

Lived Experiences of Assistant Language Teachers in Fostering Motivation and Engagement Among Japanese ESL Learners

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Abstract — This study explored the lived experiences of Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) in fostering motivation and engagement among Japanese ESL learners. This employed a phenomenological qualitative research design to discover the multiple unique roles of ALTs in the Japanese education system. Using purposive sampling, data were gathered from eight Filipino ALTs through semi-structured interviews that utilized open-ended questions. All eight ALTs articulated in the interviews that their core beliefs as teachers were significantly shaped by their experiences, particularly those in which they felt encouraged, supported, and respected by emotionally attuned and socially responsive teachers. Fostering motivation and engagement among Japanese ESL learners, as shared by the co-participants, is not just about teaching English. It's about creating a classroom where learners feel safe, respected, and genuinely involved. The ALTs found that learners respond best when lessons are fun, meaningful, and connected to real life. Whether it's through music, movement, group work, or simply taking the time to listen and offer encouragement, these teachers showed how small, thoughtful actions can make a big difference. ALTs become bridges between transforming personal experiences into powerful, learner-centered teaching that cultivates motivation and engagement in their ESL learners. The significance of their experiences lies in their affirmation that effective ESL instruction in Japan extends beyond the transmission of language. The co-participants' experiences highlight that motivation and engagement flourish in environments where learners feel emotionally safe, personally valued, and actively involved in meaningful, relatable classroom activities, making teaching a deeply human and transformative practice. With this, the analysis of co-participants' narratives revealed four major themes: (1) Factors Affecting Motivation, (2) Strategies for Enhancing Motivation, (3) Factors Affecting Engagement, and (4) Strategies for Enhancing Engagement. These themes were identified using Colizzi's method and grounded in the lived experiences of Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) in Japan. Factors Affecting Motivation emphasized the role of both intrinsic and extrinsic elements in language learning. This highlighted the emotional and instructional dynamics that influence learners, with motivation often hinging on how safe, supported, and engaged learners feel. Based on the findings, the proposed output of the study is a thematic framework, specifically a Holistic Experiential-Based Framework in Fostering Motivation and Engagement Among ESL Learners, which illustrates how Assistant Language

Teachers (ALTs) foster motivation and engagement among Japanese ESL learners through interconnected strategies and influences.

Keywords — Assistant Language Teachers, engagement, instructional strategies, Japanese ESL learners, motivation, phenomenological method, thematic framework

I. Introduction

The English language has become a global lingua franca and is considered the standard language in different fields. The increasing prominence of English as a global language has significantly impacted education systems across Asia, including the field of English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction (Liang & Fung, 2021). However, they found that significant challenges were faced by educators globally, including those in the field of teaching ESL. This was supported by the study of Dang et al (2023), which mentions that challenges such as unequal access to quality instruction, cultural diversity, and the tension between English proficiency and local language preservation remain.

Many Asian countries have integrated English into their school curricula to enhance international communication, educational opportunities, and economic competitiveness (Salomone & Salomone, 2022). In Japan, reforms like the "Rainbow Plan" and the JET Program reflect ongoing efforts to improve English education through initiatives involving ALTs, aiming to boost student motivation and global readiness. Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) occupy a vital role in Japan's English education system by collaborating with Japanese Teachers of English (JTEs) to provide authentic language experiences. Sheikh (2024) noted that their responsibilities include fostering communicative competence and intercultural understanding. ALTs are expected to model English fluency, simplify lessons through scaffolding techniques, and make lessons accessible using comprehensible vocabulary. Tsujino (2022) further emphasizes that ALTs employ positive reinforcement strategies, such as encouragement and praise, to boost student confidence, addressing common self-esteem issues among Japanese ESL learners.

In connection to this, motivation and engagement have long been recognized as crucial factors in second language acquisition (Bagheri, Nevisi, & Farhani, 2022). In Japan, fostering these factors among learners has become a pressing priority (Gullikson, 2024). Motivation is often driven by two powerful forces: intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Zhang, et al., 2025). Intrinsic motivation arises from within the learner's satisfaction that comes from learning a new language. Conversely, extrinsic motivation is influenced by external factors such as praise, grades, or other tangible rewards (Zhang, et al., 2025). Engagement reflects when students are fully immersed in what they are doing. Jones Brent (2022) states that in the classroom, this often manifests as students actively participating or being meaningfully involved in the learning process. ALTs are uniquely positioned to foster positive attitudes toward English learning, as Sakamoto (2022) asserts, by

creating environments that encourage active participation in the acquisition of the English language.

On the contrary, Donohue (2024) highlights that the lack of control over instructional design restricts ALTs from using more creative and engaging teaching methods. Systemic issues, such as rigid curricula and limited communicative time, further reduce their effectiveness. Although culturally responsive teaching is emphasized, research rarely explores how ALTs adapt to this approach or the long-term effects of their strategies on students (Hiratsuka, 2023). This study would like to delve into the heart of the challenges of that the ALT teachers in engaging the Japanese ESL learners.

In line with this, the researchers would like to explore the lived experiences of ALTs to gain deeper insights into the strategies they employ in teaching English to foster motivation and engagement among Japanese ESL learners. Moreover, this study aimed to address existing gaps with a holistic experiential-based framework that strengthens and fosters motivation and engagement among the learners.

Theoretical Lens

This study was anchored on the Self-Determination Theory (SDT), developed by Bhandhu et al. (2024), and Total Physical Response (TPR), developed by James Asher, cited in the study of Karshiboyevna & Madina (2024).

SDT is a psychological framework that explores the factors influencing human motivation. It distinguishes between intrinsic motivation (internal satisfaction) and extrinsic motivation (external rewards). SDT emphasizes the importance of three basic psychological needs: autonomy (a sense of control over one's actions), competence (belief in one's ability to succeed), and relatedness (feeling connected to others), which are essential for fostering intrinsic motivation and sustained engagement in learning or other activities as cited by Smith et al., (2024). In educational contexts, SDT highlights the significance of supportive environments that nurture these needs to enhance student motivation and performance (Ryan et al., 2021). The present study utilized this theory to examine how self-determination theory (SDT) applies to second language learning, emphasizing the role of autonomy, competence, and relatedness among Japanese ESL learners. It highlights how ALTs enhance autonomy by offering learners choices in activities, build competence through appropriately challenging tasks, and promote relatedness via positive relationships and collaborative environments. Additionally, it discussed how teacher-student relationships and culturally responsive teaching practices influence motivational states (Barua & Lockee, 2024), which aligned with exploring the experiences of assistant language teachers in fostering motivation and engagement among Japanese ESL learners.

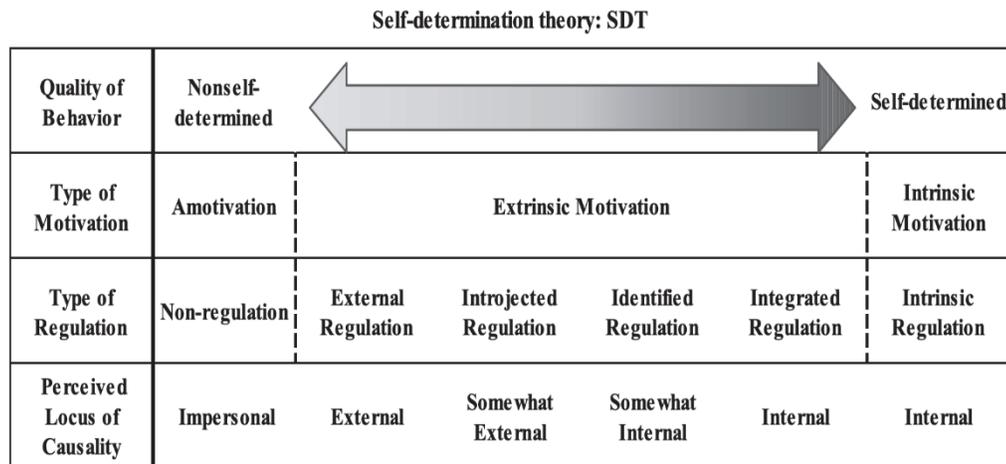


Figure 1: Self-Determination Theory

In addition, Total Physical Response (TPR) is a language teaching method developed by James Asher, which combines language instruction with physical movement to enhance learning and retention (Karshiboyevna & Madina, 2024). It is based on the idea presented by Nguyen (2025) that language acquisition is more effective when it mirrors the natural process of first language learning. This was also utilized as a framework to create a more engaging and motivating learning environment for Japanese ESL students. TPR's action-based approach caters to kinesthetic learners and alleviates the pressure of verbal production, potentially reducing the anxiety common among Japanese learners (Yuquilema Mullo, 2024). The interactive and often playful nature of TPR activities could foster a positive classroom atmosphere, enhancing student motivation and participation. This method was used to explore the ALTs' teaching ESL among Japanese learners in Japan, where traditional teaching methods may be more passive and teacher-centered. By actively involving students and creating a fun learning experience, TPR theory contributed to a more positive attitude toward English language acquisition. Likewise, it provided insights into the role of TPR in enhancing motivation and engagement in Japanese ESL classrooms.

LITERATURE REVIEW

English is considered a global language and lingua franca. The prominence of English as a global language in Japan's educational system is significant and evolving (Aizawa et al., 2023). As globalization continues to shape societies worldwide, Japan has acknowledged the importance of English for sustaining its economic competitiveness and cultural exchange capabilities (Smith, M. D., 2022). Historically, language learning motivation and engagement in Japan have recently gained prominence. Learner-centered variables, including engagement, have not been a central focus in foreign language education within the country. The dominant teaching approaches in Japan have traditionally been teacher-centered rather than learner-centered, often limiting opportunities for active student participation and engagement (Matsuyama, Nakaya, Okazaki, Lebowitz, Leppink, & Van Der Vleuten, 2019). Sizable classes, particularly in high schools and

many universities, have made it challenging to address the motivational and engagement needs of individual learners (Wang, & Calvano, 2022). Consequently, the motivation and engagement of learners have received limited attention in the context of Japanese language education (Oga-Baldwin et al., 2021).

English Education in Japan has influenced the experiences of Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) in fostering motivation and engagement among ESL learners. During the Meiji period (1868–1912), English was viewed as a tool for modernization, similar to how ALTs currently facilitate the development of communicative competence in English. However, by the 1880s and early 20th century, rising nationalist sentiments led to resistance against English, echoing contemporary discussions on Japan’s monolingual identity and the perception of English as a foreign language (Takeishi, 2022). The exam-oriented education system further hinders language learning, as standardized tests (*juke-eigo*) emphasize grammar and reading over oral communication skills (Bradford, 2019).

Beyond standardized tests, linguistic resistance continues to influence English education in Japan, as many students perceive English as an academic necessity rather than a global competency (Schilcher, 2019). ALTs must bridge this gap by highlighting the real-world relevance of English and incorporating activities such as role-playing, discussions, and cultural exchanges to foster intrinsic motivation. Additionally, effective collaboration with Japanese Teachers of English (JTEs) is crucial for integrating communicative teaching methodologies into lessons. While Japan has relied on Western instructors, the roles of ALTs remain shaped by cultural and institutional norms (Chindemi, 2021).

English as a Second Language Instruction and Educational Reforms in Japan have undergone several academic reforms over the past two decades, implemented by the Ministry of Education (MOE) to enhance English proficiency among the learners. These include hiring native English-speaking assistant teachers through the JET Program, mandating learners to take an Oral Communication course, and integrating communicative English lessons in schools since 2009 (Otani, 2023). These changes have reignited discussions about making English an official language in Japan. Additionally, in 2001, the government consolidated multiple ministries to establish the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) to streamline educational reforms and introduced an Integrated Curriculum. This initiative promotes learners’ exposure to contemporary foreign cultures and the perspectives of non-Japanese residents in Japan (Nakayama, 2020). However, despite these theoretical reforms, Japanese teachers often lack clear guidance on practical classroom strategies to enhance student motivation and engagement.

Teravainen-Goff (2022) mentioned in his study that second language acquisition indicates that motivation and engagement among learners are factors in maintaining active participation. Studies have demonstrated that positive learning experiences and teacher feedback have a significant impact on language learning outcomes (Gan, An, & Liu, 2021). Conversely, adverse learning experiences can cause students to believe they are incapable of acquiring English and

undermine motivation (Amoah & Yeboah, 2021). Intrinsic motivation, or learning for personal satisfaction, is considered more effective in fostering long-term language acquisition than extrinsic motivation, which focuses on achieving external rewards such as passing exams (Wannas & Alshaye, 2024). While extrinsic motivation can sustain learning despite challenges, it often leads students to perceive language study as a means to an end rather than an enjoyable process (Meşe & Sevilen, 2021). Given these findings, ESL teachers should focus on strategies that cultivate intrinsic motivation to enhance student engagement and fluency development.

Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) in Japan's education system are deeply intertwined with the nation's evolving approach to English education. As the global significance of English proficiency continues to escalate, the Japanese government has implemented substantial reforms to enhance English instruction and integrate language learning into academic and professional milestones (Kim & Cho, 2023). However, Japan's educational priorities differ from Western models, such as those in England, where learners focus more on preparing for employment transitions rather than academic entrance exams (Kuznetsov & Keva, 2023). Furthermore, Japanese cultural values, emphasizing collaboration and respect, contrast with the individualistic approaches found in Western education systems (Rudolph, 2023), shaping classroom dynamics and learner engagement. Despite Japan's commitment to English education, limited exposure to English outside the classroom remains a significant challenge, necessitating ALTs to incorporate real-world applications and native-speaker interactions into their instructional approaches (Aizawa, Rose, Thompson & Curle, 2023). As global demand for ESL teachers increases, ALTs in Japan face distinctive cultural, linguistic, and systemic issues, including the linguistic divide between teachers and learners and perceived gaps in authority and proficiency (Yacob, Yunus, & Hashim, 2022). Addressing these issues necessitates culturally responsive teaching strategies for learners' identities and educational experiences (Chen, 2023). That is why the researchers would like to dig deeper to have a better grasp of the matter.

According to Tsujino (2022), driven by the growing global demand for English proficiency, Japan established the Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) Program to foster intercultural understanding and exchange. The program's primary goal is to enhance English communication skills and foster intercultural awareness, with ALTs acting as linguistic and cultural resources. Although the program for hiring Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) only requires a bachelor's degree in any discipline, it does not mandate a background in education, English, or specific fields of study (Li, 2024). Working collaboratively with Japanese English teachers, ALTs assist in lesson preparation, support learner learning, and contribute to improving teachers' English proficiency.

Moreover, ALTs can support JTEs in different aspects of teaching, such as lesson planning, material development, and classroom management. Tsujino (2022) points out that ALTs' lack of teaching experience can be offset by their motivation to teach and eagerness to learn. By actively participating in the team-teaching process, ALTs can enhance the quality of English language

teaching. They can also provide a fresh perspective on teaching methodologies and assist in implementing innovative pedagogical approaches in the classroom.

According to Tsujino, H. (2024), despite these advancements, the evolving role of ALTs presents challenges, particularly in team-teaching contexts. ALTs frequently report feeling relegated to assistant roles, with unclear expectations and limited influence in lesson delivery (Hiratsuka, T. (Ed.), 2023). Issues such as an excessive focus on game preparation activities or being treated as “human tape recorders” hinder their effectiveness, while institutional relationships and cultural adaptation further complicate their roles (Morris, S. A., 2022). This highlights the need for a clearer definition of scope and responsibilities, as well as improved support structures, to maximize ALTs' contributions to language learning (Hiratsuka, 2022). Moreover, Han (2021) states that ALTs are essential in bridging the gap between traditional communicative and student-centered language teaching approaches. Their role extends beyond facilitating language learning; it includes fostering learner autonomy and cultivating cultural sensitivity among students. However, researchers emphasize the importance of comprehensive teacher training programs to equip ALTs with the pedagogical and cultural competencies necessary to traverse Japan’s unique educational landscape.

Beyond classroom teaching, their presence creates a more communicative and interactive learning environment, encouraging students to practice speaking English more freely while developing their overall speaking and listening skills. Moreover, ALTs actively contribute to lesson development by collaborating with Japanese Teachers of English (JTEs) to create and implement innovative instructional plans. This collaboration also benefits JTEs by enhancing their own English language proficiency and teaching methodologies (Aizawa et al., 2023). Furthermore, ALTs help create and foster an inclusive classroom environment and assist with student assessments. With this, ALTs function as cultural emissaries, sharing their cultural backgrounds with students and the wider community.

According to Hiratsuka (2023), others may be motivated by the opportunity to develop their Japanese language skills or gain experience in international education, which could enhance their future career prospects. The appeal of living abroad and immersing oneself in a way of life can also be a significant motivator. Furthermore, some ALTs are intrinsically motivated by a passion for teaching English as a foreign language and a desire to have a positive influence on students' lives (Hiratsuka, 2022). Finally, the relatively competitive salary and benefits associated with programs like the JET Programme can be a significant factor. These motivations may vary and often converge to create a unique and enriching professional experience for ALTs in Japan.

Assistant Language Teachers in Japan often encounter several challenges. One prominent difficulty is navigating cultural disparities, both in the classroom and in everyday life (Aoyama, 2023). Adapting to Japanese customs, social norms, and communication styles can involve a steep learning curve. Additionally, differing educational philosophies between their home country and Japan may necessitate adjustments in teaching strategies. Building rapport with Japanese teachers

can also be challenging. Furthermore, overcoming language barriers in daily activities outside the classroom can create logistical challenges. However, the concept of "non-natives" introduces a layer of complexity to the experiences of Filipino ALTs (Glasgow, 2023). Although they are highly qualified and proficient in English, they often confront implicit and explicit biases due to their accent and perceived lack of native speaker status. These perceptions of "non-natives" can influence their sense of self and professional identity, prompting them to reconcile their heritage with their role as English language instructors in a foreign country. Navigating these complexities requires a strong sense of self.

In English as a Second Language (ESL) education, Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) play an increasingly essential role in cultivating dynamic and enriching learning environments. According to Sheikh et al. (2024), with the growing diversity of student populations in ESL classrooms, which comprise learners with varied backgrounds, needs, and abilities, the role of ALTs has become crucial in tailoring instruction to meet these diverse requirements. The role of language teachers emphasizes a shift from being the sole authoritative source of knowledge to acting as "facilitators of learning" who guide students toward greater autonomy. Their contributions align with research indicating that teacher quality has a significant impact on learner achievement, and the diverse skills and cultural backgrounds that ALTs possess enhance the overall effectiveness of ESL instruction (Sheikh et al., 2024).

In this regard, research indicates that it may take Japanese ESL learners five years or more to achieve proficiency in academic English comparable to that of native speakers. This highlights the importance of integrated instruction that supports both content learning and language development. However, a persistent challenge is the traditional ESL curriculum's emphasis on academic skills, which often overlooks social integration, leaving Japanese learners feeling isolated within the school community (Otajonova, 2024). Through their direct engagement with students, ALTs can bridge this gap by fostering engaging and inclusive learning environments that promote real-world communication and cultural exchange.

In line with ALT Strategies for Japanese ESL Learners, according to Al-Obaydi et al. (2023), cultivating active engagement among English as a Second Language (ESL) learners is crucial for their academic success. In addition, the study by Ay & Dağhan (2023) highlights the effectiveness of student-centered teaching methods in enhancing motivation and engagement. For Japanese ESL learners, culturally relevant activities such as role-playing real-life scenarios can significantly boost interest and elucidate the practical value of language skills (Chris Hastings, 2023).

In light of the study, teachers play a vital role in fostering motivation and engagement by providing consistent feedback and aligning instructional approaches with students' goals and learning preferences (Ha & Nguyen, 2021). ALTs can contribute by introducing diverse cultural perspectives, incorporating culturally relevant topics, and utilizing task-based learning approaches that emphasize real-world applications (Hooper, 2023). In addition, Ginting et al. (2024)

emphasize that fostering high levels of engagement requires a student-centered approach along with a supportive learning environment. By implementing adaptive teaching strategies, ALTs make English learning more accessible and less intimidating for Japanese students.

To foster intrinsic motivation among Japanese learners studying English, instructors should integrate real-world, culturally relevant contexts into their lessons. One effective method is Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL), which utilizes the Internet and e-learning platforms to provide interactive, student-centered experiences. A vital component of CALL is Computer-Supported Collaborative Learning (CSCL), which encourages learners to participate in group learning activities (Hmelo-Silver & Jeong, 2023). Studies have found that Japanese students who participated in online collaborative learning are involved in an acculturative process that enables students to assimilate into new knowledge communities, as defined by Zitha et al. (2023). Similarly, Nakata et al. (2022) argue that collaborative learning boosts motivation by placing students in structured, interactive environments where they actively engage in problem-solving and language use. Another strategy to enhance motivation is Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL), which leverages the advantages of Computer-Supported Collaborative Learning (CSCL) by utilizing mobile devices, such as smartphones and iPods (Tong, An, & Zhou, 2024). These tools offer students continuous access to English through both spoken and written communication, reinforcing language exposure beyond the classroom.

Despite the advantages of these digital learning strategies, Husni and Tasir (2022) state that there are challenges to their implementation. CSCL and online-based learning require additional time and effort from instructors to monitor students' online activity and ensure their engagement with appropriate educational content. The rapid evolution of e-learning technologies and concerns over internet safety further complicate the integration of e-learning into the curriculum. However, advancements in automated tracking software can assist teachers by monitoring students' online activity and the time spent on learning platforms (Andujar & Salaberri-Ramiro, 2021).

In line with the relevant literature and studies, this study aimed to explore the lived experiences of Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) in fostering motivation and engagement among Japanese English as a Second Language (ESL) learners. Furthermore, it identified similarities and differences in the findings of previous research conducted by various scholars.

English education in Japan is recognized as essential for economic and cultural participation, prompting nationwide reforms to enhance proficiency (Aizawa et al., 2023; Smith, 2022; Kim & Cho, 2023). However, challenges persist, particularly in fostering engagement and improving instructional effectiveness. A key distinction in Japan's ESL approach is its teacher-centered instruction, which contrasts with the student-centered models used in many global contexts (Matsuyama et al., 2019).

As a result, Japanese students tend to prioritize academic success, while learners in other countries focus more on career development and practical language application (Edwards &

Ashida, 2021). Despite these differences, motivation and engagement are universally recognized as critical for second language acquisition (Teravainen-Goff, 2022).

ALTs play a crucial role in Japan by providing language support, fostering intercultural awareness, and helping students overcome traditional classroom limitations (Tsujino, 2022; Merdiaty & Sulistiasih, 2024). However, Japan's curriculum, which focuses on grammar and vocabulary over conversation, limits real-world English practice, making it difficult for students to integrate the language into their daily lives (Aizawa et al., 2023).

While Japan's ESL approach differs in its emphasis on rote learning and grammatical precision, it shares global challenges related to motivation, engagement, and instructional adaptation. Research highlights the importance of integrative and instrumental motivation, with some students driven by the desire to engage with English-speaking communities while others focus on academic and career advancement (Fathi et al., 2024). Strategies such as collaborative learning, culturally responsive teaching, and student-centered instruction have proven effective in both Japanese and international contexts (Groenewald & Kilag, 2024).

Additionally, Wong et al. (2024) emphasize multiple engagement factors, while Tomlinson and Jarvis (2023) advocate for differentiated instruction to address individual learning needs. Technology-enhanced approaches, such as Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) and Collaborative Social Constructivist Learning (CSCL), have shown promise in increasing student participation (Hmelo-Silver & Jeong, 2023). However, these methods require strong instructor support, curriculum adaptation, and ongoing teacher training, which remain challenges across various ESL contexts (Husni et al., 2022). Ultimately, Japan's ESL education system must strike a balance between its traditional structures and modern, interactive strategies to enhance student engagement and learning outcomes.

The emphasis on adapting strategies to specific contexts (cultural, institutional, and technological) suggested that these factors shape ALTs' experiences and that their success in fostering motivation and engagement depends on their ability to tailor their approaches accordingly. Therefore, the conclusion synthesizes the key findings related to ALTs' experiences, offering insights into their challenges and successes in motivating and engaging Japanese ESL learners.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

This study aimed to provide valuable insights into the lived experiences of Assistant Language Teachers in fostering motivation and engagement among Japanese ESL learners.

Specifically, this study answered the following questions:

1. How do co-participants describe their lived experiences in fostering motivation and engagement among Japanese ESL learners?
2. What themes emerged from the co-participant's lived experiences in fostering motivation and engagement among Japanese ESL learners?
3. Based on the findings, what output may be proposed from the lived experiences of assistant language teachers in fostering motivation and engagement among Japanese ESL learners?

II. Methodology

This study employed a descriptive phenomenological qualitative research approach to explore the experiences of Assistant Language Teachers in fostering motivation and engagement among Japanese ESL learners (Neubauer et al., 2019). Descriptive phenomenology analyzed participants' detailed narratives, organizing them into meaningful statements that reflect the study's central concepts (Prosek & Gibson, 2021). According to May & Perry (2022), this method is especially appropriate for contexts with limited existing knowledge about a particular issue, aiming to achieve a more profound understanding of the core meaning of the phenomenon by examining the viewpoints of individuals directly involved. To perpetuate the objectivity and neutrality of the collected data, the researcher employed phenomenological reduction, a key technique used to eliminate personal biases and preconceptions regarding the experiences of assistant language teachers in Japan (Morimoto, Y., 2021). The research followed Colaizzi's phenomenological method, ensuring a systematic and in-depth understanding of the participants' lived experiences (Praveena & Sasikumar, 2021).

This approach provided a comprehensive and systematic understanding of ALTs' experiences, offering significant insights into strategies for fostering motivation and engagement among Japanese ESL learners.

III. Results and Discussion

This study yielded the following key findings:

1. All eight ALTs articulated in the interviews that their core beliefs as teachers were significantly shaped by their experiences, particularly those in which they felt encouraged, supported, and respected by emotionally attuned and socially responsive teachers. Fostering motivation and engagement among Japanese ESL learners, as shared by the co-participants, is not just about teaching English. It's about creating a classroom where learners feel safe, respected, and genuinely involved. The Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) found that learners respond best when lessons are fun, meaningful, and connected to real life. Whether it is through music,

movement, group work, or simply taking the time to listen and offer encouragement, these teachers showed how small, thoughtful actions can make a big difference. In addition, the ALTs become bridges between transforming personal experiences into powerful, learner-centered teaching that cultivates motivation and engagement in their ESL learners. The significance of their experiences lies in their affirmation that effective ESL instruction in Japan extends beyond the transmission of language. Their highlight is that motivation and engagement flourish in environments where learners feel emotionally safe, personally valued, and actively involved in meaningful, relatable classroom activities, making teaching a deeply human and transformative practice.

2. The study revealed four major themes: (1) Factors Affecting Motivation, (2) Strategies for Enhancing Motivation, (3) Factors Affecting Engagement, and (4) Strategies for Enhancing Engagement. These themes were identified using Colizzi's method and grounded in the lived experiences of Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) in Japan. *Factors Affecting Motivation* emphasized the role of both intrinsic and extrinsic elements in language learning. Intrinsic factors included curiosity, enjoyment, and a sense of achievement, while extrinsic motivators involved classroom recognition, teacher support, and the global utility of English. *Strategies for Enhancing Motivation* captured the interactive and culturally relevant methods ALTs used to sustain interest. *Factors Affecting Engagement* focused on the relational and psychological elements that shape classroom participation. *Strategies for Enhancing Engagement* are centered on classroom structure and social cohesion. These findings affirmed that motivation and engagement in Japanese ESL contexts are shaped by a complex interplay of emotional, cognitive, cultural, and instructional factors. By recognizing the factors that influence learner behavior and applying tailored, learner-centered strategies, ALTs can create more inclusive, responsive, and empowering learning environments that foster sustained language development and confidence. The themes provide a holistic view of how ALTs strategically adapt their practices to support learners' development and participation.
3. Based on the findings, the proposed output of the study is a thematic framework, specifically a Holistic Experiential-Based Framework in Fostering Motivation and Engagement Among ESL Learners, which illustrates how Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) foster motivation and engagement among Japanese ESL learners through interconnected strategies and influences. The thematic framework comprises four major themes: factors affecting motivation, strategies to enhance motivation, factors affecting engagement, and strategies to enhance engagement. It emphasizes that motivation is driven by learners' global outlook, emotional safety, curiosity, and autonomy, while engagement is sustained through interactive methods, teacher presence, and culturally responsive practices. This structured output provides a practical, research-informed guide that reflects the lived experiences of ALTs, emphasizing the importance of adaptive teaching, effective feedback, peer collaboration, and classroom organization in creating inclusive and motivating ESL environments.

IV. Recommendations

Based on the study's findings and conclusions, the following recommendations were provided to foster motivation and engagement among Japanese ESL learners:

1. Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) may adopt a culturally responsive, learner-centered approach guided by a holistic, experiential-based framework. This framework may be implemented to promote emotional safety, learner autonomy, and active participation. This provides clear, adaptable strategies to support ALTs in building inclusive, engaging, and culturally respectful learning environments. Likewise, this may enhance and increase teaching confidence and effectiveness among them.
2. Japanese ESL/EFL learners and other nationalities may be provided with a holistic, experiential-based framework that promotes motivation and engagement to help them enhance and strengthen their utilization of the English language. This learner-centered approach fosters a less intimidating and more engaging learning environment that will enable the learners to build confidence through speaking, writing, collaborative activities, and the like.
3. Japanese school administrators may utilize a thematic framework, a holistic, experiential-based approach, to foster motivation and engagement among ESL learners. This framework can also help invest in the ongoing professional development of ALTs, particularly in areas such as differentiated instruction, intercultural communication, and emotional intelligence. This framework reminds school leaders of the vital importance of supporting both ALTs and learners by creating classrooms that feel safe and inclusive. Overall, school leadership must champion inclusivity, trust-building, and teacher collaboration as key pillars of a successful ESL program.
4. Curriculum Designers may consider developing modules that are aligned with the suggested thematic framework. The framework, a holistic experiential-based framework in fostering motivation and engagement among ESL learners, gives a strong foundation for designing lessons that speak to learners' interests and reflect how they actually learn best. It encourages using movement, media, and real-world content to keep lessons fresh, fun, and relevant. A culturally sensitive and interactive curriculum ensures sustained engagement and real-world language application.
5. Other Researchers may explore ALT practices across different cultural and national contexts to broaden understanding of engagement and motivation. For fellow researchers, this framework, a holistic experiential-based framework in fostering motivation and engagement among ESL learners, opens the door to deeper exploration of what truly drives motivation and engagement in diverse classrooms. It serves as a valuable starting point for examining how culture, emotion, and pedagogy intersect in real-world ESL teaching contexts.

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