, continuously reshaped through social interactions, institutional structures, and personal reflection (Barkhuizen, 2017; Yazan & Lindahl, 2020). This supports poststructuralist perspectives that view identity as fluid, contingent on shifting contexts and evolving experiences (Norton, 2013). Early discussions of language teacher identity honed in on linguistic proficiency, but contemporary scholarship employs a more holistic approach, taking into consideration sociocultural influences and professional development (see Hiratsuka,

2022). Recent investigations produced empirical evidence of teachers managing complex, sometimes contradictory, identities while moderating personal and professional obligations. Moonthiya (2024), for example, delved into how non-English-dominant teachers-in-training in Australia represented their language teacher identities. Through photo-elicitation, seven language teacher identity representations were identified (i.e., knowledge transmission, learner-centeredness, nurturing, teachers as learners, English experts, teacher dispositions, and professional uncertainty), with tensions—mainly between aspirations and external expectations. The findings highlighted the need for greater awareness and reflection on teacher identities. Wang and Fang (2025) explored the identity reorientations experienced by language instructors transitioning into teacher educator roles in China. They evidenced the ways in which institutional culture and societal norms contribute to professional reinvention and how cross-cultural teaching environments amplify the challenges of identity negotiation. Seminal studies by Tsui (2007) and Miller (2009) found that teachers frequently underwent role transformations modulated by classroom interplay and institutional mandates. These insights resonate with Trent's (2012) findings on English instructors in Hong Kong, whose credibility was often contested due to prevailing attitudes toward native and non-native speakers. Such challenges reinforced the necessity of ongoing professional realignment and resilience.

In sum, previous studies elucidated that language teacher identity is neither static nor unidimensional; it transforms in response to external expectations and internal self-concept. As globalization reconfigures language education, further research is needed to appraise the processes through which expatriate educators reconcile professional demands with personal aspirations in increasingly convoluted teaching landscapes abroad.

The JET Program and Its ALT Experiences

Extending the preceding discussion of language teacher identity as fluid and context-dependent, the JET program provides a concrete case in which institutional structures and cultural expectations contour expatriate teachers' identity work. Since its outset in 1987, the JET program has emerged as a compelling example of the implementation of team-teaching approaches and the integration of foreign teachers into national education structures. Considering the program's longevity and scale, it offers fertile ground for weighing how foreign language teachers as expatriates develop and maintain their professional identities in transnational environments. Contemporary scholarship has documented the nuanced intricacies of team-teaching dynamics between JET ALTs and JTEs, and disclosed both the potential for meaningful collaboration and inherent tensions arising from differing educational philosophies and cultural expectations (Hiratsuka, 2023a, 2023b). Of particular salience are the themes of cultural adaptation and professional development that permeate the literature on JET ALT experiences. Empirical investigations have shown that JET ALTs must adroitly maneuver multilayered institutional arrangements while concurrently advancing their teaching competencies and cultural understanding. The heterogeneity of institutional support across different regions and schools engenders a variety of experiences that influence identity making in singular ways (see Donohue, 2023; Hale, 2023; Hiratsuka & Castellano, 2023; Ishino, 2023; Nall & Mansouri, 2023; Sakamoto, 2023; Tsujino, 2023).

In particular, Hiratsuka's (2022) framework made marked theoretical inroads in making sense of ALT identity construction by identifying two primary identity constructs (see Figure 1). The first construct, the Foreigner Identity, encompasses the multifaceted ways JET ALTs are perceived and perceive themselves as cultural outsiders, manifesting in their celebrity status in local communities, their perspectives as temporary residents, and their role as English language experts. The second construct, the Dabbler Identity, reflects the often-precarious position JET ALTs occupy as teaching assistants, their novice status in educational contexts, and their ongoing journey toward Japanese language and cultural proficiency. As can be seen, the two interrelated identities exist in an intricate relationship, as do their constituent sub-categories. The arrows underline the dynamism of the identities as being in flux and in flow temporarily, socially, and spatially. In light of these theoretical

developments, the current investigation attempts to critically evaluate the ALT identity model with a different cohort of former JET ALTs to ascertain to what extent and in what way they evaluate the ALT identity model, specifically interrogating if they resonate with the proposed constructs and whether they would suggest modifications to the primary and incumbent ALT identities. Consequently, the research question guiding this exploration was: What perceptions and experiences do former JET ALTs have regarding their ALT identities—both in relation to and beyond the ALT identity model constructed by Hiratsuka (2022)?

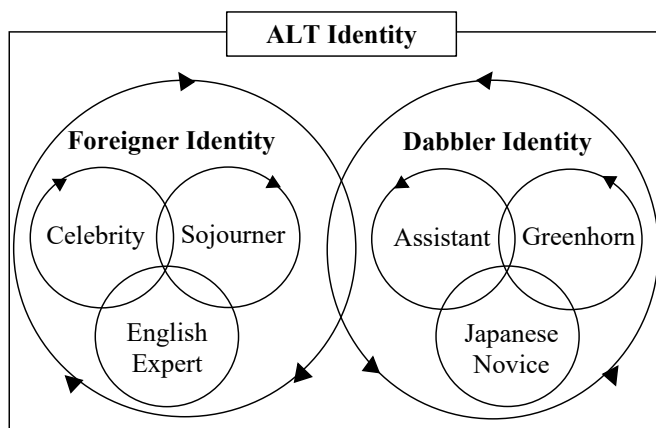


Figure 1. The ALT identity model (adopted from Hiratsuka, 2022)

Methodology

Research Design

For this exploration, I employed narrative inquiry as the primary methodological approach since it allows for in-depth investigation into JET ALT experiences and identity construction. Narrative inquiry proves particularly suitable for probing identity formation as it enables participants to articulate their experiences through storytelling (Chase, 2005; Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). Through this process, the participants demonstrated how they made meaning of their roles and positions within the Japanese educational context. This approach acknowledges that identity construction occurs vis-à-vis the stories people tell about themselves and their experiences, thereby making it ideal for capturing JET ALTs' understandings and articulations of their professional and personal development (Barkhuizen et al., 2024; Riessman, 2008).

Participants and Context

I implemented two distinct sampling methodologies in my participant recruitment strategy. To begin with, I employed convenience sampling to select readily accessible participants. Subsequently, I utilized snowball sampling, wherein my preliminary participants facilitated the expansion of my research cohort by recommending additional participants within their professional and personal spheres (see Robinson, 2014). In upholding rigorous ethical standards, I conscientiously excluded individuals with whom I had established professional relationships previously. I ultimately assembled a research cohort comprising 10 former JET ALTs who had served in this capacity across diverse geographical regions of Japan between 1999 and 2021. For clarity, the present study defines a small city as one with fewer than 100,000 residents, a medium-sized city as one with 100,000 to 1

million residents, and a large city as one with more than 1 million residents. I secured participation from individuals representing varied nationalities—encompassing Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, Singapore, South Africa, and USA. I conjectured that this international multiplicity, together with their disparate teaching locations, enhances the comprehensiveness and trustworthiness of the ALT identity discussion. In addition, the participants' JET ALT tenures, which ranged from one to four years, enabled me to analyze experiential evolution of their identities across different temporal phases of their service. I have preserved participant confidentiality by assigning numbers to each JET ALT (see Table 1). The Japanese proficiency levels shown in Table 1 represent participants' self-perceived proficiency at the time they were JET ALTs, based on their retrospective reflections during the interviews.

Table 1

Background information on participants

Name	ALT 1	ALT 2	ALT 3	ALT 4	ALT 5
Gender	Female	Female	Female	Male	Male
Age	30	32	33	35	38
Nationality	South Africa	USA	USA	Canada	Ireland
Racial/Ethnic Status	Caucasian	Asian	Caucasian	Asian	Caucasian
Major	Media	Folklore	Fine Arts	Psychology	Law
Years in the Program	2018-2021	2015-2017	2014-2015	2014-2016	2013-2017
Location Allocated	Medium-Sized City in Western Japan	Medium-Sized City in Eastern Japan	Major City in Eastern Japan	Medium-Sized City in Western Japan	Medium-Sized City in Eastern Japan
Schools Assigned	Junior High Elementary	Junior High Elementary	Junior High Elementary	Senior High	Senior High
Current job	Writer	Flight Attendant	Product Designer	Clinical Counsellor	Travel Officer
Japanese Proficiency	Advanced	Advanced	Basic	Intermediate	Intermediate
Name	ALT 6	ALT 7	ALT 8	ALT 9	ALT 10
Gender	Male	Male	Male	Male	Female
Age	38	42	42	44	47
Nationality	USA	New Zealand	Singapore	Australia	South Africa
Racial/Ethnic Status	Caucasian	Caucasian	Asian	Caucasian	Black
Major	Psychology	Management	International Relations	Japanese	Fine Arts
Years in the Program	2013-2017	2003-2007	2007-2008	2008-2010	1999-2001
Location Allocated	Small City in Eastern Japan	Small City in Eastern Japan	Small City in Eastern Japan	Small City in Eastern Japan	Medium-Sized City in Eastern Japan
Schools Assigned	Junior High Elementary	Senior High Junior High Elementary	Senior High Junior High Elementary	Junior High Elementary	Junior High Elementary
Current Job	Librarian	University Lecturer	Real Estate Agent	Researcher	Entrepreneur
Japanese Proficiency	Basic	Basic	Intermediate	Intermediate	Basic

Data Collection and Analysis

I utilized narrative interviews as my core methodological approach. Following ethical clearance and informed consent procedures, 10 participants engaged in narrative dialogues with me, conducted remotely via Zoom. Each dialogue lasted approximately 45 minutes. It began with my introduction of the research focus on ALT identity through the presentation of the ALT identity model (Hiratsuka, 2022). At the top, I invited the participants to comment on the model, specifically eliciting their thoughts on the two primary identities—Foreigner and Dabbler—and their sub-identities. They were then encouraged to evaluate, modify, or even reconstruct the model based on their individual experiences and perspectives as former JET ALTs before they shared their own narratives. The methodological design privileged storytelling autonomy—with me adopting a receptive listening stance that allowed participants to navigate their own narrative pathways and ascribe meaning to their experiences. While maintaining this participant-directed approach, I occasionally introduced guiding prompts (for instance, asking them to compare their experiences with other JET ALTs they knew) and follow-up to deepen narrative exploration.

The analytical journey started with meticulous transcription of the narrative sessions comprising seven and a half hours of dialogue that generated 85 pages of textual data. Utilizing NVivo 11's analytical capabilities, I implemented content analysis framework (Bogdan & Biklen, 2016), while preserving narrative coherence for enabling systematic examination. The initial analytical phase emphasized holistic understanding of individual stories and analyzed how each participants constructed meaning through their narratives. This was followed by cross-narrative analysis so as to discern patterns in the ways the participants articulated their identity development within their contexts. The interpretive process remained attuned to the chronological dimensions of identity construction and explored how the participants' professional self-understanding evolved through their storytelling. This temporal lens, in tandem with attention to both collective and distinctive narrative threads concerning the ALT identity model (Hiratsuka, 2022), shone a spotlight on the fluid nature of ALT identity formation. I will summarize the current exploration's findings below, based on the two main categories that resulted from the data analysis. The inter-connected categories are: (a) Engagement with the Existing ALT Identity Framework and (b) Emergence of a Third Identity: The Japan Enthusiast.

Findings

The analysis of interview data from 10 former JET ALTs brought to light two prominent themes in regards to the ALT identity model (Hiratsuka, 2022). The two themes sprang from rich narratives spanning over two decades of the JET ALTs' experiences in different school sectors across a selection of regions of Japan, from small cities to medium-sized/major cities.

Engagement with the Existing ALT Identity Framework

All 10 participants emphatically supported the existing model's two primary identities (Foreigner and Dabbler) and their respective sub-identities, while sharing personal accounts that portrayed these identities playing out in their day-to-day lives. Their recollections showed that being a JET ALT in Japan was not a fixed experience, but rather one that changed and developed based on timing and circumstances. The model's comprehensiveness in capturing the JET ALT experience was particularly evident in stories about traversing professional roles. One participant, ALT 5, succinctly stated: "Those six identities are a pretty good description of different aspects of ALT life." Agreeing with the ALT model, ALT 8 depicted JET ALTs as "temporary residents, assistants, and novice Japanese learners." ALT 6 told me: "I can certainly relate to a lot of these.... I felt

helplessness at times dealing with systems that I just did not know anything about.” ALT 3 reflected on her journey as a young JET ALT straight out of college:

As an English expert to a celebrity, whether I wanted that role or not, I was assisting them [her JTEs] in a relatively casual way. So, what you covered are all true. It was nice since I didn't have to handle most of the responsibilities of a real teacher—something I don't think I'd ever want to do since it seems incredibly challenging. Looking back at the greenhorn phase, I had only been out of school for a year. What was I even thinking about 10 years ago? While my younger siblings have never moved abroad like I did, I now realize how little I knew when I made that decision.

This sentiment of growing into manifold identities was echoed across the participants' stories, although their experiences appeared to have taken different forms based on their personal traits and contextual elements. ALT 10, describing her experience in her assigned location, highlighted the gradual morphing of these identities:

In many ways, it is true that ALTs are foreigners and dabblers. In particular, in the beginning you might be conscious of how much you stand out. But the longer I lived there, the more I became part of the community. The person at the convenience store, the staff at XXX station, and even the bus drivers, they all became familiar faces. They turned to stare at me less because I was now just another member of the neighborhood.

The interplay between self-perceived and recognized identities proved to be an integral dimension of the JET ALT journey. ALT 9 outlined a layered process in reference to the English expert identity:

I agree with all of the identities. But I never considered myself an English expert. I guess people tell you you're an English expert.... I think most English ALTs probably don't themselves consider an English expert, but certainly everyone else sees you as one, absolutely. And they expect you to know the finer points of grammar that, to be honest, most native speakers don't know because you just know them, if it makes sense.

ALT 4 reinforced that identity manifestations varied across different contexts: “Celebrity? Foreigner? Yeah, sometimes, some ALTs see themselves that way, right? From my personal experience, I'd say ALTs in more rural settings might feel that way more often because they receive a lot of attention.” When ALT 7 referred to the ALT model (Hiratsuka, 2022), he offered particular insight into how school settings influenced identity cultivation: “Pretty much everything here is accurate, but I think it does depend on the individual ALT and the JTE that you're working with. But also the type of school that you're working at.” ALT 1 reflected on her experience from the perspective of nationality and representation:

These are very non-serious identities... I definitely would probably fit more myself into this foreigner identity and dabbler identity.... The truth is that was enough.... That was enough for my job, essentially, just to be South African, English speaker, and white person.

The psychological parameter of these identities—particularly the internal negotiations and sense-making processes JET ALTs experience—was notably apparent in ALT 2's reflection:

I can resonate with a lot of these.... A lot of the time, I think ALTs are so focused on what makes them different and so consumed by the idea of the foreigner identity. You know, embracing the dabbler identity might actually bring many of them a sense of comfort and belonging as an ALT in their community.

Through their stories, the participants both largely aligned with the framework and illuminated the fluid nature of ALT identities as they morph through different situations and personal paths.

Emergence of a Third Identity: The Japan Enthusiast

A striking finding originated from nine of the 10 participants who independently identified a significant gap in the existing ALT identity model—the absence of an identity category grasping ALTs' connection to and fascination with Japan. While ALT 10 did not specifically address this aspect in her interview, the remaining participants shared lush storytelling about this proposed "Japan Enthusiast" identity, which ranged from casual interest to intense cultural fixation. It seemed to have served as a primary motivation for joining and/or staying in the JET program for some ALTs. ALT 1 bluntly told me: "the Americans who like anime come to Japan just for that." The emergence of the Japan Enthusiast identity category was particularly evident in ALT 5's recounting of different types of JET ALTs he encountered:

I found this a lot with Americans—many of those who came over were, as we would say, Japanophiles—much more so than those from other countries. I always feel a bit wary of anyone who is a 'phile' of anything because I kind of noticed that when some of them came to Japan, they had the country on a pedestal or held an unrealistic expectation of it.

ALT 6 was another participant who designated JET ALTs as being Japan Enthusiasts: "Not an insignificant number of ALTs are using the ALT job opportunity as their ticket to go to Japan that they've dreamed of—not just the land of anime but it is an idealized country." ALT 8 acknowledged this identity's presence through his observations of colleagues: "There are some people who are really into Japanese culture—kind of like Japanese geeks. You see it with those who are obsessed with things like samurai culture and kendo and karate and yukata." Likewise, ALT 4 made a keen observation concerning the varying depths of this enthusiasm:

The love for Japan was significant—it showed up on a gut level. You saw it with some ALTs during orientation. Instead of going out, they'll pull out their DS and play video games in the lobby of the XXX hotel. Then there are those who seek out more classical aspects of Japanese culture—its literature, traditions, dress, and architecture.

It was ALT 2 who broke down the intricacies of why this identity category deserves consideration:

Choosing Japan isn't random. You need a reason that sets it apart from every other country. There has to be something about Japan that sparks your interest, something that makes it stand out. And you need a certain level of passion to take on the challenge of moving to a country that is so homogeneous and culturally distinct from the West. Like, why Japan instead of Spain? Spain is different, sure, but it's still part of the Western world. There was something about Japan that drew them in.

Looking back, ALT 4 reflected on his journey from a pop culture fan to someone with a deeper appreciation of Japanese culture:

Before college, I definitely grew up watching anime. Dragon Ball Z was a huge part of my life, along with playing Yu-Gi-Oh. But I was fortunate to have my perspective broadened through studying Japanese culture. In college, my understanding of Japan expanded a lot.

ALT 9's observation pointed to how this enthusiasm has grown with the wider global availability of Japanese media:

I think enthusiasm for Japan has increased nowadays, mainly because when I was younger, we didn't have as much exposure to Japanese pop culture. I'd say the turning point was probably Pokemon. From there, anime started to spread significantly.

Deliberating on the range and intensity of this enthusiasm, ALT 3 put forward her perspective:

I'd say I'm on the lower end of the spectrum when it comes to that. People often assume, "Oh, you studied Japanese and lived in Japan, so you must love anime." But honestly, not really. I appreciate Japanese artwork and listen to some Japanese music, but it's not my whole life. That said, there were definitely ALTs for whom it became their entire identity.

For ALT 7, this Japan Enthusiast identity proved particularly enduring and personally meaningful: "I am still a big fan of Japan, and my wife and I travel to Japan almost every year." His words suggest that, for some ALTs, the affective and cultural bonds formed through the JET experience extended well beyond the program itself, continuing to influence their identities and personal trajectories long after returning home.

Discussion

This investigation into ALT identity construction yielded insights that simultaneously solidify and widen existing theoretical frameworks. While the current exploration illuminated Hiratsuka's (2022) dual-identity model, it also uncovered a previously unidentified facet of Japan Enthusiast ALT identity—importantly suggesting a more nuanced perspective on the role enactment of these educational professionals in Japanese schools.

The participants' reflections were largely congruent with the constitutive architecture of Hiratsuka's (2022) framework. Their narratives elucidated the ways in which these identity categories materialized differently dependent upon specific circumstances, thereby corroborating contemporary theoretical perspectives that conceptualize teacher identity as dynamic and context-sensitive (Barkhuizen, 2017; Norton, 2013). The findings also resonated with Yazan and Lindahl's (2020) scholarship accentuating the profoundly situational nature of identity formation in educational settings. This investigation denoted intriguing complexities surrounding the "English expert" sub-identity. The participants frequently described a considerable gap between their self-perception and the expertise attributed to them by their Japanese colleagues and students. This disconnect exemplified the contested nature of native speaker authority in EFL educational environments (see also Hiratsuka, 2024a, 2024b; Trent, 2012), while also reflecting Islam's (2011) observations about the interwoven relationships between native and non-native English-speaking educators. The negotiation between self-constructed and externally-assigned identities took shape as a pivotal theme, thus undergirding Norton's (2013) theoretical framework of identity formation in language education contexts. Geographic location exerted a meaningful influence on the manifestation of the "celebrity" sub-identity, with distinctions between small and medium-sized/major cities. This spatial variation is in accordance with Wang and Fang's (2025) analysis of institutional influences on teacher identity composition and Moore's (2017) examination of team-teaching coordination in Thailand. By and large, the data suggested that community size and degree of internationalization notably affected the experiences of the JET ALTs and the embodiment of their roles. A major theoretical advancement arose from recognizing the "Japan Enthusiast" as a discrete identity category. This recognition accentuated the role of both prior and newly developed cultural interests in conditioning professional identity, hence nuancing Moonthiya's (2024) work on the interplay between personal ambitions and career expectations. The development of this enthusiasm, especially in the context of Japanese popular culture's worldwide influence, enriches McConnell's (2000) probing of the JET program's role in cultural diplomacy. The participants'

varying levels of cultural involvement—from casual curiosity to full immersion—indicated a layered linkage between personal passions and professional identities than previously acknowledged.

The current exploration carries important real-world applications for various stakeholder groups. For JET ALTs, successful role fulfillment requires striking a delicate balance between cultural enthusiasm and professional development, all the while actively pursuing pedagogical skill enhancement beyond linguistic expertise. This necessity for balanced development echoes previous findings on professional learning in team-teaching environments (Carless, 2006; Corcoran, 2011; Heo, 2019; Hiratsuka, 2022, 2023b). Relatedly, JTEs can optimize collaboration by leveraging ALTs' cultural knowledge about Japan and their home countries as educational resources and concurrently maintaining clear communication channels, reflecting previous insights into power structures in transnational teaching contexts (Donohue, 2023; Hale, 2023; Ishino, 2023; Nall & Behzad, 2023). Moreover, educational institutions play a pivotal role in facilitating effective ALT integration. Schools should implement comprehensive orientation programs that address both pedagogical and cultural dimensions, and simultaneously establish mentoring systems that pair experienced educators with newcomers. Local boards of education can enhance program effectiveness through structured training initiatives that acknowledge varying levels of cultural familiarity and teaching experience among JET ALTs, all the while fostering professional networks and establishing transparent evaluation frameworks in order to maximize cooperative teaching arrangements (see also Hiratsuka, 2013, 2015, 2017, 2023b, 2025; Sakamoto, 2023; Tsujino, 2023; Wang, 2014). At the national level, the findings suggested several policy implications for the Japanese government and dispatching companies. Program effectiveness could be enhanced through recruitment processes that equally weight cultural awareness and teaching aptitude, alongside the development of differentiated training programs tailored to JET ALTs' varying levels of experience and cultural knowledge (see Hiratsuka, 2025). The creation of clear career advancement pathways for long-term JET ALTs and reconsideration of the "assistant" designation could address role ambiguity concerns identified in recent research (e.g., Hiratsuka & Castellano, 2023). Theoretically, the surfacing of the Japan Enthusiast identity suggested a need to reconceptualize ALT identity as a tripartite rather than dual framework. This expanded model might put forth a more holistic foundation for comprehending how personal interests, professional roles, and cultural positioning interact in the composition of ALT identity. That is to say, the findings contribute to broader theoretical discussions by showing in sharp relief the significance of cultural interests in sculpting professional identity in international teaching contexts.

Conclusion

Through this exploration, I endeavored to inspect and evaluate the ALT identity framework proposed by Hiratsuka (2022) by means of extensive interviews with 10 former JET ALTs. The investigation brought forth insights that both built upon prior theoretical understandings and uncovered new dimensions of identity formation among JET ALTs in the Japanese educational system. The research findings, by and large, contextualized and extended the relevance of the two primary identity categories: Foreigner and Dabbler. The participants' narratives demonstrated how these identities unfolded uniquely across different temporal and geographical contexts, thus lending support to contemporary theoretical perspectives on the malleable process of professional identity development. There was a pivotal discovery that crystallized from this exploration: the identification of a previously unrecognized identity category that I termed the "Japan Enthusiast." This finding revealed that ALT identity forging often begins well before they arrive in Japan, contoured by their level of cultural interest and involvement with Japanese people and resources, and may even continue after they leave. The spectrum of this enthusiasm ranges from casual interest in contemporary Japanese culture to profound engagement with traditional aspects of Japanese society.

Several limitations of this exploration warrant acknowledgment. The participant pool, while diverse, represents a specific temporal and geographical subset of the JET ALT experience. Moreover, the retrospective nature of the interviews may have been influenced by the passage of time and subsequent experiences. These limitations suggest opportunities for future research, including real-time longitudinal studies of ALT identity development and comparative analyses of similar programs in other cultural contexts. Although this study focused on core ALT identity dimensions, other aspects of identity construction (including influential factors) also surfaced, pointing to additional avenues for targeted future research. Future studies could also track how cultural affinity and professional engagement evolve throughout a JET ALT's tenure in Japan and, therefore, deliver a more adaptable view of identity creation. Along with this, further investigation into the implications of pre-existing and newly acquired cultural enthusiasm is needed to assess its impact on teaching effectiveness, student engagement, and professional satisfaction. Comparative studies across different international teaching programs could also unveil whether similar identity trends unfold in other educational contexts. Another promising avenue for research involves looking into how institutional policies and training programs influence ALT identity development. By appraising the impact of orientation programs, mentorship initiatives, and career development opportunities, future research might produce useful findings on ways educational institutions can better aid JET ALTs throughout their careers (see Hiratsuka, 2025; Hiratsuka et al., 2025). Furthermore, research on the perceptions of students, colleagues, and administrators toward JET ALTs of varying identity categories could shed light on the extent to which these identities determine professional interactions and educational outcomes.

Via the current study, I cast new light on the intricate processes through which language educators craft and preserve their professional identities beyond national borders. As a result of scrutinizing their experiences, I both echoed existing frameworks and unmasked new features of ALT identity construction and developed a richer portrait of their experience. The findings grow increasingly vital as schools worldwide embrace international faculty. My hope is that I have enriched our theoretical and practical understanding while charting unexplored territory for future scholars elucidating identity formation in global teaching environments.

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