

***“That Was a Masterpiece!”:
Crafting Effective Workshops for Japanese Pre-Service Teachers of English***

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Abstract

The implementation of the new Course of Study Guidelines in Japan has increased the demands on teachers at elementary, junior, and senior high schools. Regrettably, the support structure for English teachers in the public system is sadly lacking. Every day, novice English teachers in Japan are facing challenges for which their pre-service training has failed to prepare them (Mouri, 2020; Tahira, 2012). This paper explicates a research project that aims to understand and support the practical needs of pre-service English teachers who intend to teach at junior high schools and senior high schools in Japan. Pre-service teachers of English (n=20) were asked to identify what topics they would like to be included in teacher-training workshops designed to address their needs. In 2022, two workshops were held taking into account these perceived needs. This paper focuses on the efficacy of the first workshop which was based on the participants' (n=12) informal and written feedback. This research project aims to provide realistic solutions to practical problems which English teachers in Japan face every day. It is hoped that fellow educators will find this paper useful when considering making changes to their own educational contexts.

Keywords: Practical Needs, Pre-Service, Support, Teacher Training

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Introduction

All teachers, regardless of the country in which they teach, need support. Many English teachers in Japan are struggling to overcome the challenges that they face and the existing support structure leaves much to be desired (Okumura, 2017). This paper outlines a research project which aims to understand the needs of pre-service English teachers in Japan and to provide meaningful support. Initially, the challenges which English teachers in Japan face are laid out after which the rationale and design of the research project is explicated. The authors outline the details of the first workshop in a series of workshops designed to meet the needs of pre-service English teachers.

Background

Nanzan University is a private Catholic university in Nagoya, Japan. It has a student body of just under 10,000 students. The Department of British and American Studies (known as *Eibei* in Japanese) at Nanzan University is renowned for the high English level of its students. Many of the *Eibei* students join the English teaching profession after they have graduated.

Past research – Supporting in-service teachers of English

The motivation for applying for a Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS) Kaken grant to support in-service teachers of English stemmed from the Principal Investigator's (PI - Professor Cripps) frustration at seeing many of his seminar students struggle when they began their in-service teaching. In 2015 a JSPS Kaken B research grant (15H03481) was awarded to Professor Cripps and his research team, and teacher-training workshops were held as part of this four-year research project. Five workshops were held in total, with the first four workshops focusing on topics that were chosen by in-service teachers: '*Motivation,*' '*Intercultural Communication,*' '*Teaching English in English,*' and '*Creativity in Education.*' (For more detailed information on these workshops and the research project as a whole see Cripps et al., 2017, 2018). For the final workshop, it was felt that the focus should be on the needs of pre-service English teachers to help them make the transition from being a learner to a teacher.

Transitioning from a learner to a teacher

In 2018 Dr. Saori Doi from the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa was invited to give the final workshop of the Kaken B research project. On May 26, 2018, Dr. Doi gave a workshop entitled '*Transitioning from a learner to a teacher*'. The purpose of this workshop was to help pre-service English teachers at Nanzan University reflect on the challenges that they would face once they become English teachers after they graduate (for more details on this workshop see Cripps & Doi, 2020). The success of this workshop was one of the motivations that spurred the PI to apply for funding to support pre-service English teachers in Japan, especially considering the significant obstacles that aspiring teachers need to overcome.

Challenges for pre-service teachers

Pre-service English teachers in Japan face numerous difficulties. Arguably the main three challenges are: (1) meeting the demands of the New Course of Study (NCoS); (2) inadequate pre-service training and practical experience; and (3) a poor support structure once they enter the teaching field. The Japanese Ministry of Education, Sports, Science and Technology

(MEXT) requires English teachers in Japan to, ‘in principle’, teach English in English. This, and other NCoS demands, places a great deal of responsibility on novice and experienced English teachers and many feel that they cannot meet these demands (Cripps, 2019, 2021; Mouri, 2020). Teacher license courses which are held at universities in Japan tend to focus on less practical aspects of teaching such as the history of English teaching and legal issues connected to teaching. Although there is a focus on teaching methodology, pre-service English teachers receive little practical training in the form of teaching practicums.

To further exasperate this unsatisfactory situation, the practical training that pre-service teachers receive at junior and senior high schools is wholly inadequate (Kikuchi & Browne, 2009). As part of the teaching license course students return to their former junior or senior high school and receive three weeks ‘on-the job’ teacher training (in the case of those who want to receive a junior high school teaching license), and two weeks teacher training (for those who want to obtain a high school teaching license). During this time, student teachers are assigned a teacher mentor from whom they receive advice and shadow. In practice, however, students are given little advice and are often left to their own devices regarding how to prepare for classes and how to teach. Although student teachers do get guidance regarding how to write a sample lesson plan but, typically, they only have the chance to teach three or four practice classes during their time at their designated school. Once teachers pass the teaching license course and enter the teaching field after graduating from university the support that they receive at their new school is almost non-existent. This has led to increasing levels of stress, dissatisfaction, and a high attrition rate within the first few years of teaching. Many experts in teacher education agree that the shortage of qualified English teachers in Japan is problematic and that effective teacher-training programmes can contribute to lowering the attrition rate (Fukushima, 2018; Steele & Zhang, 2016; Tahira, 2012).

Outline of the Kaken B research project

The precarious situation for pre-service English teachers explained above was the impetus behind the current research project. This project aims to research and support the practical needs of pre-service English teachers who intend to teach at junior and senior high schools in Japan. Through intensive workshops and the provision of online support, pre-service English teachers will enhance their methodological knowledge and practical teaching skills. Support will be provided in three main ways by: (1) holding a series of intensive practical teaching workshops focusing on teaching methodology and practice; (2) creating an ‘English Knowledge Lab’ (EKL) website which will house useful audio and video files, as well as a host of other teaching support material such as lesson plans, grammar activities, communication activities and ICT implementation activities; and (3) producing practical teaching handbooks based on the teaching workshops.

This paper focuses on the first of the practical teaching workshops which was held in June 2022. Before designing this workshop, pre-service teachers of English (n=20) were asked through an online questionnaire and a group interview on Zoom, what topics they would like to be included in the proposed teaching workshops. A summary of the most popular suggestions is shown in Table 1 and this was used as the basis for the design of the first workshop.

Table 1: Suggested topics for pre-service workshops

No.	Suggested topics for pre-service workshops
1	How to use information technology in and outside the classroom.
2	English education in other countries.
3	The pros and cons of different teaching styles.
4	Creativity in teaching.
5	How to work with Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs).
6	How to make lesson plans.
7	How to make effective activities for use in the classroom.

The section below gives an overview of the first workshops and its focus. This is then followed by an analysis of the written feedback which the participants provided at the end of the first workshop.

The first pre-service English teaching workshop

In May 2022, the PI approached two experienced English teachers and asked them if they would consider giving a session as part of the first workshop. Professor Sean Toland from The International University of Kagoshima is an expert teacher and worked at Nanzan University for four years. During this time he worked closely with the PI and created a series of textbooks for first-year students at *Eibei* (Cripps et al., 2018). Professor Uchida is the Dean of the Graduate School of Global Communication and Language at Akita International University, Japan which is famous for its teacher training programme. Both professors were informed of the topics suggested by the pre-service teachers and were asked if they could give sessions which addressed these needs. The first workshop was held at Nanzan University on Saturday, June 25, 2022. Twelve pre-service teachers attended along with four professors. More pre-service English teachers wanted to attend but they were not allowed to because of they were in the middle of their teacher training and were instructed to avoid crowded places because of Covid-19 guidelines.

Professor Toland's session

The title of Professor Toland's session was: '*Cultivating English language learners' creativity*'. During his session, Professor Toland concentrated on the following areas: (1) what is creativity?; (2) challenges related to fostering creativity; (3) how to teach creatively; and (4) creativity and digital literacy – practical lesson ideas. Professor Toland concluded his session with a group activity.



Figure 1: Professor Toland's session on 'Cultivating English language learners' creativity'

Professor Uchida's session

The title of Professor Uchida session was: *'Why can't they write?'* During his session, Professor Uchida concentrated on the following areas: (1) getting Japanese students to write in English; (2) getting Japanese students to think critically; and (3) getting students to keep a conversation going in English.



Figure 2: Professor Uchida's session on 'Why can't they write?'

Feedback

At the end of the workshop a feedback sheet was given to each participant (see Appendix A). The pre-service English teachers were told that their feedback was anonymous and they were encouraged to give their honest comments. Below the feedback on both sessions is discussed, and illustrative comments from the participants. Pseudonyms are used in this paper to protect the identity of the workshop participants.

Feedback on Professor Toland's session

The pre-service teachers appreciated the practical focus provided by Professor Toland's session. For example, Miki wrote: *"He gave us specific class ideas, which were very helpful. I want to make creative classes, too. I'll make students use PowerPoint or video editing apps!"* The participants were very interested in how to weave ICT use into their teaching and the practical advice provided by Professor Toland was widely appreciated. Yuki commented: *"I have been interested in how to make classes exciting with ICT devices so I got a lot of practical ideas from your session. Thank you!! I especially became interested in recording conversation maybe all Japanese junior high or high students have iPad now so I want to try it in my future. Thank you!"*

Professor Toland's session examined how creativity could be fostered in the classroom. The importance of creativity for both teachers and students was also highlighted. Kaoru stated that: *"I learned that creativity is so important and I should have it entire my life. Also, I got some interesting ideas about teaching. ICT makes class more interesting when the students can use it effectively."* Rie, who had already completed her teaching practice, reflected on the importance of creative thinking which was raised by Professor Toland:

Because I've experienced my teaching practice, Professor Toland's session made me realize the importance of creative thinking. As I prepared for my class, it was really difficult for me to make my class creative and active, so hopefully after I actually become a teacher I want to try out some of the activities which Professor Toland has shared with us today.

Feedback on Professor Uchida's session

Professor Uchida's session focused on critical thinking. Ayumi was very positive about the session, and through the workshop came to realize the importance of helping students develop their critical thinking skills in Japanese: *"I was amazed to know why the Japanese students can't write English sentences well. I learned that it is important to improve the critical thinking skills in Japanese before writing English."* Haru reflected on how he needed to improve their teaching ability: *"It was really interesting. I learned what the critical thinking is. I thought I should keep studying to improve my teaching skill. There are a lot of ways to teach English."* Professor Uchida's session also helped some of the students reflect on their own teaching experiences. Fune explained her feelings:

It was really fun presentation and it also interesting topic for me. I especially interested in the J-E [Japanese to English] exercise. I'm working at cram school and I feel that many students can't come up with their opinions. The exercise we did today was interesting and also effective for students to develop students' thinking skills. Thank you for the wonderful experience.

How to raise students' motivation is a major concern for pre-service (and in-service) English teachers. Professor Uchida gave some practical examples of how to get students engaged in class and the importance of creating 'comfortable pressure'. Rie reflected on this: *"Raising students' motivation was one of the problems I have faced, so Professor Uchida's session has given me a good idea of how to get the students more interactive in the English class."*

Both sessions given by Professor Toland and Professor Uchida were received enthusiastically by the participants. In their written feedback many participants wrote that they were looking forward to attending future workshops.

Suggested topics for future workshops

The workshop outlined in this paper received considerable positive feedback from the participants. When asked to suggest possible topics for future workshops the pre-service English teachers provided many recommendations (Table 2 below shows their suggestions). The column on the left shows suggestions from students who had already completed their teacher training (all fourth-year students) and the column on the right shows suggestions from those who had yet to experience the on-site teacher training as part of the teacher training course (i.e., third-year students).

Table 2: Suggested topics for future workshops

No.	Suggestions for future workshop topics made by students who had completed their teacher training	No.	Suggestions for future workshop topics made by students who had yet to experience teacher training
1	How to make opportunities to communicate in English in class.	1	Teaching methods, ICT, speaking activities, and presentation skills.
2	Activities for each reading, listening, speaking, writing skills and how to teach grammar in a fun way.	2	How to be good a teacher in difficult situation such as dealing with monster parents and bullying.
3	Manners, icebreakers with students, how to start a new unit and handout ideas.	3	How to improve Japanese students' speaking skills.
4	How to teach in order to make students focused.	4	How to design speech activities and use presentations in class.
5	How to make a teaching plan. How to make students actively.	5	How to motivate students. How to teach English in an interesting way. How to teach grammar.
6	How to teach grammar effectively.	6	How to provide students with active learning in English classes.

Analysis of the feedback related to possible future workshop topics helped determine the theme for the second workshop (Cripps et al., 2023). This 'feedback loop' is one essential element to the crafting of workshops which are tailored to the pre-service teachers' needs.

Conclusion

This paper has outlined the evolution of a research project that aims to support pre-service teachers of English in Japan. The impetus for seeking funding was borne out of frustration from the PI as he wanted to his seminar students when they became English teachers. After successfully securing JSPS funding, the research team has been working to ascertain the needs of pre-service English teachers and design workshops to meet these needs. As demonstrated in this paper, the first workshop which was held in June 2022 was a resounding success. In fact, the title for this paper was inspired by one of the participants in the workshop who expressed their satisfaction with one of the workshop sessions. Post-workshop feedback was overwhelming positive and suggestions were made regarding possible topics for future workshops. It is clear that pre-service English teachers in Japan need a great deal of help before they enter the teaching field, and the workshop described in this paper is the first step to providing significant and meaningful support for aspiring English teachers.

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Appendix A

Feedback Sheet

Feedback Sheet – Pre-service Teaching Workshop No. 1

Thank you for agreeing to complete this short survey. It should take about 10 minutes to complete. Your answers will be used to help understand pre-service English teachers' needs, to aid research, and to help design future workshops.

Your answers will be treated with strict confidentiality and at no time will your identity be revealed. The questionnaire is anonymous. Once again, thank you for your help.

Tony Cripps

1. Please provide some feedback about Professor Toland's session:

2. Please provide some feedback about Professor Uchida's session:

3. **For students who have NOT done teaching practice yet** - What topics would you like to see included in future workshops? Please give some examples.

4. For students who have **NOT** done teaching practice yet - What skills do you think you need to learn to help prepare you for becoming a teacher? Please give some examples.

5. For students who have **NOT** done teaching practice yet - What is your opinion of the teaching license course?

6. For students who **HAVE** completed their teaching practice - What is your opinion of the training/support that you received while at your junior high or senior high school?

7. For students who **HAVE** completed their teaching practice - Please write about your experience of teaching at your junior high or senior high school.

8. For students who **HAVE** completed their teaching practice - Considering your experience of teaching at your junior high or senior high school what topics would you like to see included in future workshops?

9. When is the best day/time to hold future teaching workshops? How long would you like the workshops to be?

10. If you have any questions/comments please e-mail me or write them here:

Once again, thank you for your time!

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