

Priming University Students for the Reality of Teaching English in Japan

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Abstract

This short paper delineates a support framework for pre-service English teachers which is being developed for students at a private Japanese university and identifies the main challenges which Japanese pre-service English teachers face. The authors provide an overview of the support which was given before and after a cohort of pre-service English teachers (n=7) started their English teaching practicums. Three mini-workshops were designed to support these students. The workshop titles were: (1) a sample class and microteaching; (2) finding solutions to pedagogical problems; and (3) post-teaching practice reflection. The content of these mini-workshops is outlined along with how the research team is planning to enhance its support system for Japanese pre-service English teachers.

Keywords: Pre-service Teachers, Support Structure, Workshops

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Introduction

Despite the training they receive at university, many pre-service English teachers in Japan are unprepared for the realities in the classroom when they launch their teaching careers. Teaching is a craft that takes years to master and the more support that pre-service and novice teachers receive in their formative training and teaching years the better the pedagogical outcomes will be. This paper highlights a Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS) Kaken-funded research project (No. 23K20483) which aims to ascertain the needs of pre-service English teachers in Japan and support their pre-service teacher training. Initially, the paper provides a brief background on teacher training for English teachers in Japan before outlining the support structure which is currently being put in place as part of this research project. The focus of this paper is on the strategies the researchers utilized to help prepare a cohort of seminar students (n=7) at a private Japanese university for their teaching practicums. The authors describe how support was offered through three mini-workshops before and after their onsite teaching practice at Japanese junior and senior high schools. The content of these mini-workshops is outlined along with suggestions regarding how the support system for Japanese pre-service English teachers can be enhanced.

Background

The support structure for pre-service English teachers in Japan is less than ideal. Insufficient teacher training has created a divide between educational policies in Japan and the realities of the teaching profession (Kikuchi & Browne, 2009). Thus, it is imperative that Japanese pre-service English teachers receive adequate training (Kurosawa, 2011; Ueno, 2013). Preparatory training for pre-service teachers at Japanese universities typically emphasizes pedagogical theory, the historical context of English education in Japan, and legal considerations, yet allocating only a limited timeframe to hands-on practical training. Consequently, the practical training component integrated into the teaching license course, especially the onsite teaching experience at junior and senior high schools which provides a short teaching practicum window of only two or three weeks, is wholly inadequate. Enhancing training programmes can provide one solution to this glaring shortcoming (Fukushima, 2018; Steele & Zhang, 2016; Tahira, 2012).

The research project outlined in this paper aims to support pre-service English teachers in Japan by building on past research involving teacher-training workshops and online resources for in-service educators. The foundation of the project lies in previous JSPS Kaken-funded initiatives (No. 15H03481, No. 20520538, and No. 23520722), which developed pedagogical workshops and online support frameworks for junior and senior high school English teachers. These successful models now provide a basis for identifying and addressing the specific needs of pre-service English teachers. The research team (i.e., Dr. Cripps, Dr. Imai, and Dr. Toland) is working to extend these efforts to help future educators. The research project focuses on two primary research questions: (1) What are the pedagogical needs of pre-service English teachers in Japan?; (2) What type of support structure is needed to help these teachers? The project is guided by action research as the methodological approach endeavours to find practical solutions to educational challenges (McNiff, 2013). It aims to address the issue of supporting pre-service English teachers as they strive to meet the requirements outlined in the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) Course of Study (CoS) guidelines, which emphasize creating globally-minded citizens proficient in English (Tahira, 2012).

Traditional teacher-training methods in Japan are often outdated, leaving a gap between what is currently offered and what is required under the latest CoS guidelines. This research project aims to fill this gap by creating an innovative support framework specifically tailored to pre-service English teachers' needs, helping them acquire the skills necessary for teaching English in an ever-changing environment. As part of this research project, the research team has been designing and holding a series of workshops for pre-service English teachers over the last three years. The workshops are briefly described below.

One-Day Workshops

As part of a JSPS Kaken-funded research project, a series of workshops has been held since 2022. Two one-day workshops were held in June 2022 and November 2022. The content of each of these workshops was based on questionnaires and written and oral feedback from pre-service English teachers. Before the first workshop, pre-service teachers (n=20) were asked through an online questionnaire, what topics they would like to be included in teacher-training workshops designed to address their specific needs. For the first workshop the topics of 'How to use information and communications technologies (ICT)' and 'creativity and critical thinking' were the most popular suggestions, and these were used as the foundation for its construction. For subsequent workshops, oral and written feedback provided by the workshop participants were woven into the design of future workshops. The overarching theme of the second workshop was 'Improving students' English-speaking skills' (for more details about the first two workshops see Cripps et al., 2023a, 2023b). Each of these workshops sought to furnish the participants with theoretical and practical knowledge related to teaching English at junior and senior high schools in Japan.

Table 1: Content of the 2022 Workshops

No.	Date	Content
1	June 25, 2022	<p>Creativity and ICT use Prof. Toland – The International University of Kagoshima, Japan</p> <p>Critical thinking and writing Prof. Uchida – Akita International University, Japan</p>
2	November 19, 2022	<p>Helping false beginners to read and write Prof. Uchida – Akita International University, Japan</p> <p>Strategies to support Japanese English language learners' 21st century skills Prof. Toland – The International University of Kagoshima, Japan</p> <p>How to reverse the trend: Japanese could speak English better Prof. Matsumoto – Bond University, Australia</p> <p>Tips for getting your students to speak English Prof. Tony Cripps – Nanzan University, Japan</p>

Mini-Workshops

After the two one-day workshops which were held in 2022, the lead researcher, Dr. Cripps, decided to hold three mini-workshops in May and June 2023 to support his seminar students who were to undertake their practical teacher training as part of their teaching license course. The participants (n=7) of these mini-workshops (duration=100 minutes) were Dr. Cripps' fourth-year seminar students who were taking the teaching license course. Table 2 shows the content of the three mini-workshops.

Table 2: Content of the Three Mini-Workshops

No.	Date	Content
1	May 17, 2023	Sample class and micro-teaching Prof. Tony Cripps – Nanzan University, Japan
2	May 24, 2023	Q & A – Finding solutions to pedagogical problems Prof. Tony Cripps – Nanzan University, Japan
3	June 21, 2023	Post-teaching practice reflection (online) Prof. Tony Cripps – Nanzan University, Japan

Mini-Workshop 1 – Sample Class and Micro-Teaching

The first mini-workshop focused on providing Dr. Cripps' seminar students with a sample class and samples of 'micro-teaching'. Dr. Cripps gave a sample English class for upper-intermediate level students. His seminar students were shown the following: (a) how to begin a class, (b) how to get students interested in the topic at hand, (c) how to introduce key vocabulary, (d) how to conduct pair work activities, and (e) how to introduce students to reading and comprehension strategies. The workshop was video recorded and used later in the creation of teacher-training videos.

Mini-Workshop 2 – Finding Solutions to Pedagogical Problems

For the second mini-workshop Dr. Cripps' seminar students spent the first 50 minutes asking him questions about how to teach junior and senior high school students. The students' desks were arranged in a semi-circle facing Dr. Cripps. After 50 minutes the situation was reversed, and each student had a chance to sit at the head of the class and answer questions. A list of 25 questions had been prepared by Dr. Cripps pertaining to teaching English and teaching in general. The questions provided representative examples of situations that the students may face during their teaching practice. Examples of these questions are as follows:

1. How will you begin your first class?
2. What is your 'English policy'?
3. How would you try and improve your students' listening skills?
4. How will you introduce students to new vocabulary?
5. What would you do if one of your students falls asleep in your class?

Mini-Workshop 3 – Post-teaching Practice Reflection

The third mini-workshop took place on Zoom, a video conferencing platform, on June 21, 2023. The students who had completed their teaching practice at their respective junior and

senior high schools were encouraged to talk about their teaching practice experiences. Initially, they spoke in English for 20 minutes but then they were encouraged to switch to Japanese and spoke for a further 80 minutes. The discussion of their teaching practice was candid, animated, and extremely interesting. The students found the whole ‘debriefing’ process extremely cathartic. In addition to the oral feedback provided by the post-teaching practice reflection on Zoom, the students also completed an online questionnaire which asked them to reflect on their teaching experiences and teacher training as a whole (this is the subject of a forthcoming paper – Cripps et al., 2025b).

Future Support

The research team is planning further support for pre-service English teachers in Japan as part of this research project. Additional support which is currently being considered is as follows:

1. Establishing an exchange project (both online and face to face) with pre-service English teachers who are studying at a university in Okinawa.
2. Conducting interviews with novice in-service teachers to ascertain their support needs.
3. Creating a community of practice group (utilizing the LINE app) for novice in-service teachers. This support group will act as an idea-sharing forum.
4. Involving more ex-seminar students who are now in-service teachers in future workshops (see Cripps, Imai, & Toland, 2025a).
5. Compiling a bilingual list of ‘classroom English phrases’ for students and teachers.

Conclusion

Priming pre-service English teachers for the challenges that they will face in the classroom and arming them with the practical skills that they need should be at the core of any teacher-training programme. Arguably, the main weakness in many teacher-training courses run by Japanese universities is the lack of focus on the provision of practical skills. Too much emphasis is placed on the teaching of laws, regulations, and history. A fundamental shift in how teacher training is conducted in Japan is needed if MEXT wants to improve the standard of teaching, increase teacher job satisfaction, and reduce the attrition rate of teachers. The support framework outlined in this paper aims to go some way towards helping prepare pre-service English teachers in Japan for the professional challenges they will face in the future.

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