

***“I Don’t Have Any Knowledge About Space. What Should I Do?”:
Helping Japanese Pre-service English Teachers Survive Their Teaching Practicums***

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Abstract

This paper outlines a support structure for pre-service English teachers which is being implemented at a private Japanese university as part of a Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS) funded research project. Through the design and delivery of practical teaching workshops the researchers are working to provide meaningful support for pre-service English teachers. The paper begins with a brief discussion of the main challenges which Japanese pre-service English teachers face, before going on to describe the support framework which is being constructed for them. Attention then shifts to a description of the support provided for pre-service English teachers immediately before they start their teaching practicums. The single-case descriptive case study highlights the pedagogical challenges and frustrations that one pre-service English teacher experienced during her practicum. The student’s teaching practice struggles are used as an illustrative example of the problematic issues that pre-service English teachers must overcome. It also highlights how the researchers are trying to construct a customized framework which meets the unique needs of Japanese pre-service English teachers. This paper provides readers with a window into the difficulties which pre-service English teachers face when being thrown into the teaching arena with minimal support.

Keywords: Pre-service Support, Teacher Training, Workshops

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Introduction

This paper, which is one of a series of articles, emerged from a larger study that explores the needs of Japanese pre-service English teachers. The research project aims to provide pre-service English teachers with practical pedagogical strategies and emotional support. It focuses on a Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS) funded ‘*Kaken*’ project which aims to support pre-service English teachers. Several researchers (e.g., Cripps, 2023; Mouri, 2020; Tahira, 2012) have reported that the support structure for pre-service English teachers in Japan is notoriously weak. This unfortunate reality, coupled with a short teaching practicum window of only two or three weeks, places aspiring English teachers in a difficult and vulnerable position. How can short practicums, which are an integral part of the teaching license system in Japan, possibly prepare pre-service English teachers for the realities of teaching at Japanese junior and senior high schools? This short paper discusses the support which is being provided by a group of researchers based in Japan to pre-service English teachers at a private Japanese university. The study draws upon data that emerged from the online interactions between one university student and her professor, an online collaborative debriefing session, and the lead researcher’s classroom observations. By highlighting the concerns of one pre-service English teacher during her teaching practicum, the paper provides a window into pre-service English teachers’ needs in Japan.

Background

Pre-service and in-service English teachers require ongoing support to cope with the myriad of challenges that they will face throughout their teaching careers. As part of a previous research project (see Cripps et al., 2017a, 2017b), the research team members endeavoured to provide assistance for in-service teachers. The five-year research project (2015-2019) identified Japanese in-service English teachers’ needs and aimed to address those needs through intensive workshops, an online teacher support centre, and the creation of practical teaching material.

In 2022, the writers of this paper were awarded a five-year JSPS grant to support Japanese pre-service teachers of English. The research team is currently working to identify the specific needs of pre-service English teachers and provide meaningful support in a variety of different ways such as teaching workshops, individualized online support, teaching handbooks, and a professional learning network. Pre-service teachers in Japan face three main challenges as they embark on their teaching journeys: (a) the considerable demands of the New Course of Study guidelines (CoS), (b) poor pre-service training at their university, and (c) a lack of practical teaching experience (Mouri, 2020; Tahira, 2012). To help equip pre-service English teachers with the necessary skills that they will need once they start teaching the research team has started to offer a series of workshops dedicated to addressing these needs. Previous workshops conducted by expert educators from Japan and Australia have focused on issues such as ‘Helping false beginners to read/write’, ‘Strategies to support Japanese English language learners’ 21st century skills’, and ‘Improving students’ spoken English skills’ (for more detailed information on these workshops see Cripps et al., 2023a, 2023b; Cripps et al., 2023).

A Teacher-Training Seminar Course at Nanzan University

Nanzan University is a private Catholic University in Nagoya, Japan. Many students in the Department of British and American Studies (known as ‘*Eibei*’ in Japanese) have a high level of English as they attended high schools with strong English programmes and/or studied overseas in English-speaking countries. Not surprisingly, a significant number of students in

the *Eibe* programme enrol each year in a teaching license course run by the university. In addition to the teaching license course, some *Eibe* professors also offer teaching seminar courses to third- and fourth-year students. Professor Cripps' seminar course at Nanzan University aims to furnish students with a grounding in teaching methodology and provide them with practical pedagogical skills (see Cripps, 2023 for a detailed overview of the seminar course). The list below shows some of the main the subject areas covered in the two years of Professor Cripps' seminar course:

- Teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) methodology
- The roles of a teacher
- Learners and their needs
- Motivation
- Learner autonomy
- Evaluation
- Teaching speaking
- Teaching listening
- Teaching reading
- Teaching writing
- Teaching vocabulary
- Teaching with technology

Support Woven Into a Practical Teaching Seminar Course

The provision of support immediately before the pre-service English teachers begin their teaching practicums as part of their teaching license course is a key component of preparing them for many of the challenges that they will face during their teaching practice. Apart from offering a solid grounding in teaching methodology, Professor Cripps' seminar course aims to provide extensive support for his seminar students who are enrolled in the teaching license course and undertake a teaching practicum. Usually, most teaching practicums take place in June. Therefore, two bespoke classes which help prepare students for their teaching practice are woven into the seminar course in May.

Bespoke Class One – Sample Lesson

In this class, Professor Cripps gives a mock English lesson that is designed for high school students. Special attention is paid to how to begin a lesson, generating interest in the topic at hand, offering encouragement and positive reinforcement, as well as strategies to get students to interact and produce spoken English. After the sample class, students discuss the various components of the class and how they would teach the same content.

Bespoke Class Two – Q & A Class

In this 100-minute class, which takes place just before the students start their teaching practice, the students are invited to ask Professor Cripps any questions about teaching. The tables and chairs are strategically organized in a horseshoe formation to encourage open communication with Professor Cripps sitting at a desk in front of the students. At the 50-minute mark the roles are reversed. Each student takes a turn sitting in the 'hot seat' (i.e., in front of the horseshoe) and they have to answer questions set by Professor Cripps related to typical teaching situations that they are likely to encounter. Professor Cripps has a list of 50 questions and the students

have to choose a number which is related to a specific question about teaching. This random aspect injects an element of jeopardy into the proceedings and creates a level of tension and anticipation which the students seem to enjoy. Examples of typical questions are: ‘How would you try and motivate students who do not seem interested in your class?’, ‘What are some of the most effective ways to correct students’ mistakes?’, and ‘How can you encourage students to use English in class?’

At the end of the class, the students are encouraged by Professor Cripps to support each other throughout their teaching practicums by establishing their own LINE group. LINE is a popular mobile messenger app in Japan which allows users to send contacts messages and make voice and video calls. In essence, the pre-service teachers’ LINE group acts as a virtual community of practice that offers both practical and emotional support. Several researchers (e.g., Lantz-Andersson et al., 2017; Trust et al., 2016) have reported that teacher forums can serve as a type of virtual staff room where educators can discuss pedagogical strategies, troubleshoot problematic classroom issues, and receive moral encouragement. In addition, Professor Cripps reminds the students that he is always willing to answer any questions that they may have during their teaching practicums.

The section highlighted in the pages that follow provides an illustration of a typical LINE message interaction which frequently takes place between seminar students who are nervously preparing for their teaching practicums and Professor Cripps. It provides an interesting window into the pedagogical concerns and trepidations that most Japanese pre-service educators experience at the start of their teaching journey.

Support During Teaching Practice

The teaching practicum period, which is only three weeks for a junior high school license or two weeks for a senior high school license, is perhaps one of the most stressful and demanding periods that pre-service English teachers experience throughout their time at university. During this time, Professor Cripps offers both virtual and face-to-face support for the students in his teaching seminar course. In addition, he usually observes the teaching practice of at least three of his students at junior high or senior high schools. Unfortunately, it is logistically impossible for Professor Cripps to conduct classroom observations for all of his students because of his teaching load, committee work, and other responsibilities. Therefore, many of the pre-service English teachers in Professor Cripps’ seminar course tend to either come to visit him in his research office to ask for advice, or alternatively they request online support with their lesson plans via the LINE message function.

What follows below is a representative example of a typical message exchange which takes place during the teaching practicum period. The LINE message exchange between one of Professor Cripps’ seminar students ‘Nozomi’ (pseudonym) and Professor Cripps took place on June 6, and June 13, 2023. Nozomi had just started her two-week teaching practicum at a senior high school in Aichi prefecture. She informed Professor Cripps that her mentor at the high school had instructed that she would be responsible for teaching a textbook unit which focuses on ‘space’. The LINE messages provide a snapshot of the concerns of Nozomi, and how Professor Cripps tries to offer constructive advice to his seminar students.

Figure 1. LINE message from Nozomi asking for advice

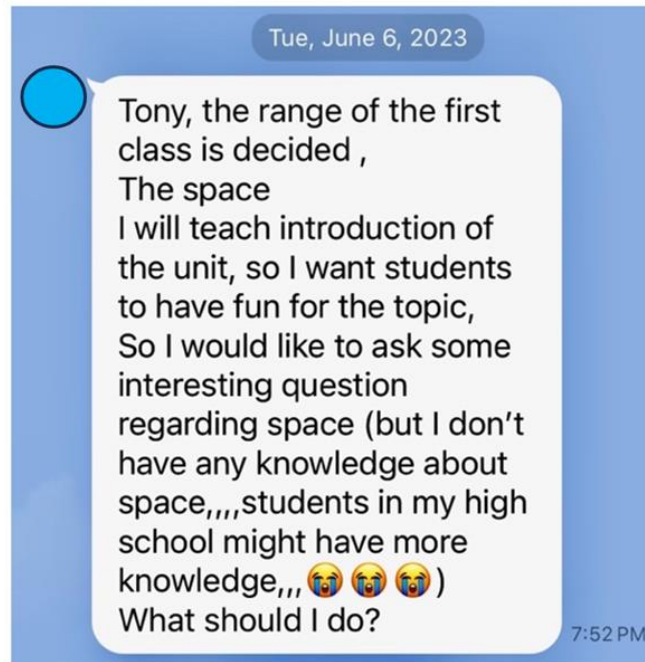
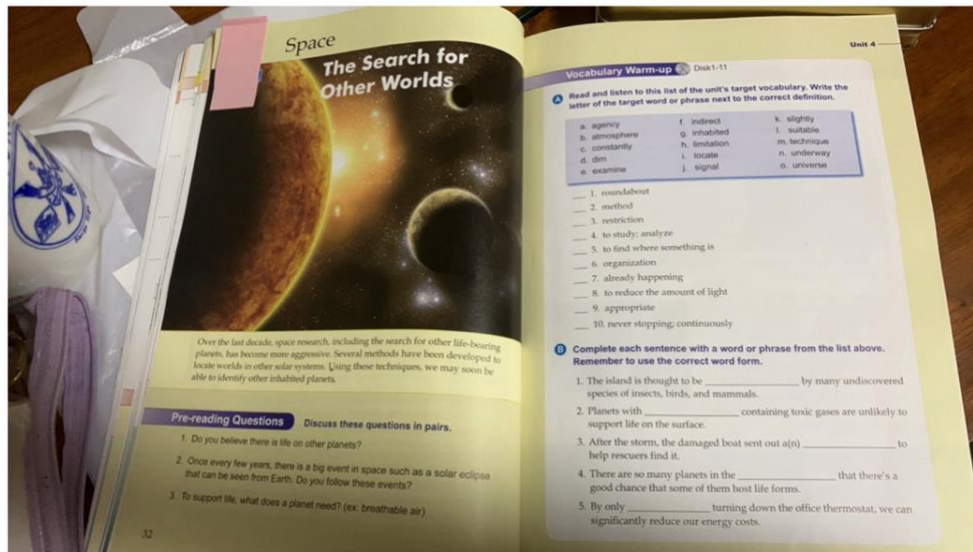
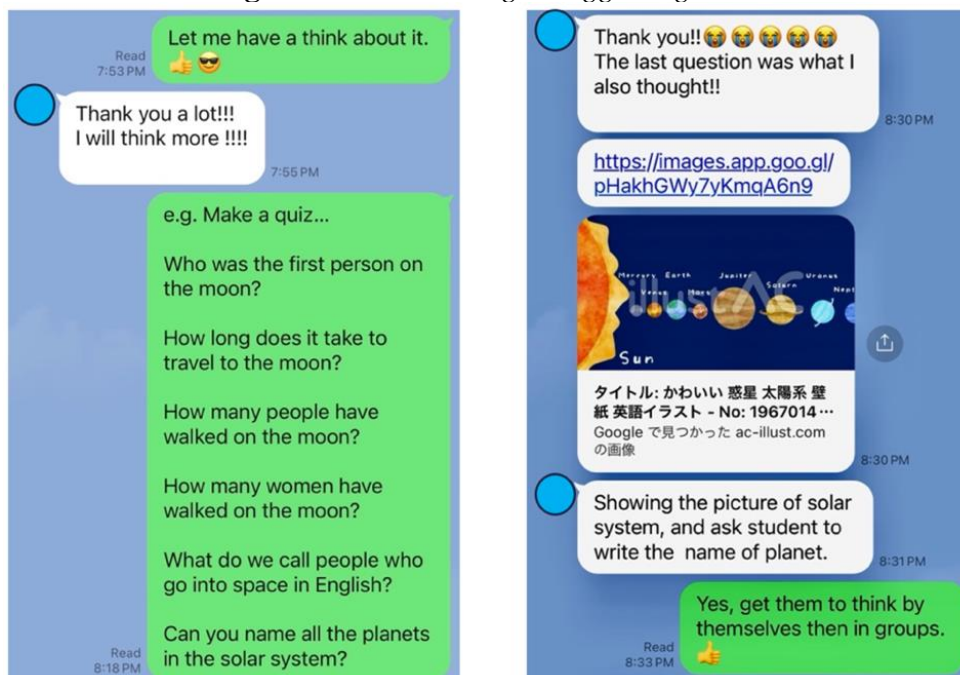


Figure 2. Textbook photograph sent by Nozomi



Once the pre-service English teachers have been told which sections of the textbook they will teach, a certain amount of uneasiness sets in, and students often ask for help. In this case, Nozomi was worried about the content of a chapter about 'space' and sent a LINE message in which she wrote: "I don't have any knowledge about space...What should I do?" In such a situation, it is important for the seminar course teacher (Professor Cripps in this case) to project a measure of calmness and reassure the student. It is equally important to refrain from being 'a wise sage' who provides 'all the answers'. Instead, it is essential that room is left to allow students to forge their own pedagogical paths.

Figure 3. LINE message: *Suggesting ideas*



It is imperative for both supervisors and mentors to stay positive and supportive when listening to pre-service English teachers' ideas and concerns. The temptation sometimes is to try and provide pre-service teachers with 'the answers' they seek instead of letting them find their own way. The feedback shown in Figure 3 and Figure 4 was given to act as a catalyst to engage Nozomi's own ideas. No further advice was given until one week later (June 13, 2023) after Nozomi had taught her first two classes.

Figure 4. LINE message: *Continuing the discussion*

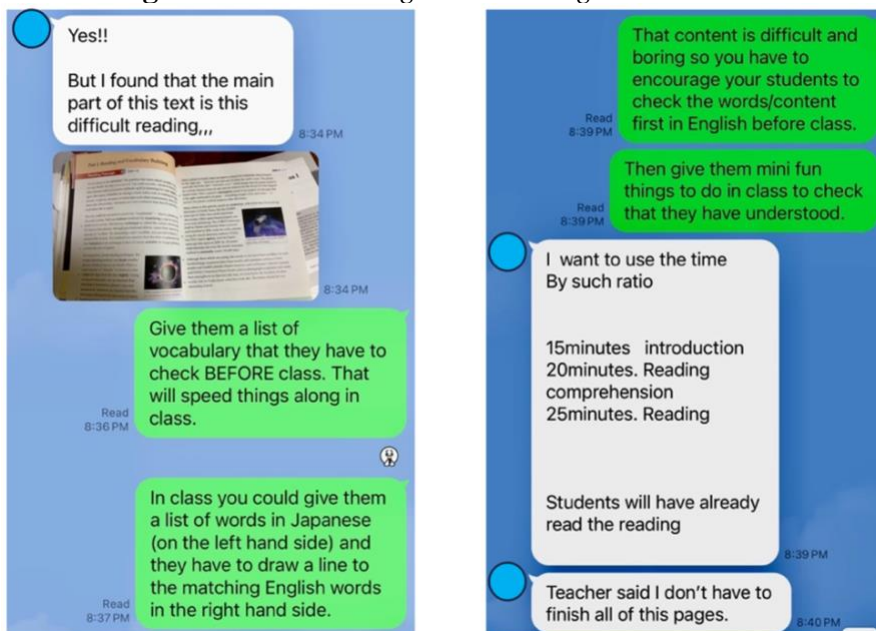


Figure 5. LINE message: Continuing the discussion

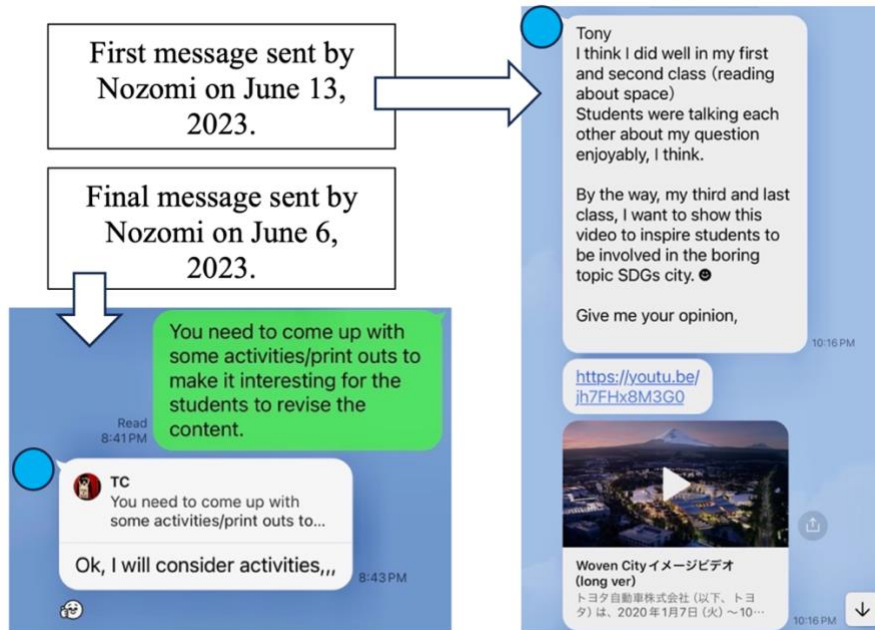


Figure 6. Explaining how to 'set up' and explain a topic before using a video

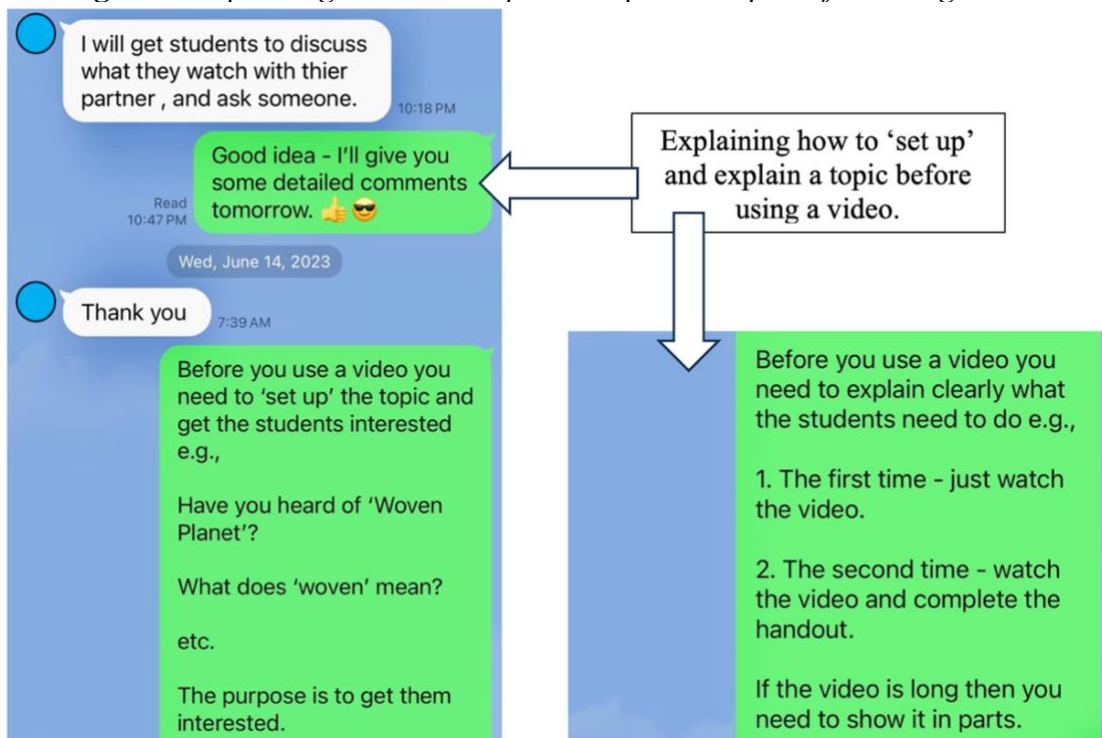
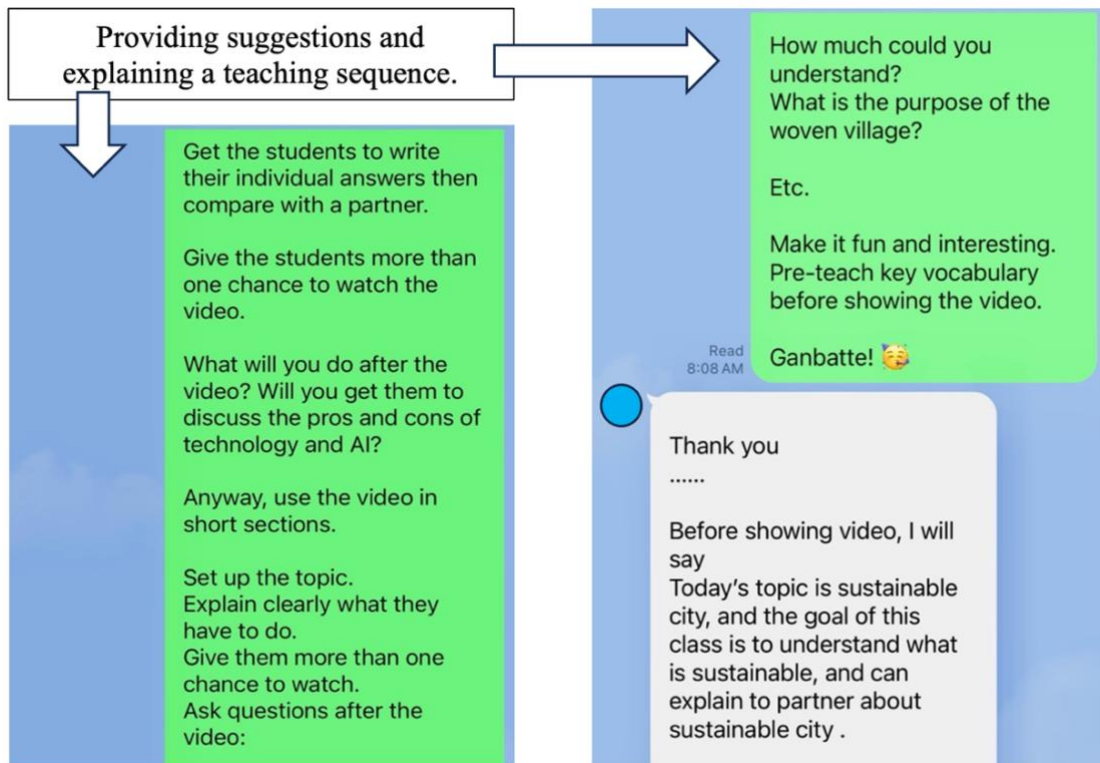
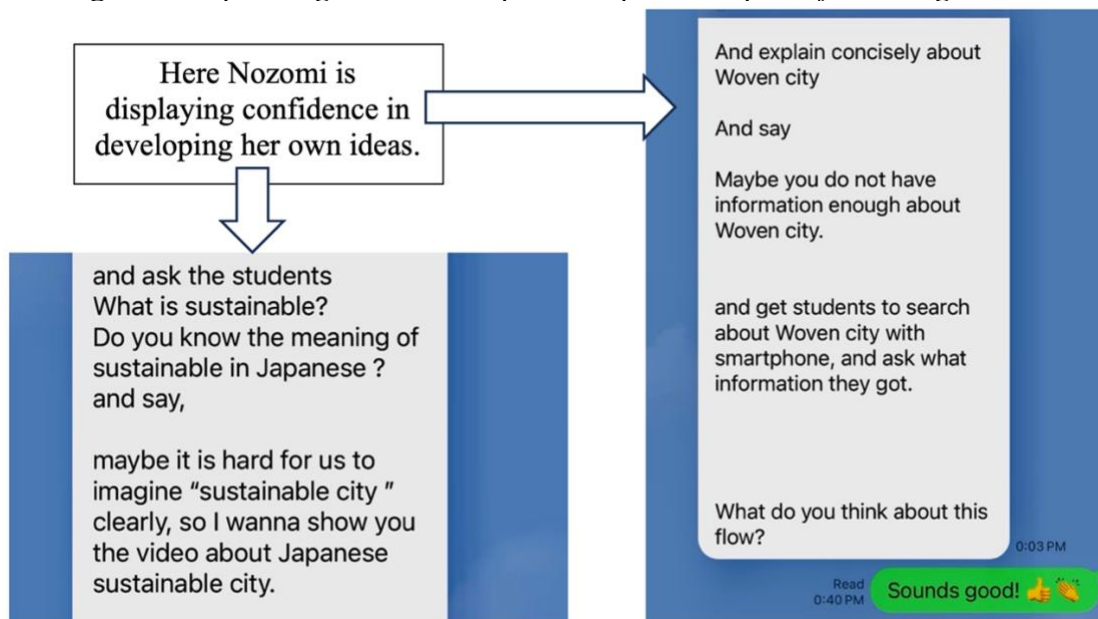


Figure 7. Explaining a 'teaching sequence' when using a video



After teaching her first two classes, it was clear that Nozomi's initial apprehensions were alleviated, and she was generally satisfied with her teaching performance. In Figure 7 and Figure 8 she shares her ideas on how she intends to introduce the topic of 'sustainable cities'. Nozomi shows how she plans to 'set up' the topic before outlining how she will try to pique the students' interest in the topic.

Figure 8. Explaining how to 'set up' and explain a topic before using a video



The LINE messages above provide a clear example of the kind of support that pre-service English teachers seek during their teaching practicums. In this case Professor Cripps tries to

offer advice without being too prescriptive. After teaching her first two classes it is evident that Nozomi had developed a certain level of confidence in her own teaching ability. Her initial concerns of “*I don’t have any knowledge about space...What should I do?*” soon dissipated leaving Nozomi to concentrate on how she would plan and deliver her subsequent classes.

Debriefing Session

After the teaching practicums have finished, Professor Cripps gets together all his seminar course students who gave practicums for a special ‘debriefing’ session. During this meeting, Professor Cripps utilizes ‘reflective circles’ as the technique provides educators with not only mutual support, but also an awareness of different perspectives and strategies (Gardner et al., 2022). This important session, which is offered outside of regular class time, affords the students the opportunity to share their practicum experiences with the other members of the seminar course. On June 21, 2023, this recorded session took place online using the Zoom video conferencing platform and seven students spent over hour sharing their practicum experiences (in both English and Japanese). While it is beyond the scope of this paper to examine this debriefing session in great detail, it is worth noting that it generated a lot of interesting comments and reinforced the value of a teachers’ community of practice. This debriefing session will be the subject of a future paper.

Moving Forward

Hopefully this paper has served to give the reader a front-row seat in which to observe the support which is being provided by the *Kaken* research team to pre-service English teachers at Nanzan University. We will continue to offer a variety of different teaching workshops (e.g., making learning more accessible for neurodiverse learners) while exploring other areas of assistance such as the provision of an online support site and teaching handbooks. We also plan to widen our ‘follow-up’ support by monitoring novice teachers to better understand their initial struggles and teaching needs.

Conclusion

This short paper has attempted to highlight different types of support that are being provided for pre-service English teachers at a private university in Japan. Many university students who are taking a teaching license course often experience high levels of anxiety when preparing for, and taking part in, their teaching practicums. The teacher-training workshops, pre-practicum bespoke classes, and post-practicum formal and informal debriefing sessions briefly outlined in this paper all work to build a protective and realistic support framework for pre-service English teachers.

This paper has provided a unique insight into the online interactions that take place between pre-service English teachers and seminar course leader before, during, and after their teaching practicums. More specifically, the LINE messages from Nozomi to her seminar course teacher Professor Cripps illustrate typical concerns that pre-service teachers experience and demonstrate how instructors and mentors can provide constructive feedback while leaving pre-service teachers free to explore and utilize their own ideas. Expert teachers are adept at adapting to new and difficult circumstances based on their considerable experience. When expert teachers act as mentors to aspiring and novice teachers, they should create a calm and nurturing atmosphere which enables new educators to ‘find their own way’. The *Kaken* project that our

research group is working on aims to provide pre-service English teachers with such an environment as well as the requisite skills that they will need for their teaching careers.

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