
Rethinking Teacher Training

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Abstract

This short paper raises the important issue of rethinking teacher training for English teachers in Japan at junior high schools and senior high schools. After a brief overview of the current state of teacher training in Japan, the paper outlines how pedagogical support could be provided through intensive teacher training workshops. The design and features of the workshops are outlined along with a summary of how additional support could be provided through an online Teacher Support Center (TSC) and the creation of practical teaching handbooks.

1 Introduction

There are as many definitions of what a ‘good’ teacher is than there are teachers. What seems to be irrefutable, however, is that a ‘good’ teacher has a wealth of knowledge and practical experience which he/she can draw upon according to any given situation. For novice English teachers just finding their pedagogical feet, teaching can seem a daunting task. This is where in-service teacher training can provide valuable support. In addition, in-service teacher training can help refresh and invigorate more experienced teachers who have become tired or disenchanted with the ‘daily grind’ of public school teaching. This short paper discusses a supplement to the existing system of in-service teacher training for English teachers in junior high schools and senior high schools currently provided in Japan. After briefly discussing the background of current teacher training, the paper outlines a proposal to introduce intensive English

workshops as a means to provide meaningful teacher support.

2 Background

The rapid expansion of globalization has meant that many countries are seeking to create citizens who are equipped to cope with our ever-changing world. The Japanese government's call for internationalization is helping shape how education is perceived, and increasingly more emphasis is being placed on the importance of English language education (Brown & Iyobe, 2014). By seeking to improve the overall standard of students' English in Japan, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has responded to this challenge. The implementation of the 2013 new Course of Study Guidelines has dramatically changed the pedagogical terrain for teachers at elementary schools, junior high schools, and senior high schools. It is clear that there is a real need to improve the way English is taught in Japan and that MEXT is responding to these needs. However, it has been argued that the support structure for English teachers within the public system in Japan is sadly lacking (Tahira, 2012). Logically support should be developed in parallel with the implementation of new policies.

All teachers need support both when they are starting off their teaching careers, and as their experience grows. Teaching is a craft that requires years of improvement. A typical fledgling English teacher in Japan will have taken a teaching certificate course at a university, which would involve some pre-service training under the watchful eye of an experienced teacher. Many would argue that this is palpably inadequate. Pre-service and in-service training and support for English teachers in Japan is arguably behind countries in Europe and its closer Asian neighbours. Many countries are investing a considerable amount of their education budget in providing support for teachers in the form of training courses — Japanese teachers deserve similar support.

3 Providing an answer — Intensive Workshops

Revisiting and rethinking teacher support for English teachers in Japan working to comply with the new Course of Study Guidelines is both timely and vital. Existing in-service support structures are anchored to past teaching methods and

alternative training and support is essential if Japan truly wants to create citizens who can use English effectively (Tahira, 2012). Since April 2012 I have taught teaching workshops as part of the teacher license renewal course at Nanzan University. Each year teachers attending these workshops have mentioned how useful the workshops are and how they would like to learn more. With this in mind I propose that intensive pedagogical workshops for English teachers be created for those in the Tokai area.

The intensive workshops outlined below aim to provide much needed pedagogical support for English teachers in Japan in parallel with the new policies introduced by MEXT. Having taught at all levels of the Japanese education system (including elementary schools, junior high, senior high schools and universities), I feel that I am in a position to understand the needs of English teachers in Japan. One way to provide support for novice and experienced teachers is to consider their immediate needs and provide rigorous pedagogical support in the form of intensive workshops, which take place over a weekend when they do not have work commitments.

The basic premise of these intensive workshops is to provide concentrated exposure to formal academic lectures by experts in the field. In addition, teachers would gain knowledge through content-based and skills-based classes. Group work and collegial support is an essential part of these workshops culminating in the production of pedagogical presentations. Having a theme for each day provides focus for the participants. I propose to provide pedagogical support for Japanese teachers of English in three ways:

- 1) Creating practical lectures and workshops which will address the teachers' pedagogical needs.
- 2) Making an online teacher support center (TSC) which will house teaching videos, audio files, word files, and other support material for teachers to freely access whenever and wherever they like.
- 3) Publishing practical handbooks based on the lectures and workshops. These publications will focus on content-based areas such as Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), Intercultural communication, Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), as well as focusing on skills-based topics such as reading, writing, listening and speaking.

Initially, a total of five two-day weekend workshops will be offered to teachers of English at junior high and senior high schools in Japan. The purpose of the workshops is to provide practical support to improve their professional development. The workshops will be divided into four distinct 90-minute units. Table 1 shows the structure for a daily workshop.

Table 1 : Daily Workshop Structure

Unit 1	A formal lecture (70 minutes) given by an expert in the English teaching field followed by Q & A time (20 minutes).
Unit 2	Content-based classes which will focus on one particular aspect of teaching e.g. intercultural communication or communicative competence.
Unit 3	Skills-based classes which will focus on practical ways to improve teaching and learning e.g. vocabulary building and material creation.
Unit 4	Practical classes which will fuse the main themes/topics of each day. Teachers will be encouraged to present their ideas through task-based work and discussion.

Table 2 shows the structure of the first two weekends of the intensive workshops. Content lectures given in the first units will include; English as a global language; Teaching English in Japan; CLIL; Teaching digital natives. Content-based classes given in the second units will focus on; Intercultural communication; Communicative competence; Syllabus and course design; Teaching with technology. The third unit of each intensive workshop will focus on such skills as; Teaching speaking and listening; Teaching reading and writing; Practicing new language; Creating effective material. The fourth unit of each daily workshop will involve the participants discussing and presenting their own ideas for improving their teaching based on the theme, content, and skills covered in units one to three.

Table 2 : Outline of Workshops 1 and 2

Workshop 1 — August 2016		Workshop 2 — March 2017	
Day 1	Day 2	Day 1	Day 2
Lecture	Lecture	Lecture	Lecture
English as a global language	Teaching English in Japan	Content & Language Integrated Learning	Teaching digital natives
Content-based class	Content-based class	Content-based class	Content-based class
Intercultural Communication	Communicative Competence	Syllabus & course design	Teaching with technology
Skills-based class	Skills-based class	Skills-based class	Skills-based class
Teaching speaking Teaching listening	Teaching reading Teaching writing	Practicing new language	Creating effective material
Application	Application	Application	Application
Presentations & discussion	Presentations & discussion	Presentations & discussion	Presentations & discussion

Initially, it is hoped that approximately 20 teachers will join each day of the intensive workshops. At this point in time a pilot scheme of five workshops has been planned starting in August 2016 and finishing in August 2018. The proposal to start these intensive workshops has been put forward as part of a Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (B) application which, if accepted, will run from April 2015 to March 2019. If successful these workshops will be made available to all junior high school and senior high school English teachers in the Tokai area.

4 Additional support

As noted in section 3 above, the intensive workshops are not the only way that practicing teachers can be given meaningful support. As part of this teacher support project an online Teacher Support Center (TSC) will be developed to both support and enhance the intensive workshops. A secure and dedicated TSC website will be created and made accessible through all platforms — PCs, smartphones and tablets. Research into online support and Massive Open Online

Courses (MOOCs) has demonstrated the need and effectiveness for online support for both teachers and learners (Cripps, 2011; 2014). Following the successful creation of an online study abroad center and an autonomy support center (Cripps, 2011; 2012), the TSC will provide teachers with access to a wealth of pedagogical information.

Through the proposed online Teacher Support Center teachers will be able to access a whole host of useful information including, but not limited to:

- worksheets
- lesson plans
- videos from expert teachers
- synchronous and asynchronous chat with other teachers
- sample lesson videos
- vocabulary tests
- listening tests
- textbook specific support material

The content of the TSC will be continually updated as the workshops and supplementary material are developed. Support for English teachers at elementary schools and universities may be added at a later date. Participants will be canvassed throughout the workshops both through interviews and focus groups. Also, an exit questionnaire will be administered at the end of each workshop to determine their effectiveness, to collect the teachers' suggestions on future workshop topics, and the online TSC material.

Additional support will be provided through the publication of practical handbooks based on the lectures and workshops. These handbooks will focus on content-based areas such as CALL, Intercultural communication, and CLIL, as well as focusing on skills-based topics such as reading, writing, listening and speaking. It is expected that the teachers who take part in the workshops and use the TSC and handbooks will benefit in many ways. Specifically, since they will have a stake in the workshop and TSC content, through their questionnaire responses and interviews, it is likely that this ownership will result in increased motivation and satisfaction. Furthermore, it is hoped that their teaching skills will be enhanced by exposure to various practical teaching methods. Logically, practical support that

meets the exact needs of the teachers should result in improved teaching in the classroom and higher levels of motivation.

It is envisaged that additional workshops will take place in the future focusing on other salient teaching themes, content, and skills. For example, the growth of English Medium Instruction (EMI) at Japanese universities warrants closer research into English teaching at junior high and senior high schools (Oyabu, 2011). Similarly, the growth of MOOCs and how they can be integrated into existing curricula is a further topic that merits in-depth investigation.

I believe that the most important way to help teachers improve their teaching and teaching satisfaction levels is to encourage more sharing amongst their peers. Although teaching is often seen as a ‘social occupation’ it is a fact that it can also be isolating and demanding. Sharing thoughts, ideas, and emotions can help others in similar situations. The intensive workshops, if realized, will be just one stepping stone towards the creation of a better support network.

5 Conclusion

Anyone who has lived in Japan for a significant period knows that change takes time. Anyone who has taught English in Japan knows that significant change in the education system takes even more time. Flippancy aside it is a fact that MEXT has started to reshape the way that English is taught in Japan, yet much of this teaching is still tied to the university examination entrance system. Junior high school and senior high school teachers are in a position to affect how English is taught in their classrooms and this will influence how their students perceive and use English.

Teachers will always need support to improve their teaching (Scrivener, 2011). When approached correctly teacher training, such as the workshops mentioned in this paper, can furnish teachers with a support system which will provide practical pedagogical skills and thus aid their teaching. At times teaching can seem to be a lonely and frustrating occupation, but through collegial interaction and discussion, intensive workshops can arguably be more meaningful than periodic ‘shot-in-the-arm’ top-up courses.

If the proposed workshops mooted in this paper are to be realized it will take a combination of funding, combined effort, and planning. Yes, change takes time

but significant change can be realized with the help of colleagues and government assistance. The logic of providing pedagogical support for teachers in parallel with changes in the curriculum is irrefutable. Rethinking teacher training is the first step towards reconstructing the support system for teaching in order to afford meaningful and effective change.

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