

A Contextual Analysis of the Japan Exchange and Teaching Program (JET)

Factors that Influence the Establishment of the JET Program

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Abstract

The JET Program (Japan Exchange and Teaching Program) is known as an educational program to enhance English education and cross-cultural understanding in public classrooms by inviting native English speakers⁽¹⁾. The JET Program, which was implemented in 1987 with the aim of internationalization, is a national strategy designed to improve Japan's position in a global environment. This national project has impacted education for the past 26 years in terms of foreign language education and internationalization by motivating Japanese students to learn English and other cultures (The JET Programme, 2012a). The JET Program is a well-known educational policy, but it is not a pure educational policy; rather, it entails different purposes and objectives. In this paper, I present a description of the JET Program, an analysis of the factors that influence the establishment of the program, and an examination of the JET Program from two dimensions - educational purpose and diplomatic purpose by using government documents, official websites, and related literature.

Keywords: Japan's internationalization, national project, establishment of the JET program, contextual analysis, educational policy, foreign policy

キーワード: 日本の国際化、国家プロジェクト、JETプログラムの創設、文脈分析、教育政策、外交政策

1. DESCRIPTION OF THE JET PROGRAM

The JET Program is one of the largest exchange programs in the world. By 2012, the JET Program had grown to 4,360 participants per year from 40 countries and with more than 55,000 alumni from 62 countries (The JET Programme, 2012a).

In 1986, the Proposal of the Japan Exchange and Teaching Program (JET) was first

presented by Japanese Prime Minister Nakasone and U.S. President Reagan as a top-down government initiative. The purpose of the JET Program is to promote “internationalization” at the local level by inviting native English speakers to assist in international exchange and foreign language education in junior and high schools. The goals of the JET Program are “to improve foreign language teaching by allowing pupils to learn ‘living’ foreign language directly from teachers who are native speakers and to increase proper understanding about foreign countries”. The JET Program appears to be one of the most important educational policies for the Ministry of Education to foster Japan’s global integration and to educate Japanese youth to be competent in this global age (MEXT, 2000, p.124).

The JET Program is a large government program involving massive efforts and resources “to foster international perspectives by promoting international exchange at local levels as well as intensifying foreign language education” (McConnell, 2000, p.1). The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (MIC), the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), and the Council of Local Authorities for International Relations (CLAIR) are all in charge of administering the JET Program ⁽²⁾ (The JET Programme, 2012b).

The JET Program launched under the *Kokusaiika* period. The program was praised as smart foreign and educational policy for “internationalizing Japan,” exchanging cultural understanding at a grassroots level, motivating students to learn English and other cultures, and connecting to the rest of the world. The purpose of the JET Program is stated on the JET website as follows:

The Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme aims to promote grass roots internationalization at the local level by inviting young overseas graduates to assist in international exchange and foreign language education in local governments, boards of education and elementary, junior and senior high schools throughout Japan. It seeks to foster ties between Japanese citizens (mainly youth) and JET participants at the person-to-person level (The JET Programme, 2012c).

This government-initiated project involves three ministries and appropriates an annual budget of 500 million U.S. dollars (McConnell, 2000, pp.3-4).

In terms of English education, policy makers and Japanese English teachers have recognized the JET Program as an important policy for the internationalization of public classrooms (MEXT, 2001). It is said that the JET Program is a final and improved version of the English educational project (MEXT, 2001). For instance, before the JET Program, there

was the Monbusho English Fellow Project established in 1977 by the Ministry of Education. In the following year, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of International Affairs co-sponsored the British English Teachers Scheme (MEXT, 2001). The JET Program launched in 1986 rooted in similar ideologies and purposes. In fact, the JET Program is the latest version of these previous national projects (McConnell, 2000, p.41). From this perspective, the JET Program is intended to cover the previous projects' shortcomings. Additionally, the program comprises a vast organizational framework, including three key ministries, the Prime Minister's office, and over 1,000 contracting organizations (JET Programme Pamphlet, 2010).

2. CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF THE JET PROGRAM

Generally speaking, historical, political, economic, or cultural factors have significant influence on establishing policies or programs. The JET program is no exception. Regardless of size or influence, political, economic, geographic, cultural, and linguistic factors are all contextual issues that forced Japanese policy makers to create the JET Program. The JET Program is an educational policy; however, it was intended to change the perception of Japan and to address different problems.

In this section, I detail political and economic factors as major influences and geographic, cultural, and linguistic factors as minor influences that force the establishment of the JET Program.

(1) Major factors that influenced the establishment of JET Program

(i) Political and economic factors

The political and economic factors are the largest primary factor. After WW II, Japan went through rapid transformation toward economic miracles and showed growing status as a world economic leader. In the 1980s, despite its high status as an economic superpower, Japan was criticized for its closed economic and political policies as well as social attitudes towards the rest of the world (McConnell, 2000, p.5). Foreign allies started to question whether Japan could fulfill the high expectations for global leadership. In order to address this problem, Japan needed to demonstrate an effort to internationalize and show strong world leadership.

At the height of the U.S.-Japan trade wars, the JET Program was created in response to Japan's perceived image problem within the international community. These political and economic factors are the foremost contextual issues that drive the JET Program. McConnell

(2000) explained as follows:

As it has emerged as an economic power, Japan—with its relatively homogeneous population and sense of isolation—has faced an acute problem of global integration. Western countries have protested with growing vigor what they perceive as the closed nature of Japanese society and Japan's refusal to play by the rules of the international liberal trading order. Foreign pressure on Japan to take concrete measures to liberalize the country [. . .]. (p.14)

In 1987, therefore, the Japanese government decided to address these contextual issues by locating thousands of college graduates from mainly Western English speaking countries into public schools and local government offices throughout the nation (McConnell, 2000, ix). The solution was educational reform. The implementation of the JET Program involved the entire range of administrative levels and required a large investment both inside and outside of Japan. Foreign political and economic pressures were so intense and severe that Japan needed to take action.

(2) Other minor factors that influenced the establishment of the JET

(i) Geographic factor

Other minor factors provide more explanation about establishing the JET Program. For instance, the Japanese government operates the JET Program for geographic factors. Japan is geographically separated from other countries, which limits the opportunities for Japanese students to interact with foreigners and to develop a sense of international community. Some people say that Japanese people lack communication skills because of geographic location (Matsui, 1983). This is of concern to the Japanese government because in this global age, future Japanese generations must have competency in international languages and possess international skills for national interests. From this perspective, the Japanese government is justified in targeting educational reform.

(ii) Cultural factor

The cultural factor is also an important contextual issue that needed to be addressed. Japan is a relatively homogeneous nation where Japanese people are accustomed to being the racial majority in their own culture. Unlike pluralist nations where they struggle to integrate their ethnically diverse populations, Japan faced different international pressure “to create diversity and to acquaint its insulated people with foreigners at the level of face-to-face

interaction” (McConnell, 2000, ix). In order to foster internationalization, Japan needed to bring foreigners, particularly English native speakers, from outside and promote diversity and integration in school and society.

(iii) Linguistic factor

English has become the world’s dominant language. English is the official or semi-official in more than seventy-five countries: two thirds of scientists in the world read English: and eighty percent of the world’s information is written in English (Philson, 1998, p.170). The power of language depends on the country that holds strong influence in the period. Philson (1998) stated that about 100 years ago, “German was the international language of science and technology, French of culture, and English of trade” (p.169). As mentioned in the previous section, Japanese government immediately included English education into policy for strengthening national wealth. Japanese students start learning English when they are thirteen years old, the first grade of junior high school. English is a mandatory subject in secondary school and a part of entrance examination of high schools and universities. The Japanese government seriously considers English education a national priority because of future national wealth.

Contextual issues are situational and may vary in different contexts. The Japanese government faced several severe issues and concerns that forced the creation of the JET Program. From this perspective, the Japanese government is justified in targeting educational reform in addition to political reform.

3. THE JET WITH TWO FACES: “EDUCATIONAL FOREIGN POLICY”

As I stated previously, the JET Program is a national strategy designed to improve Japan’s position in a global environment. Due to this complicated nature of the program, the JET Program was established not only for educational purpose but also diplomatic purposes.

(1) The JET as an educational policy

The JET Program serves an important role in education for internationalizing classrooms across the nation. From every perspective, such as government effort, scale, budget, and educational meaning, the JET Program is worthy of attention. As previously stated, the JET Program involves three ministries with an annual budget of 500 million US dollars. In its 26th year, the program has grown significantly from 848 participants from four countries in 1987 to 4,360 participants from 40 countries in 2012 (The JET Programme,

2012a). In terms of educational meaning, most Japanese students and teachers enjoy having JET teachers in their classrooms. Needless to say, the JET Program has had a significant impact on education.

(2) The JET as a foreign policy

At first glance, the JET Program appears to be “an educational policy”; however, the JET Program was intended to serve a diplomatic purpose. Precisely, the *birthplace* of the JET Program’s was not in the education field, but in foreign politics. Japan needed to appease the world since foreign allies showed dissatisfaction of Japan’s role in the Gulf War and Japan’s closed society (McConnell, 2000, p.5). The JET Program began in order to create a new, more positive image as an international leader. Today the JET Program has an outstanding reputation and has developed excellent international networks between Japan and other countries (The JET Programme, 2012a).

Due to serving both educational and diplomatic purposes, the JET Program has an extremely complicated faces and dense structure. Therefore, I will detail the JET Program as an “educational foreign policy” from multiple perspectives.

The JET Program was established as a last resort to address political issues and show Japan’s efforts for internationalization. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs believes that the program creates a positive international image to show Japan’s effort for internationalization and increases Japan’s national security because JET alumni will become sympathizers for Japan and be placed in higher positions in organizations after the completion of the program (McConnell, 2000, p.266). The Ministry of Education believes that the JET Program serves to improve English education and motivate both students and Japanese English teachers in the classroom (MEXT, 1999, p.124). The Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications believes that the JET Program is beneficial for local level internationalization since all prefectures have accepted JET participants who interact with Japanese people in communities (MEXT, 2001). In many local regions, the JET teachers are the only foreigners; therefore, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications believes that appearances of JET teachers in communities are simply significant for internationalization. The Japanese government believes that the JET is a smart educational foreign policy for appealing to internationalizing Japan, exchanging cultural understanding at a grassroots level, motivating students to learn English and different cultures, and linking up to the rest of the world.

4. CONCLUSION

The JET Program is a huge national and international project. McConnell (2000) stated the JET Program as a gigantic “\$500 million per year project” involving three ministries, 3,245 municipalities, and more than 16,000 public schools across the nation (p.3; p.139). At first glance, the JET Program is a unique educational policy to invite native foreign speakers to classrooms; however, the JET Program is not a pure educational policy. The program was intended to address different issues and to respond to world criticisms about Japan’s attitude. In other words, the JET Program would have never been established if there was no foreign pressure or if Nakasone did not have interest in foreign affairs or education. Therefore, the JET Program can be classified as “reactive policy” (McConnell, 2000, p.62) because without such catalysts, the JET Program would not have been initiated.

The extent to which the JET Program is effective for internationalization depends on from what perspective it is viewed. The benefits of the JET Program are at the individual level, which includes JET participants, Japanese students, Japanese local officers, and Japanese English teachers. Japan is often criticized for egoistic attitude in terms of economics and politics; however, in case of the JET Program, it is a great example of an altruistic policy. McConnell (2000) said the JET Program may not be a charitable gift to foreign youth; rather it is beneficial to all people who are involved in the program like three ministries (p.36). In addition to this, he stated the people who benefit the most from the JET Program is neither Japanese students, Japanese English teachers, nor Japanese people in communities; rather the JET teachers who receive high salary⁽³⁾ in spite of their amateur status benefit the most and enjoy their stay in Japan with full finance support. The government pays salary, insurance, business class airfare tickets, and local transportation (JET Programme Pamphlet, 2010). The key to the program is to invite foreign youth from outside of Japan in order to improve Japan’s expertise, image, and national security in terms of economy and foreign politics. The Japanese government believes it is worth spending the amount because the program is appealing to foreign allies and because it quiets criticism about Japan. From this perspective, it seems reasonable to give benefits to the JET participants.

[Notes]

(1) There are three types of jobs including Assistant Language Teacher (ALT), Coordinator for International Relations (CIR) and Sports Exchange Advisor (SEA). Over 90% of the participants engages in ALT position (The JET Programme, 2012d).

- (2) MOFA is in charge of the application process and orientation prior to departure. MIC allocates local taxes to cover Programme expenses. MEXT is in charge of post-arrival orientations and training seminars for ALTs. CLAIR determines participant placement with contracting organizations (JET Programme Pamphlet, 2010).
- (3) McConnell (2000) also said that about eighty percent of the JET participants' salaries eventually stays in Japan and is used in the local economy (p.36) and approximately 50 percent of JET participants said that they are able to save at least 25 percent of their salary (p.289).

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