

Teacher Professional Development: A Key to Effective English Education Curriculum Choices

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【報告】

Teacher Professional Development: A Key to Effective English Education Curriculum Choices

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In order to make decisions that lead to effective teaching practices, teachers need to have both disciplinary knowledge and pedagogical ability. This paper examines the hiring criteria of higher education institutions and recruiters for these institutions in Japan, by analyzing the fields of expertise of English teaching faculty at a university. In addition, semi-structured interviews with two university faculty members who have academic backgrounds in fields other than language or education are presented to exemplify issues faculty face. Based on the findings it is argued that there is a lack of this base knowledge that underpins best practices within English language education and consequently the implementation of faculty development for both full-time and part-time faculty members teaching English would help ground faculty in the foundational knowledge necessary for effective teaching practices.

1. Introduction

While research was of paramount importance for university faculty in the past, nowadays higher education around the world is putting more emphasis on quality teaching and learning (Bradshaw, 2013; Figlio & Schapiro, 2017). Some institutions are even including teaching effectiveness as one of the criteria for assessing faculty tenure promotions. Here, in Japan, we see this shift in attitudes toward teaching with the promotion of faculty development centers, such as the Center for Professional Development at Tohoku University, which provide seminars, workshops, and programs to help faculty improve their teaching along with other aspects of their duties as university faculty. However, these programs are often under-utilized because of their voluntary basis. Thus, a question that remains is how effective is the teaching that is being carried out at universities across Japan. This question is especially relevant to English language instruction since the faculty that teach these classes often come from a variety of fields.

This paper, thus, aims to first provide insight into

exactly how diverse the disciplines of English language teaching faculty can be. It then addresses the question of how English teaching faculty without field specific knowledge make decisions about curricula through two case studies. Finally, recommendations regarding how teacher training can help all English language teaching faculty make better choices will be provided.

2. Literature Review

The lack of quality in English language education in Japan is a common theme regarding secondary education based on the fact that few students reach oral proficiency in the language. Numerous research articles (Steele & Zhang, 2016; Kikuchi & Browne, 2009; Sakui, 2003) highlight the mismatch between Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) goals of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and what actually takes place in the classroom due to stakeholder pressure to prepare for high school and university entrance examinations. Teachers are often required to prepare students for examinations that focus on grammar

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and translation rather than communication.

The efforts to implement CLT, which have largely failed, may be due in part to the above mentioned pressures, but other factors such as inadequate teacher training and a lack of understanding of the CLT principles and methods have been identified by Cripps (2016). These latter factors are not limited to secondary education but also affect higher education as well. Because of possible conflict between existing practices and beliefs that are grounded in the Grammar-Translation Method, consideration regarding how to adapt CLT to specific contexts is also an important consideration. Igawa (2008, p. 432) points out that “As professionals, teachers should constantly develop themselves. Teachers’ own growth is necessary in order to cope with the ever-expanding knowledge base in subject matter and pedagogy, rapidly changing social contexts of schooling, and increasingly diversifying students’ needs.” While ideally teachers would prioritize their professional development in the areas they are teaching, professionals in higher education have many demands upon their time and may focus their efforts in other areas especially if their expertise is in areas outside that which they are teaching.

3. Inherent Nature of Change in Education

One inherent aspect of effective teaching at any level is change. This change, be it within a teacher’s own classroom, or possibly more broadly at the course level, can be initiated due to external forces, such as a changing social context that affects the subject matter that one is teaching, new course offerings requiring the development of a new curriculum, and the “new vision” that invariably accompanies administrative changes within a university. However, it more commonly occurs on the more localized level from the teachers themselves. Teaching is often referred to as a reflective and recursive practice where the

practitioner is examining and rethinking their intentions and the learning outcomes based on the felt experiences in the classroom (Eisner, 1991; O’Reilly, 1998) .

Reflective practice can come in a variety of forms. One of the most common is the class questionnaire that students complete at the end of each semester. Here at Tohoku University, teachers are required to reflect by submitting online responses to how these course evaluations will affect their teaching in the future. However, self-reflection can take many other forms such as action research within the classroom, and more formative types of assessment can be implemented throughout a class, such as “minute-paper” or student focus groups that have students highlight difficulties or problem areas they perceive with a particular class. Classroom observation by other teachers can also be helpful to provide feedback. The conscientious teacher is continually adapting their materials and teaching methodology to reflect the current context of their teaching.

4. Effective Teaching in Higher Education

Before taking into consideration the various forms of feedback or requests from administration to make adjustments and improvements to their teaching, a basic understanding of what effective teaching is must form the foundational basis from which to build upon. While effective teaching in higher education is a “contested concept” (Skelton, 2004, p. 452), numerous studies from a variety of standpoints have been carried out. McMillan (2007) highlights a variety of studies from a discipline specific perspective while a student perspective is provided by the likes of Onwuegbuzie et al. (2007), Vulcano (2007), and Delaney, Johnson, Johnson, and Treslan (2010). Such a wide sampling of how “effective teaching” is conceptualized presents diverse views on exactly how it can be achieved. However, effective teaching is generally understood as teaching that is

student-focused and affects learning in a positive way (Devlin & Samarawickrema, 2010).

Numerous research studies (for example Kreber, 2002; Delaney, Johnson, Johnson & Treslan, 2010; Bulger, Mohr, & Wallis, 2002; Witcher, 2003) support the common sense notion that the foundation of good teaching begins with disciplinary knowledge. Saroyan et al. (2004) and Bulger, Mohr, and Walls (2002) expand on this notion by indicating that knowledge by itself is not enough but how it is presented, or pedagogical ability, is as important, if not more important to the learning process. With this in mind, the question of what constitutes the disciplinary knowledge needed to teach English as a second or foreign language arises.

4.1 Disciplinary knowledge in English language teaching

As with most professional undertakings, students study specific fields at university to prepare themselves with the disciplinary knowledge and theoretical underpinnings that are necessary for decision making once they begin their careers. For a career in teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language, the recognized field of study is a Master of Arts Degree in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), which includes Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL), Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) and Teaching English as an International Language (TEIL). According to Bagwell (2018), these degrees differ from other language related degrees such as Applied Linguistics, Linguistics, and Second Language Acquisition in that TESL/TEFL/TEIL focuses on pedagogy and applying language research to classroom pedagogy whereas the later degrees are focused more on language theory and research unrelated to teaching.

4.2 Current situation in higher education in Japan

From personal experience, this foundational level of disciplinary and pedagogical knowledge, necessary for effective teaching was glaringly absent from the requirements of the higher education institutions in the late 1990's and early 2000's, which was evident from the foreign faculty members' educational backgrounds including my own, which consisted of only a bachelor's degree in zoology and a master's degree in international management. Having any kind of master's degree and some knowledge/experience with Japanese language and culture were sufficient qualifications to teach English at the university level.

The situation has seemingly improved little over the last 30 years. Blog posts chronicling teachers' experiences teaching in Japan that mention colleagues' qualifications hint at this fact. For example, Blincowe (2018) states, "I met English teachers who were directly hired by universities, they held master's degrees but in a variety of subjects. Some of the older teachers didn't have post-graduate degrees, but instead held over 20 years of teaching experience that was considered just as good." This is also evident when looking through the hiring criteria for university teachers on websites like that of Westgate Corporation, a recruiter of teachers for over 50 university campuses in Japan (a list is available at <https://www.westgatejapan.com/M-1-2.html>). These criteria include:

"University graduate with a bachelor's and/or more advanced degree and one of the following:

1. EFL/ESL classroom teaching experience along with EFL/ESL teaching certificate and/or elementary/primary/secondary teaching credentials/qualifications
2. 1000+ hours of actual EFL/ESL classroom teaching experience in lieu of teaching certificate or credentials/qualifications" (Westgate, 2018)

The implication of these criteria is that experience can be a replacement for educational qualifications. This may be true if the experience is high quality, but that is something that is often difficult to ascertain. In addition, as Richards and Farrell (2005, p. 4) point out “...although many things can be learned about teaching through self-observation and critical reflection, many cannot, such as subject-matter knowledge, pedagogical expertise and understanding of curriculum and materials.”

In addition to the hiring practice of recruiters that many universities rely upon, universities in Japan require teachers from some fields, especially American or British Literature and American History to teach required English courses along with classes within their major fields of study. This is seemingly done because of the sheer number of required English courses versus the lower demand for the field specific courses of these subjects. While universities abroad, such as those in the United States, compensate for the high demand for English teachers by hiring graduate students at low wages, this is not an option for Japanese universities where classes can, in most cases, only be lead by full-time faculty members. Some universities are even requiring native English-speaking faculty from any department to also teach required English courses due to manpower and budgetary considerations. (M. Sato, personal communication, September 6, 2018)

4.2.1 A case in point: Faculty teaching English at Tohoku University

A quick look at the educational backgrounds and research interests of faculty, both native and foreign, teaching English as a Foreign Language at any campus in Japan will yield a wide variety of disciplinary backgrounds, some of which have little or no connection to the English language or teaching in general. As a case study for this paper, the researcher looked at the educational backgrounds

and research activities of full-time faculty teaching English at Tohoku University by analyzing data self-reported through departmental websites and ResearchMap (<https://researchmap.jp>). The very fact that full-time English teachers come from four different departments or institutes (Literature, Informatics, International Culture, and the Institute for Excellence in Higher Education) would lead one to believe they come from diverse backgrounds and this holds true. Of the 36 full-time faculty members teaching English in 2018 only seven teachers hold a degree in TESOL or some variety thereof or have both English and Education degrees. Another 15 are in more research and theory related language studies such as linguistics some of which are clearly focused on languages other than English, with 14 coming from fields totally unrelated to English language such as History, Literature, Media Studies, Indian Philosophy and Asian studies. (Figure 1)

This diversity of educational backgrounds would seemingly be even more prevalent with part-time teachers, many of whom even though English is not their field of expertise or possibly interest, take on English teaching to supplement their incomes or because they cannot find full- or even part-time work in their field of expertise. While data for part-time teachers was not available, the anecdotal evidence

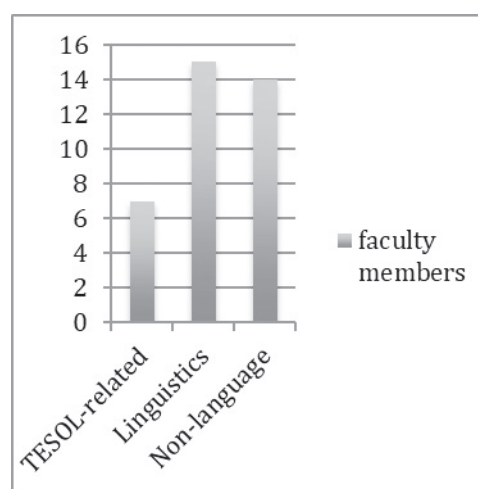


Figure 1: Tohoku University Teacher Distribution by field of study

from personal acquaintance would suggest that this is so. It seems that because demand for native-speaking or native-like speaking teachers outweighs the supply in some regions, the fall back position for many institutions is that if you are able to speak English, you are able to teach it. This is related to what Medgyes (2001, p. 433) calls “unprofessional favouritism in institutions, publishing houses, and government agencies” when referring to the preference for native English speakers over non-native English speakers.

4.2.2 Semi-structured interviews of teachers without language-related backgrounds

To help exemplify the situation, case studies based on semi-structured interviews of two faculty members, who are teaching English at Japanese universities but whose degrees are not in TESOL, Linguistics, or Education are provided below.

Teacher A

Teacher A is male and a native speaker of a language other than English or Japanese and has been teaching English in Japan for 14 years. During his Ph.D. studies in biology here in Japan, he began working part-time at a conversation school teaching both his native language and English to help pay living expenses. This school provided two-hours of training on how to help students learn and that is all of the training for teaching that this person ever received. Because teacher A was able to build up extensive experience teaching languages, he was able to get part-time work at various universities when his efforts to find employment in his major field of study failed. With little training, this person based most of his teaching on the good teaching/learning experiences he had had. Having come from an undergraduate university where teaching was highly valued, this person believes that the role models he had were excellent models to base his

own teaching upon. In addition, Teacher A had regular interactions with other teachers with whom he discussed teaching. Because of a heavy teaching load across numerous universities, he uses a common textbook in all of his classes; however, he picks and chooses from what the textbook provides. Although teaching English is Teacher A’s job, his research is still in the biological sciences. Thus, due to time constraints, this teacher does not try to keep up with the developments in TESL/TEFL.

Teacher B

Teacher B is female and a native Japanese speaker who has 18 years of teaching experience in Japan. She is a full-time, tenured faculty member who divides her time between her subject area, Literature, and general English education classes. Having studied English as an undergraduate student and studied abroad for a year, Teacher B is very fluent in English but is focused on Literature. When pursuing a Ph.D. in American Literature, the assumption that Teacher B had was that she would have to teach English along with literature since that is what all of her role models were doing. However, the teaching of English was not of great interest to this teacher. She does not consider herself a really serious teacher and this person’s main goal in the class is to keep the students awake. Thus, this teacher has recently been using textbooks that are based around popular music, which seems to catch students’ interest. Teacher B also follows the curriculum design presented in the textbook with little variation. More recently, Teacher B has added computer-assisted learning to her teaching because it is available at the university and it is an easy way to fill the students’ time. Occasionally, this teacher finds it difficult to fill up the 90-minute class time and is at a loss as to what to do with the students. Since English education is more of a sideline than the main interest of this teacher, she has not spent much time

learning about the field of English language education. That being said, she has been involved in a special interest group within the Japan Association of Language Teachers.

Both of these case studies, while anecdotal, highlight issues that many teachers, English language-related or not, face in teaching classes. One of these is the idea that teachers can base their teaching on “good classes” that the teacher has taken, a finding mirrored in Marshall’s (1991) survey of the way teachers teach. In addition to teaching based on the way the teacher learned best, Marshall (1991) and Cox (2014) also found that the way teachers were taught and the easiest way to cover the content were common themes in the responses. These latter findings are reflected in what teacher B expressed about her own teaching. One of the problems with using these criteria for one’s own teaching is that students have different preferred learning styles. This is echoed in the research by Thompson, Orr, Thompson, & Park (2002, p. 63), which emphasizes the need for instructors to understand their own learning styles so that they can adapt to their students’ styles. In addition, covering the material often comes at the cost of learning the material. Just because a teacher “teaches” some aspect of the content, it does not mean that students have learned that concept. Research has shown (Schmidt, 1983; Brown & Larson-Hall, 2012) that students internalize or “notice” in different ways. The very fact that there is research such as Brown and Larson-Hall’s (2012) “Second Language Acquisition Myths” indicates that the strategies mentioned by the interviewees and highlighted in other research are not always common sense in nature and cannot be picked up through experience.

5. Discussion/Recommendations

Universities in Japan are faced with a difficult problem regarding English language education. How can they provide quality English language courses that will help students reach their personal goals, as well as the course objectives, if the teachers are not equipped with the knowledge of the best practices within the English language teaching profession? Some institutions have turned to the cookie-cutter approach, or what Ritzer (1996) refers to as “McDonaldization” in describing worldviews, where the curriculum is standardized across the department. In this situation, teachers teach exactly the same materials and give the same assessments in the various sections of the same class. While this ensures the students are at least receiving the same content, it does not address the issue of how that content is taught, or the pedagogy. However, as the title of Torgny Roxa’s (2018) closing plenary, “A learning culture – more about how than about what,” at the 2018 ISSOTL Conference aptly points out, pedagogy is at least as important as if not more important than the actual content being learned. Though content is obviously important, students will not be able to learn that content efficiently without an informed pedagogical approach. In addition, the rationale behind implementing a standardized curriculum can be lost over time as faculty advance, retire, or move on to other institutions taking with them the institutional knowledge.

Therefore, it would be advisable for universities to address the gap in faculty foundational knowledge by implementing faculty development programs targeting field specific needs. As in other subject areas, it is increasingly recognized in recent years that teachers teaching English as a second or foreign language need professional development (Richards & Farrell, 2005).

However, developing these programs is not enough; getting faculty to participate in the programs

is necessary. As for English language classes at Tohoku University, approximately one-third of the classes are provided by part-time faculty members, many of whom have little time or incentive to attend faculty development programs. Institutions may need to consider compensating these adjunct faculty members in some way so that they feel attending such programs is valued. As for full-time faculty, it may be possible to integrate faculty development into their standard monthly meetings or require new faculty to attend a specified number of hours of faculty development as some universities are doing (M. Sato personal communication, September 6, 2018).

While this paper provides some evidence as to the lack of quality control in English language classes at the university level in Japan, it would be valuable to research more deeply the connection between teachers' educational backgrounds, teaching philosophies and classroom practices to determine how effectively English language teaching is being carried out. Obviously, implementing this type of research could face difficulties since teachers are often reluctant to share their views and even more so to have someone observe their teaching.

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