The Perpetual First-Year Teacher: The Experience of an International Exchange Teacher in a Japanese Language Program

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Abstract:

Although many foreign language programs across North America staff their language courses with International Exchange Teachers (IET)—short-term visiting teachers who come from countries where the target language is being used—few attempts have been made to understand issues surrounding this particular arrangement. This qualitative study of a Japanese IET explores such issues by focusing on an IET in a small college-level Japanese program. This study shows how an IET's adjustment to a teaching situation might be complicated by her pedagogical, linguistic and cultural orientations.

1. Introduction

Many foreign language programs in North America, both at K-12 and higher education levels, staff their language courses with International Exchange Teachers (IET). Also known as *visiting teachers*, *visiting interns*, or *language fellows*, IETs are usually native speakers of the target language who come from a country where the language is spoken. Typically, they come to North America through cultural exchange programs, although they may also come as part of the exchange agreements between affiliated institutions such as sister schools. While the availability of such programs may vary from language to language, some languages—such as Japanese—rely heavily on IETs partly because of the relative shortage of trained teachers with intimate knowledge of the target language and culture. For the Japanese language alone, there are at least twenty-six programs

that send Japanese teachers to North America on a short-term basis (e.g., one year) (Nihongo, 2004).

In many ways, IETs are similar to first-year International Teaching Assistants (ITA), especially those who are first-time teachers and who come to North America directly from their home countries. They begin their teaching duties while going through an intense period of linguistic and cultural adjustments. They are competent users of the target language and have the understanding of the contemporary cultural context. Some of them work as experienced teachers' assistants while others have full teaching responsibilities, even in their first year. However, there are also some important differences. While many ITAs take courses related to language teaching and research as they teach, few IETs receive additional theoretical or pedagogical training beyond the orientation and staff meetings. ITAs often have a cohort of first-year ITAs whereas IETs are often isolated because they do not have peers who are going through the same experience. Many ITAs see language teaching as their career of choice while IETs may have other career goals. ITAs usually continue to teach at the same institution for several years while IETs are likely return to their own countries or move on to other institutions to pursue graduate studies. In other words, IETs are perpetual first-year teachers.

The unique circumstances under which IETs work have important implications for staffing, teacher education, and the quality of foreign language instruction. However, the research on teacher education has focused mostly on teaching assistants while there remains a dearth of research on the development and professional preparation of other types of teachers, especially IETs (Bernhardt & Hammadou, 1987; Schulz, 2000). Given the important role IETs play in many foreign language programs—especially in small programs—their experiences need to be investigated. To this end, this qualitative case study explores the experience of an IET in a small Japanese language program at a university in the United States.

2. Background

In general, IETs in foreign language departments are short-term visiting teachers, and are usually on an exchange visa. The selection criteria for IETs vary significantly from program to program. Many programs select teachers who have majored in Japanese language teaching or passed the Japanese language teaching competency test while others accept any native speaker of Japanese. While some of the IETs are aspiring Japanese language teachers seeking to gain some teaching experience, others participate in these programs out of a desire to live in Canada or the United States, or to gain international experience. While there are some exceptions, many of them arrive with limited preparation and experience, if any, in teaching a foreign language. They often work as teachers' assistants, although in some cases they are responsible for an entire course, just as some graduate students with teaching assistantships assist teachers while many others co-teach or are fully responsible for a course.

IETs can enrich foreign language programs significantly and create a win-win situation for all parties involved when they are incorporated into the curriculum appropriately. Because IETs are likely to be familiar with current events and trends in target languages and cultures, they can function as linguistic and cultural resources for teachers and students in the program. This is particularly valuable in settings where the students do not have exposure to contemporary native individuals outside of the classroom. At the same time, the interns can gain some teaching experience and begin their careers in the field of language teaching. At its best, IET positions may provide what every prospective foreign language teacher needs: ". . . high quality, supervised field experiences for prospective teachers" that includes "full- or part-time, paid internships or practica for a minimum of 1 year, where candidates for FL teacher certification can observe, practice, and develop effective teaching skills with the guidance and under the supervision of experienced professional educators" (Schulz, 2000, p.518).

In some cases, however, the arrangement is less than ideal, or even acceptable. Often coming directly from their home countries, IETs may struggle with adjustments to their new cultural and institutional contexts. They may also struggle with their own ability to communicate with students and colleagues in English. IETs with little or no background or professional interest in language teaching may not be able to provide quality language instruction. IETs may also suffer from a common problem in foreign language teacher education: "a lack of meaningful and helpful supervision" (Bernhardt & Hammadou, 1987, p.292). The interns who lack adequate preparation may be assigned to responsibilities that are much bigger than they can handle. In some cases, the use of IETs may be seen as a way of acquiring labor that is cheaper than full-time, tenure track faculty members, or even graduate teaching assistants. Using IETs in lieu of—rather than in addition to—qualified, full-time faculty members will likely result in inadequate language instruction and, in the long run, detrimental effects on the language teaching profession in general.

The current study describes in detail the experience of an IET in a Japanese program at a US university. While my intention is not to reduce the participant's experience to a mere list of problems, I have focused on her struggles because they demonstrate a wide range of challenges novice teachers from abroad may face and thus deserve serious attention in the discussion of IETs. In addition to the perspective of the teacher herself, the study includes the insights from her students and the department chair that complement (and perhaps complicate) the teacher's interpretation of her experience.

3. Participants and Method

The primary participant of this study was Haruko, a twenty-nine-year-old Japanese woman who was teaching Japanese at a US public university for the first time.[1] Haruko came to the university through a Japan-based service-learning program that sent people to various schools abroad to teach Japanese as a foreign language. Program participants were on a one-year contract and did not receive

any monetary compensation for their teaching activities aside from full room and board that was provided by the hosting institution. The program did not require any teaching experience, and Haruko's previous job had been a research position in biochemistry. However, she had taught Japanese to her non-Japanese colleagues on a volunteer basis for several years, and had completed two certification programs in teaching Japanese, including a practicum, prior to her arrival in the US. Although she had never lived outside of Japan, she had traveled extensively to Canada, the US and several Asian countries.

The Japanese program in which she taught was housed in an FL department that offered ten languages, including Japanese. The Japanese program did not have any tenure-track faculty member although it typically offered two to four Japanese language courses and one culture course each year, depending on the availability of non-tenure-track instructors. The original arrangement for Haruko was that she would be responsible for one introductory Japanese course per semester while a full-time instructor would teach advanced Japanese courses and act as her mentor; however, the instructor accepted a tenure-track position and moved to a different institution immediately before Haruko arrived. Thus, Haruko was the only teacher of the Japanese language during the year that she taught, and her only colleague in the Japanese program was a part-time instructor from the United States who taught a culture course.

The majority of data was collected during Haruko's second semester of teaching, but she also provided her teaching journal and teaching materials from the first semester. For triangulation, the data was collected from multiple sources, including a daily teaching journal, class observation notes (twice a week), handouts and teaching materials, weekly informal interviews, and three formal audio taped interviews (each lasting two to three hours). All interviews with Haruko as well as her teaching journal were in Japanese (quotes used in this article have been translated by the author).

The secondary participants of the study included her students and the department chair. In addition to observing students in class, I conducted a three-

hour group interview toward the end of the semester with four students who demonstrated a variety of Japanese proficiency levels (based on their exam scores). I chose to ask them to share their perception of their teacher's experience in a group rather than meeting them individually because "the conversation usually promote[s] increased candor" and "often stimulate[s] new ideas" (MacNealy, 1999, p.192). I also interviewed the chair of the FL department about the institutional structure of the program and her perception of Haruko's experience.

My role as a researcher was that of an observer. To students, I introduced myself as a professor of Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) who was studying the experiences of first-year international teachers at a US university, and who did not know anything about teaching Japanese. I never participated in a class activity or answered students' questions during class, although I chatted with them before and after class to establish a good rapport. The teacher was someone whom I had initially met socially during her first semester in the US. Our subsequent interaction, however, was mostly limited to the formal and informal meetings I scheduled as part of this study.

4. Findings

4.1 Pedagogical Issues

As described earlier, Haruko came to the university with some training and experience in teaching Japanese as a second language (JSL). Her experience included teaching small groups of professionals from China and North America, and tutoring Canadian researchers at her research lab. She drew on her prior experience as a resource, but she also had to make some major adjustments to the new, unfamiliar pedagogical context.

It did not take long before Haruko realized that the JSL strategies with which she was familiar would not work the same way with university students who were learning Japanese as a foreign language. One major change she needed to make was to use English as the instructional medium. While in Japan, she had

used only Japanese in class because learners did not share any other language that could be used as the medium. However, that was not what students in Japanese 101 (the first-semester Japanese course) expected:

> Since I had used only the direct method in Japan, I started doing everything in Japanese, and that made students suspicious. . . . After facing almost 30 students who knew nothing about Japanese, I realized it would be impossible to teach without using English as a medium (report to the service learning program, September 2001).

Switching from using only Japanese to incorporating English as the instructional medium was a challenging transition because it required her to address her own English problems while trying to teach the students Japanese—a point which I will discuss in the next section.

Another major difference she needed to adjust to was the learners' needs and motivations. Her students in Japan were mature professionals who were highly motivated and had specific and immediate needs for the language. In contrast, Haruko felt that many of her students in the US were attracted to the course for reasons other than learning the language:

> I'd say about only 10% of them are really interested in Japanese. The rest are interested in games and *anime*. Perhaps they felt they knew Japanese just because they knew games and *anime*. But then, when they realized it was a lot harder than they expected, and they blamed it on me (journal, 03 November 2001).

For her, computer games and *anime* represented popular culture, which she positioned as the complete opposite of being academic, professional, or serious. Therefore, she automatically assumed that students interested in games and *anime* were not serious about learning the language.

In addition to her struggles with these changes that she had to make, she also found it challenging that the class became a multi-level course. Because the Japanese program was too small to offer a course for false-beginners, there were a few students in 101 who already had some Japanese. Japanese 102, the second-semester Japanese course, also included students who were slightly more advanced than 102, but not enough to start at the second-year level. This created a "two-peak" class, especially in 102, which frustrated both the students and the teacher. A true-beginner student, Nathan, reflected on his experience:

> I felt like she was going a little bit faster [in 102] and I felt like she was unsure of having to deal with people that already knew the language really well and people that'd no clue what was going on. . . . I felt like I was losing a lot of stuff I should've been getting just because it was assumed that we already knew it, so I was like "Oh, then do I constantly raise my hand and slow the whole class, or do I just keep going?" (group interview, 24 April 2002).

Haruko began to feel that "things were going much smoother" (journal, 29 January 2002) after about a month into the second semester. However, Nathan expressed his concern to her at that point, and Haruko wrote in her journal:

> [Nathan] said that he won't be able to keep up if the class moves faster than now. . . . I thought the class was going more smoothly these days because everyone was improving. I didn't realize there were students who were struggling so hard just to catch up. . . . But it's very difficult to satisfy everyone. Those who want it more challenging, those who like it the way it is, those who are already finding things too difficult. I can't make everyone happy (28 February 2002).

The "two-peak" problem remained throughout the semester, and Haruko regarded it as the biggest challenge of the second semester (interview, 10 May 2002).

These are common issues in foreign language programs, but they were particularly salient to Haruko who had had neither ample professional preparation nor experience in teaching in the United States. The feeling of isolation and the lack of mentoring did not help, either. What made these issues even more difficult to deal with, however, was her inability to negotiate them because of the linguistic issues she faced.

4.2 Linguistic Issues

Before coming to the US, Haruko was quite confident about her English abilities. She had a TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) score of 750 (equivalent of 540-550 on paper-based Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL)) and was often asked to be an interpreter when her lab had international visitors. She also worked closely with an exchange researcher from Canada that her lab hosted each year. She knew that her grammar and vocabulary were limited, but she felt confident that she could get her meaning across. However, her experiences after arriving in the US made her feel differently. About a month after her arrival, she wrote:

> When I was trying hard to communicate with foreigners in English [in Japan] . . . I was confident that I could get the meaning across. . . . But I now realize that [my English] works only in Japan. Foreigners in Japan are used to the English of Japanese people. That's why they could understand me. Now [that I'm in the US], the confidence I used to have does not mean anything (27 September 2001).

This was a very frustrating experience for her. Not only did she have communication problems; they were more frequent and more serious than she had

imagined they would be. In all formal interviews as well as in numerous journal entries, she consistently expressed frustration with her English proficiency:

> Standing in front of bored students, I tried my best, but it was so frustrating not being able to explain things well. I'm disgusted by how limited my English is (journal, 30 October 2001).

> I'm reminded again how low my English proficiency is. I'm trying to tell myself, "That's OK! I'm here to teach *Japanese*!" but I'm so frustrated that I can't understand students' questions at all and I can't express myself (journal, 05 February 2002).

Two areas of her speech that often caused communication difficulties were related to the use of auxiliary verbs and discourse organization. For example, when giving directions for an exercise one day, she said "You *shouldn't* use this cues—you can make a reason." Taking her comment as a directive not to use the cues in the textbook, students avoided using them altogether. What she actually meant, however, was that students *did not have to* use the cues provided in the textbook (observation, 18 February 2002). After the lesson, Haruko wondered why none of them seemed to be using the cues given in the textbook (informal interview, 18 February 2002).

Her indirect discourse style also made her directions unclear to students. On the first day of the second semester, she noticed that there were some unfamiliar faces in the classroom. To let the students know that Japanese 101 was a prerequisite, she told the class:

> I see some new people. Have you studied Japanese before? Do you know Japanese? If you haven't taken [101], it's going to be difficult. If you don't think you can understand, so, I don't know (observation, 22 January 2002).

In her journal, she wondered why no one left after her statement because she thought she had told them that "students who did not take [101] cannot enroll in this class" (journal, 22 January 2002). She did not realize that her statement did not come across to the students as a directive to leave the room.

Furthermore, she often had difficulties understanding or responding to spontaneous speech by the students, such as when questions arose during class.

> Student 1 (S1): *watashi no neko wa 7ji ni tabemasu.*
> (my cat eats at 7 o'clock)
> Teacher (T): *nani wo?* (eats what?)
> If you say "eat something" you have to say "something."
> S1: I just want to say my cat eats at 7, anything, like breakfast . . .
> T: Then you have to say breakfast.
> S2: Can you say "the cat eats at 7" like always at 7?
> T: OK. [moved on to the next exercise] (observation, 24 January 2002).

In this exchange, students were asking if the verb *taberu* could be intransitive, but she did not understand the question and was not able to address it. In other exchanges, too, students were often unsure whether or not she understood them. As Nathan said:

> Sometimes she'd say "yes" and I don't know why she said "yes." . . . Sometimes I'd ask her a question, . . . and she'd say "yes . . . wait what?" like that. And you're like "Why did you say 'yes' then." Like, don't say "yes" (group interview, 24 April 2002).

Haruko was well aware of her weakness in listening comprehension and how it frustrated the students when she did not understand them. When asked how

she would teach the class differently if her English abilities were better, she answered:

> Well, I don't want to use English [in class]. So it's not so much that I want to use English but I think I would understand more, understand what students are saying better. When I don't understand them, it's hard for me, and they probably get worried, too. . . . My English proficiency shouldn't be an issue in this class, and I don't want to waste the class time because of my English (interview, 15 March 2002).

Despite her limited English proficiency, a complete communication breakdown was rare. One reason was that most of the students were willing to make efforts to achieve successful communication most of the time.

> When I'd have a question and I'd go and ask her in English and I'd have to change . . . I'd automatically change the speed that I talk. . . . I slow down my speech quite a bit (Matt, group interview, 24 April 2002).

Another strategy Haruko used was to depend on several willing students who acted as "interpreters." These students rephrased other students' questions when Haruko did not understand or rephrased Haruko's explanations and answers so that other students could understand her better. For instance, one day Haruko brought in a Japanese word game called *shiritori* in which players take turns coming up with a word that begins with the final syllable of the previous word. Rather than explaining the rules herself, she asked Jane, a student who had lived in Japan for a few years, to explain them to class (observation, 22 January 2002).

One drawback of this strategy was that Haruko's listening comprehension was often not good enough to follow what students said and make sure that they were providing the correct information.

> I asked what he'd say if he was using *soreni* [and also], and Nathan was puzzled. Didn't he understand when he can use *soreni*? To tell the truth, I didn't really understand his question. David said something and Nathan seemed to understand, but what was that?? (journal, 27 March 2002).

In general, the students did not mind adjusting their speech patterns or depending on each other in order to understand Haruko. However, they also felt awkward about "helping out" because they were afraid to go too far and offend their teacher.

> . . . trying to answer his question or someone else's question and I'd try to help her out, but . . . then you get, you feel uncomfortable. Like afterwards I went to her and said "Do you feel uncomfortable if I understand what he's asking and I can answer with the quick?" you know? (Jane, group interview, 24 April 2002)

Haruko's lack of English proficiency frustrated her (and her students) consistently. However, it should also be noted that the students' familiarity with her level of English proficiency and their willingness to adjust their speech patterns, or even act as interpreters, seemed to create a collaborative learning environment and cross-cultural understanding that prevented serious communication breakdowns in the classroom.

4.3 Cultural Issues

Cultural differences in classroom expectations were another source of frustration for Haruko. Some of these were relatively minor issues and did not cause any serious problems, although they did annoy her.

> One thing I don't like here is that as soon as the bell rings, students put things away and leave. I know they only have 10 minutes to move from

> one class to another and it's inconvenient if the class goes over time. But were we like this when we were students [in Japan]? (journal, 07 May 2002).

However, others were more persistent and became a source of continuous struggle for Haruko. One example was the students' "obsession" with their grades. Her students, like most students in American colleges, were concerned about their grades and constantly asked her how they were doing in class. Coming from a university where the course grades depended solely on the final exam or project, the idea of a grade-in-progress was completely foreign to her.

> What I hated the most is that after every class, students kept saying, "I'm concerned about my grade." . . . Day after day, grade, grade, grade! I can't remember how many times I wanted to say to them, "If you are that concerned about your grade, study harder!" (journal, 03 November 2001).

Students also recalled how unhappy she was when they asked her about their class standing:

> She didn't seem to understand where we were coming from, or when I asked questions about grades and stuff . . . I don't think she understood, and I took it as "why the heck you are asking for your grade?" And I'm like "well, people do this. I just wanna know what my grade is." (Nathan, group interview, 24 April 2002)

Haruko was especially appalled when a student asked her what would be on the exam because, for Haruko, that was a form of cheating. Based on her own experience as a student, she believed that the students should be prepared to know anything and everything that was covered in class since the last exam. She refused

to tell the student, and the student complained to the chair, who then called a meeting with Haruko and the student. The chair recalled:

> And we agreed that Haruko would tell them in large kind of way what would be on the test because for her, as she described to me, would never do that in Japan. Wouldn't say what's on the test! It's a test! And I said it's OK to go ahead and you don't have to say the exact item but say the big category that would be covered (interview, 24 September 2001).

In her journal that day, Haruko wrote:

> Before class, Melinda (the student who's always asking about the exams), [the chair], and I met to discuss the next exam. . . . Anyway, from now on, I must tell students "this will be on the exam." What's the point of exams? What are they for? (24 September 2001).

She interpreted these types of questions as challenging her grading policy; she assumed that students who came to see her about grades wanted to complain about how low they were. Therefore, she was pleasantly surprised—and even more confused—when the students "seemed relieved and didn't ask why or anything" when she told them their grades (journal, 05 November 2001). After observing her students and talking to other teachers, she realized that asking about grades was common at her university, but she never became comfortable with the students asking her about their grades.

Another issue that bothered her throughout the year was the students' behaviors in the classroom, such as eating and drinking in class, keeping their caps on, and slouching in their chairs.

> Today, I gave John, the troublemaker, a little warning. John always sits sideways in the chair and slouches during the class. . . . It would be too

> stupid to get angry with him, so I just said, "John, do you sit like that in other classes, too? At least in Japan, that's considered impolite"—that was the first warning. He sat straight but then went back to the way he was originally sitting, so I said, "So you keep sitting like that. OK."—that's the last warning. In other words, because my grading policy states that 40% of the course grade depends on the student's attitude, he will receive only 60% no matter how good his exam scores are (journal, 24 September 2001).

Students also recalled:

> Did you notice that [posture in class] was like a huge thing with her? Do you remember, like calling people on it? . . . or drinking in the class, in the beginning, she got really upset about drinking in the class or posture in the class. She was like "What are you sitting that way for? You need to sit up." 'Cuz it's rude in Japan (Jane, group interview, 24 April 2002).

Haruko did not discuss cultural differences as a source of struggle the way that she did with her limited English proficiency, possibly because she was often unaware that it was the cultural differences that created dissonance. Instead, she assumed that the American assumptions and expectations about evaluating student behavior were the same as those in Japan, and she interpreted the students' behaviors accordingly. This was also the case for most of the students. Except for Jane, who had lived in Japan for several years, her students were not familiar with Japanese expectations in a university classroom, and thus were often puzzled by the teacher's behavior or her reactions to the students' behaviors.

5. Discussion

Throughout the academic year, Haruko struggled with the adjustments to her new institutional and pedagogical contexts, as well as with linguistic and

cultural issues. While each of these issues is not unique to Haruko or to IETs in general, it is important to note that these problems were compounded for her partly because of her unique status as an IET. Institutions are less likely to leave first-time teaching assistants in the classroom unsupervised, and part-time instructors in many cases would have had some professional preparation as well as prior teaching experience.

These findings point to several issues that are crucial to the success of IET programs. One is that the interns should not be used as a substitute resource, but rather as an additional resource to an otherwise solid program. While IETs—who are usually native speakers of the target language—have much to contribute to foreign language programs, especially in a program where exposure to target-language users is limited, giving IETs a full-teaching responsibility without providing mentoring is inappropriate. Being a native speaker of the target language may be an asset for a foreign language teacher, but it does not automatically qualify the person to teach the language. For IETs to perform to their full potential and for the institutions to maximize the benefit from the interns' participation, IETs should have a tenure-track or tenured faculty mentor who can guide her/him, and should also have some administrative authority.

Secondly, these findings suggest the importance of having support on issues beyond the pedagogical ones. The need for pedagogical support is easy to understand given the limited experience of the IETs, but the study also illustrates the importance of having English proficiency and an awareness of North American culture, especially those cultural aspects that are related to classroom expectations. As FL students often appreciate having a native speaker of the target language as their teacher, these students may tolerate the foreignness of their teachers and the "accent" in their English more than students in other courses. However, especially in high-stake situations (e.g. when they are concerned about their grades), not being able to communicate effectively raised the anxiety for the students in this study, and frustrated Haruko because she felt that she was wasting the class time due to her inability to understand her students well.

With regard to cultural awareness, FL courses may once again differ from most others in that the cultural gap between the teacher and students could become a legitimate lesson theme. Instructors from a country where the target language is used are valued because they provide students with firsthand opportunities to engage in cross-cultural communication. However, these teachers are expected to assimilate themselves into the North American academic culture while simultaneously presenting themselves as artifacts of the target culture. That is, even if the students enjoy the flavor of the target culture in class, they still expect the class to be an American college course. They expect a course syllabus with clearly articulated course policies, opportunities to ask questions, and continuous feedback on their academic progress. Not understanding such expectations confuses and frustrates both students and teachers, even in an FL classroom.

For the IETs to be successful (and consequently, for the institution to derive the maximum benefit from having them), providing ongoing support in linguistic and cultural adjustments is essential. Having access to ESL and/or Canadian/American culture courses such as the ones that are often available to international teaching assistants would be valuable for IETs. Someone who is familiar with both the intern's native culture and the hosting culture can function as the liaison or "buddy," especially at the beginning of their stay.

6. Conclusion

In this study, I described the experience of a Japanese IET and explored what foreign language departments can do to make the experience productive not only for IETs but also for the hosting institution and its students. I argued that the IETs should be viewed as an addition, but not as a substitute, to an otherwise solid program, and should receive ongoing support for pedagogical, linguistic, and cultural adjustments.

These suggestions may be difficult to realize, especially during times of budget crisis such as the one we are experiencing right now. There may be

pressure to hire IETs in lieu of the creation of full-time, tenure-track positions, and the idea of providing extra support for someone who is going to be around for a limited time may not be well received. However, in the long run, neglecting the need for such support compromises the quality of education that the students receive and will harm the program, its institution, and the foreign language teaching profession in general.

IET programs can be beneficial and can enrich foreign language programs significantly, but only when the hosting program, department, and institution are willing to create a situation where all the participating parties can benefit from the experience. Achieving this goal can be considered a form of investment that we can make to the field of foreign language teaching.

Notes

1. All names are pseudonyms.

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