The perceptions of Japanese EFL teachers toward their overseas in-service teacher education program

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Reference data:

In recent years a growing number of EFL teachers who eventually return home to teach have participated in L2 teacher education programs in English speaking countries for professional development. However, studies examining post teacher training experiences are scarce. Therefore, this study investigates the impact of such programs on Japanese EFL teachers, focusing on their perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of the programs, pedagogical tools they learned during their training and use in their classrooms, and any challenges they face in applying the tools presented in the programs to their teaching. The quantitative and qualitative data obtained from questionnaires indicates teachers generally perceive their training experiences as beneficial. However, the data also reveal areas teachers want to see developed more in the programs and the challenges they encounter in applying the pedagogical tools they learned when they return to Japan.

　近年英語圏において、職業向上のため第二言語(外国語)としての英語教育プログラムへ参加し、その後帰国し英語を教えるEFLの教師が増加している。にもかかわらず、そうした教師のプログラム参加後の経験を調査している研究は大変少ない。そこで本研究は、日本人英語教師のその後にプログラムがどのように影響しているかを調査する。特にこの研究では、プログラムでのどのような経験が現在の現場の職業に活かされているか、またさらに学びたかった点は何か、帰国後プログラムで学んだどういった知識を活用しているか、またその際もしあるとするならばどのような困難を経験しているか、について調査する。アンケートにより収集した量と質のデーターによると、教師はほぼプログラムでの経験を有益なものと考えていた。しかしながら、プログラムの改善点や学んだ知識を教師が現場で活用する際の苦労を経験していることも明らかになった。

A number of prospective and experienced English language teachers around the world participate in L2 teacher education programs in English speaking countries. In fact, there are a growing number of teachers from English as a foreign language (EFL) settings in North American universities who intend to return to teach in their home countries after completing their programs (Liu, 1999; Nunan,

2003). Thus it is important to understand EFL teachers' post-training experiences, in particular, the impact of teacher education programs on their classrooms in their home countries.

L2 teacher education

The issues of L2 teacher education have gradually received attention among scholars in the TESOL field. A central topic in recent literature on L2 teacher education has centered on the issue of what constitutes a professional knowledge base to develop effective programs for English language teachers (e.g. Freeman & Johnson, 1998; Yates & Muchisky, 2003). According to Crandall (2000), traditionally scholars attempted to determine the core of L2 teacher education based on a range of disciplines to prescribe what L2 teachers needed to know in order to successfully teach.

This transmission model of training has been challenged by social constructivists who seek to understand the complexity of teachers' experiences of learning to teach. In broad terms, social constructivists view learning as a social, cultural, historical, and situated activity which is also inextricably interwoven with individuals' mental lives (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996; Cole, 1985). Since the late 1980s, for example, researchers in L2 teacher education have explored teacher beliefs and their experiences of learning to teach. Recently, they have further explored teachers' professional practices in relation to broader social and cultural contexts. This descriptive view of teaching has had a great impact on the direction of L2 teacher education in the last decade (Crandall, 2000). Many researchers, for example, describe teachers filter the subject matter learned in teacher education programs through their own belief systems (e.g. Almarza, 1996; Freeman & Richards, 1996). Most recently scholars have started to reveal the influence of social contexts (e.g., teacher education programs, classrooms, and institutions) on professional activities in relation to teacher beliefs (e.g. Richards, 1998; Sato, 2002). One of the concerns discussed in the field is the issue of disconnection between theory and practice such as how teachers make sense of what they learned in academic programs in their teaching practices (e.g. Kinginger, 2002; Richards, 1998).

Studies from social constructivist perspectives certainly have portrayed the dynamic nature of teacher experiences of learning to teach. However, the research has yet to be explored in EFL contexts because of an almost exclusive focus on ESL teachers (Crandall, 2000; Widdowson, 1997).

Impact of the overseas teacher education programs

To better understand the complex nature of teachers learning to teach, it is critical to examine various settings in which teacher training occurs. In the case of EFL teachers, particularly those who participate in overseas teacher education programs, eventually returning to their native countries to teach, studies which examine post-training experiences in native contexts are necessary. Although such studies are scarce, the following two examined impacts of overseas teacher education programs on Japanese EFL teachers. Pacek (1996) examined the effect of Japanese government sponsored one year in-service teacher education programs in the UK. In particular, the study focused on how teachers changed their teaching practices. To assess the usefulness and practicality of the program, Pacek

distributed a questionnaire to 56 secondary school teachers who participated in the overseas study program. Forty-three teachers answered the questionnaires. The findings showed teachers generally responded to the program positively. They selected and adapted elements of the course relevant to their contexts. However, teachers also reported they frequently encountered pressure to follow "the traditional Japanese way of teaching" because of peer, student, and parental resistance to change. They also pointed out problems with using prescribed textbooks when attempting to innovate their classroom teaching (p. 339). Pacek attributed these difficulties to cultural and educational differences between the UK and Japan.

Lamie (2001) also examined the impacts of the in-service teacher education program in the UK on Japanese EFL teachers' beliefs and practices. This one-year program was also sponsored by the Japanese Ministry and was designed to encourage curriculum innovation toward communicative teaching. Unlike Pacek, who obtained data through questionnaires, Lamie employed multiple data collection methods including questionnaires, interviews, and classroom observations. Introducing *The Model of Change*, which describes the process of teacher change, she explored four participants' perceptions of change in their teaching methodology, attitudes, and teaching practices before and after the program. The findings suggest all participants experienced transformation in all three areas toward more communicative teaching (e.g., student-focused and meaning-based), even though constraints at the national and institutional levels (e.g., examinations, large class size) did not change.

Although these studies have provided valuable information about post-teacher training experiences, more studies need to be conducted in order to create a comprehensive picture of the issues involved. Therefore this study explores post-overseas teacher training experiences, concentrating on Japanese teachers of English who participated in teacher education programs in the US.

Research questions

The following research questions were identified:

1. What aspects of the overseas teacher education programs do teachers consider the most useful in their native contexts?

2. What are the areas teachers desire to see developed more in the overseas teacher education programs?

3. What teaching tools exposed in the programs do teachers most often use?

4. What are the challenges, if any, to applying the tools learned in the programs to teachers' native contexts?

Methodology

This paper mainly reports quantitative and qualitative data gathered through a questionnaire. The data for this paper comes from the first stage of a mixed methods approach which combined a questionnaire method and a qualitative case study approach as follows:

1. First stage – Questionnaires consisting of open and closed questions. This data is included in this paper.

2. Second stage – Qualitative data obtained through interviews, classroom observations, and reports. This data is not included in this paper.

Participants

The participants for this study were 59 Japanese EFL teachers who attended either six or twelve month Japanese government-sponsored teacher education (MEXT) programs at two large American universities from 1998 through 2003. At the time the questionnaires were administered, all participants were teaching English at secondary schools across Japan.

In order for Japanese EFL teachers to successfully incorporate communicative language teaching into their classrooms, the Ministry has promoted overseas teacher education and has sent teachers to English speaking countries since 1988 (Monbusho, 1990 as cited in Lamie, 2001). From 1998 through 2003, approximately 200 public full-time English teachers have participated in individually coordinated programs in the US which satisfied requirements proposed by the Ministry. The foci of one of the programs, for example, were ELT methodology, cultural and social aspects of the US, English language skills, and a research project on the EFL field (Holschuh & Romstedt, 2004). A total of 12 state and private universities in the US have hosted the programs.

To draw the most wide-ranging description possible, the sample for this study included teachers who attended the programs in different years (1998-2003), different types of program (6 and 12 month programs), and programs offered to a large number of teachers.

The questionnaire was translated into Japanese and distributed to 90 teachers in summer 2005. Out of 90 teachers who received the questionnaire, 59 returned them, yielding a response rate of 66%. Among the respondents, approximately two-thirds (n = 39) worked at senior high schools and one-third (n = 20) at junior high schools. Their schools were located in Hokkaido, Tohoku, Kanto, Chubu, Kinki, Chugoku, Shikoku, Kyushu, and Okinawa. All participants were experienced EFL teachers, with experience ranging from 7 to 27 years. While approximately three-fourths of the teachers (n = 45) were male, one-fourth was female (n = 14). About half the respondents (n = 29) participated in a 6-month program and the rest (n = 30) attended a 12-month program.

The surveys

The survey instrument was developed based on the literature review of teacher education (e.g. Butler, 2004; Pacek, 1996), a review of program reports, and a preliminary study conducted with a group of Japanese EFL teachers in 2002. Once the questionnaire was constructed, field tests and a pilot test were administered to check content validity and the appropriateness of the questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of three parts. The first part identified teacher background information. It contained 15 items, including multiple choice and open-ended questions. The second part examined teacher opinions about the most useful aspects of the MEXT experiences in their current contexts and the areas they would like to have seen developed more. It consisted of 22 statements to which respondents were asked to identify the degree of usefulness on a 4-point Likert-scale (4, very great extent; 3, to some extent;

2, a small extent; 1, not at all). An alternative answer, "not applicable" was also included.

The last part examined applications of the pedagogical tools covered in the programs to participants' Japanese teaching contexts. In particular, respondents were asked how relevant the course work was to pedagogical practices, which pedagogical tools participants use, the degree of difficulty in applying the tools, and specific factors affecting their application. This part of the questionnaire contained one open and three closed-ended questions which were measured using a 4-point Likert scale (4, very great extent; 3, to some extent; 2, a small extent; and 1, not at all). An alternative answer, "non-applicable" was also included.

Procedures

The two MEXT programs in the United States and the Council on International Educational Exchange (CIEE), which facilitated the programs on behalf of the Ministry, helped the researcher distribute the questionnaire. Data analysis involved descriptive statistics for closed-ended questions and inductive reasoning for open-ended questions.

Results and discussion

Useful aspects of the programs

The first question, regarding what aspects of the training teachers considered most useful in their current teaching contexts, was examined in reference to two areas: (1) language development opportunities and (2) pedagogical tools and their application. Table 1 shows teacher assessment of the former's usefulness. As can be seen, the mean

scores in all areas are relatively high, which suggests that in general teachers had positive feelings about their language development opportunities. In particular, the areas of listening skills had high mean responses (M = 3.51) indicating teachers considered learning opportunities for listening skills the most beneficial. Another area which also had high mean responses was speaking skills (M = 3.47). These results indicate teachers found oral skills useful. In addition, although there was a slight drop-off in terms of writing skills (M = 3.41) and reading skills (M = 3.32), these responses were still positive. There was another slight drop-off with regards to vocabulary learning (M = 3.10), but teachers still viewed this area useful. A variety of language development opportunities the programs provided such as ESL courses, a research project, and extracurricular activities (CIEE, 2001 & 2003) may have contributed to these positive responses. Compared to other areas, however, the mean score for grammar was relatively low (M = 2.54). Whether this can be accounted for by low interest in the area or issues related to the programs will be discussed later.

Table 2 shows assessment of the usefulness of the programs regarding pedagogical tools learned and their application. As can be seen, the overall mean scores are relatively high, indicating teachers generally consider these aspects of the programs useful in their current teaching. A majority of teachers, for example, favored opportunities to learn cultural and social aspects of the US (M = 3.75). They also had positive feelings about the opportunities to reflect on teaching practices developed previously in the programs (M=3.54). Furthermore, although there was a slight drop-off in mean scores, many teachers favored the following

Table 1. Degrees of usefulness in language development opportunities (n = 59)

	Useful (%)	Not Useful (%)	NA (%)	Mean[a]	Median[a]	S.D.
Listening skills	97	3	0	3.51	4.00	0.63
Speaking skills	90	10	0	3.47	4.00	0.73
Writing skills	86	14	0	3.41	4.00	0.77
Reading skills	85	15	0	3.32	3.00	0.78
Vocabulary	81	19	0	3.10	3.00	0.74
Pronunciation	70	31	0	2.93	3.00	0.83
Grammar	46	51	1.7	2.54	2.00	0.87

[a] 4: very useful, 3: somewhat useful, 2: not very useful, 1: not useful at all

Table 2. Degrees of usefulness in pedagogical tools & applications (n = 59)

	Useful (%)	Not Useful (%)	NA (%)	Mean[a]	Median[a]	S.D.
Cultural & social aspects	97	3	0	3.75	4.00	0.51
Reflection on past teaching practices	94	3	3	3.54	4.00	0.63
Classroom observations	83	17	0	3.41	4.00	0.77
Conceptual ideas	86	14	0	3.36	4.00	0.76
Discussion about ELT	80	20	0	3.27	3.00	0.83
Practical ideas	81	19	0	3.25	3.00	0.80
Research project	81	19	0	3.15	3.00	0.81
Discussion about the applications	70	30	0	3.03	3.00	0.9
Teaching practicum	64	27	9	2.96	3.00	0.8

[a] 4: very useful, 3: somewhat useful, 2: not very useful, 1: not useful at all

activities: classroom observations (M=3.41), learning ELT theory (M=3.36), discussions of ELT issues with other professionals (M=3.27), learning practical ideas (M=3.25), and a research project required by the Ministry (M=3.15). These findings imply the critical role such opportunities may play in the professional development of these experienced teachers. Interesting results in Table 2 are those relating to conceptual and practical ideas presented in the programs. High mean scores for theoretical and practical ideas indicate these experienced teachers gained benefits from learning both theoretical and practical tools.

There was a slight drop-off in the mean response with regards to Japanese teachers in the programs discussing how to apply the pedagogical tools to their teaching settings with other professionals participating in the programs (M=3.03) and the teaching practicum (M=2.96), although these mean scores are still relatively high, particularly when considering the percentage of the teachers who responded positively (discussion = 70%; teaching practicum = 64%). However, these areas appear to be less favorable compared to other aspects of the programs, which clustered in the 81-97 percent positive evaluation range.

Aspects teachers desired to see improved

Figure 1 addresses the second research question, regarding what areas the teachers desire to see developed more in the programs. This question was also examined in light of (1) language development opportunities and (2) pedagogical tools and their application. Multiple choice questions were used, so the data was examined based on the percentage teachers provided for various aspects of the programs. As Figure 1 shows, the percentage varies depending on the area. Approximately 68 percent of teachers reported speaking was the area they would like to have developed more in their programs. This relatively high percentage indicates many teachers found the area necessary to develop further. In addition, more than half (58%) reported listening was another area they desired to develop more. Considering the findings of the most useful aspects of the programs in Table 1, listening and speaking, results show there is a gap between what teachers perceived to be useful and what they desired to see improved. However, this gap can be explained

from EFL teachers' perspective of teachers as language learners. That is, while teachers found the opportunities to develop oral skills useful, they appeared to view the progress of their language skills along the interlanguage continuum between the native language and the target language (Brown, 2000). Therefore, while teachers agreed language learning opportunities in the programs were useful on one hand, they still desired to further develop their skills on the other. Hence, they saw the areas worth further development.

There was a drop-off with regards to writing (36%), but some teachers still feel it necessary to develop the area further. There were also drop-offs in vocabulary (25%) and reading (24%). When considered in conjunction with the results reported in Table 1, where a majority of teachers showed positive responses to vocabulary and reading skills, results here indicate that, in general, teachers were more likely to find the two areas satisfying. Moreover, the percentages with respect to grammar (19%) and pronunciation (17%) were low. Considering the results of these areas in Table 1, where half of the teachers (51%) perceived grammar to not be useful and 70 percent viewed pronunciation useful, the findings suggest that, although many teachers felt a need for further development of grammar, they may not have high expectations to receive what they consider grammar teaching in the overseas programs. That is, explicit instruction where the teaching aim is to develop knowledge about grammar through, for example, problem-solving and reasoning (Ellis, 1997, p. 84). Although the issues of explicit/implicit instruction and L2 learning are beyond the scope of this study, given the circumstances in which teachers are most probably

familiar with grammar focused teaching in Japan, the results in Figure 1 seem to be understandable. Regarding pronunciation, however, the findings suggest the teachers appear to be satisfied with what the programs offered.

Figure 1. Areas to receive more instruction (English language skills)
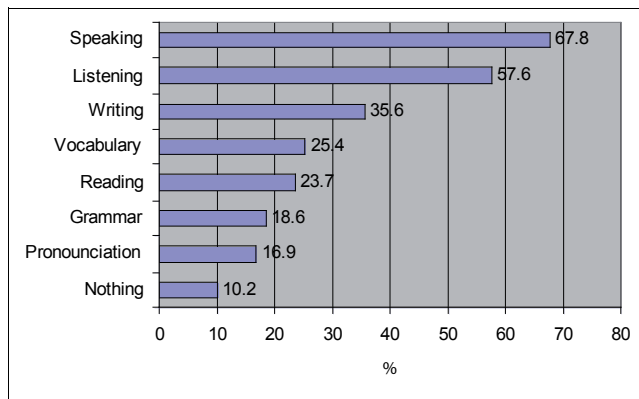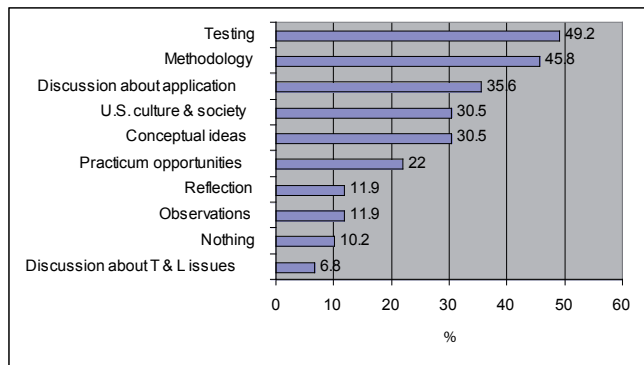

Figure 2 shows the aspects in which teachers desired to receive more instruction in terms of pedagogical tools and their application. As can be seen, teacher reactions were spread between the 7 and 49 percent range, indicating their desire varies, although overall scores were not high. For example, approximately half (49%) and slightly less than half (46%) considered testing and teaching methodology, especially regarding practical ideas, areas they wanted to learn more about. In addition, cultural and social aspects of

the US (31%), and conceptual ideas (31%) are other areas which some teachers desired to receive more instruction in. Although a majority of teachers found these areas (practical ideas, social and cultural aspects of the US and conceptual ideas) useful in their current teaching contexts in Table 2, the findings show there was a gap between what teachers found useful and what they wished to develop more in the programs. That is, while some aspects, such as practical ideas (e.g., methodology) were positively evaluated in Table 2, participants judged it important enough to require additional development and emphasis in their programs in Figure 2.

As far as practical applications are concerned, more than one-third of the participants (36%) indicated they wanted more opportunities to discuss the application of pedagogical tools in their programs. This percentage is higher than other areas in Figure 2. A lower percentage of teachers reported a need to have more practicum opportunities (22%). 64% viewed the area useful in their current contexts (Table 2), although this score is not as high as other areas. The findings seem to suggest teachers are moderately satisfied with their programs.

Other findings were low percentages with respect to reflection (12%), classroom observations (12%), and discussion of L2 Teaching and Learning issues (7%). When examined in conjunction with Table 2, where a majority of teachers considered these useful, the results suggest they appear to be satisfied with these areas.

Figure 2. Areas to receive more instruction (Pedagogical tools & application)

Table 3. Degrees of relevance between the course work and teaching practices (n = 59)

	Frequency	Percent
Very great extent	17	29
To some extent	21	36
To a small extent	20	34
Not at all	1	2

Table 4 offers more insight into teacher use of pedagogical tools, and addresses the third research question, regarding what teaching tools presented in the programs teachers most often use. The numbers in parentheses show how many times the teachers mentioned certain tools. Because of the nature of open-ended questions, the numbers are rather small. In addition, the pedagogical tools reported were practical rather than conceptual. Many of the tools described (e.g. task-based learning, more use of English in class) reflect elements of communicative language teaching, which is consistent with the goals of the programs. The tool teachers most often reported, for example, was the use of group work activities (n = 10). Although in the previous section half the teachers responded that testing was an area in which they desired to learn more, eight teachers here reported using testing/assessing ideas in their classrooms.

Pedagogical tools teachers use

To examine the applicability of the pedagogical tools presented in the programs in teachers' own contexts, the researcher first asked to what extent the teaching tools exposed in the programs are relevant to teachers' current daily teaching practices. "Relevance" here means the connection between participant teaching practices and the pedagogical tools the programs presented to satisfy the requirements proposed by the Japanese Ministry. As can be seen in Table 3, their reactions were spread to various degrees (very great extent, 29%; to some extent 36%; to a small extent 34%), implying mixed feelings regarding the applicability of the pedagogical tools they learned.

Difficulties in application

Table 5 shows perceptions of the degrees of challenge or concerns teachers encountered when applying the pedagogical tools presented in their programs. The majority of teachers (80%) reported they faced challenges or concerns

Table 4. Pedagogical tools teachers often use

Pedagogical Tools
Methodology
-      Group work (10)[a]
-      Task-based learning (7)
-      Skimming/scanning reading (4)
-      Top-down reading (6)
-      Process writing (3)
-      Presentation/debate (4)
Testing/assessing (8)
Use of authentic materials (4)
Lesson plan (3)
Knowledge about cultural & social aspects of US (3)

[a] The number of times teachers mentioned the tools is shown in parentheses.

Table 5. Degrees of challenges or concerns (n = 59)

	Frequency	Percent
Very great extent	5	9
To some extent	26	44
To a small extent	21	36
Not at all	7	12

either "to some extent" (44%) or "to a small extent" (36%), indicating teachers experienced challenges or concerns, but did not think those challenges were "very great" or "not at all." One intriguing finding is that among teachers who responded "not at all" (12%), several reported they did not attempt to use the tools when they were difficult to apply.

Table 6 shows more detailed information about factors which created difficulties or concerns for teachers applying

Table 6. Factors causing challenges and the degree of perceived challenge

	Great/some Extent (%)	Small extent/ Not at all (%)	NA (%)	n	Mean[a]	Median[a]	S.D
High-stakes tests	75	18	3	55	3.18	3.00	0.93
Large class size	56	36	5	54	2.80	3.00	1.11
Differences in expectations of Ss & Ts	49	37	10	51	2.71	3.00	1.14
Ts limited autonomy	46	39	12	50	2.62	3.00	1.14
Testing/Assessing	44	41	12	50	2.56	3.00	0.95
Ss English proficiency	44	46	5	54	2.52	2.50	1.06
Collaboration among Ts	37	53	7	53	2.40	2.00	1.06
T English proficiency	44	46	7	53	2.36	2.00	1.09
Collaborative activities	37	51	9	52	2.35	2.00	1.01
Expectations of T roles	37	47	12	50	2.26	2.00	1.14
Contents of textbooks	34	58	5	54	2.19	2.00	1.03

[a] 4: very great extent, 3: to some extent, 2: to a small extent, 1: not at all

Note. Ss = Students; Ts = Teachers

the pedagogical tools learned in the programs. The mean scores were distributed in the 2.0-3.2 range, indicating teachers found certain factors created some difficulties. For example, many teachers (75%) responded that high-stakes tests were the most challenging factor (M = 3.18). The second highest mean was "large class size" (M = 2.80). Another important factor was the differences between student and teacher expectations regarding English teaching and learning (M = 2.71). Other factors were limited teacher autonomy (M = 2.62), difficulties in accessing student communicative knowledge (M = 2.56), and student English proficiency (M = 2.52). As can be seen, these challenges involve not only social contexts such as national and institutional cultures (e.g., tests, class size, limited teacher autonomy) but also beliefs in teaching and learning (e.g., differences in expectations of students and teachers regarding L2 teaching and learning).

Conclusion

The results indicate teachers considered their overseas in-service teacher training experiences beneficial to their current contexts. In terms of language development opportunities, many teachers expressed desire for further development, particularly in oral skills. The issue of teachers learning English is a main concern for non-native English speaking teachers (e.g. Braine, 1999; Medgyes, 1992, Tang, 1997), and the results of this study demonstrate Japanese English teachers have similar concerns. The current discussion of the knowledge base of L2 teacher education tends to take teachers learning subject matter for granted (Yates & Muchisky, 2003; Widdowson, 1997). However,

this study shows that EFL teachers learning subject matter, especially the target language, needs to be discussed in work on L2 teacher education from social constructivist perspectives.

As for pedagogical tools, teachers appreciated opportunities to learn both conceptual and practical ideas. While issues of disconnection between theory and practice have been a concern in L2 teacher education (e.g. Clark, 1994; Kinginger, 2002), teachers in this study pointed out the usefulness of learning both. However, teachers also reported a desire to further develop practical teaching tools. In particular, more instruction in the area of assessment appears to be necessary.

Regarding teacher perceptions of the use of the pedagogical tools learned, they reported using aspects of communicative-oriented teaching. This is consistent with the findings of Lamie's (2001) and Pacek's (1996) studies. Interestingly, the pedagogical tools teachers reported using were mainly practical and not conceptual. Given the fact that many teachers appreciated the opportunities to learn both theoretical and practical tools, further studies examining what conceptual ideas teachers employ are necessary. Such research is critical to ensure effective English teacher education programs. To answer this question, classroom observations and interviews may be useful. Qualitative data beyond teacher self-reports will allow better understanding of how they use pedagogical tools in their contexts.

Teachers also reported they faced certain challenges or concerns in applying new pedagogical tools. The impact of social contexts such as local, national, institutional, and classroom cultures, as well as personal teaching beliefs were

influential. In other words, learning to teach is inextricably interwoven with teachers' mental lives and the social contexts in which they practice (Freeman, 2002; Freeman and Johnson, 1998). Social contexts (e.g. national policy, institutions) play a critical role in decision making in EFL settings, and teachers are ultimately the decision makers in their classrooms (Freeman & Johnson, 1998). Given this, it is crucial to further examine post-overseas teacher education experiences from social constructivist perspectives.

Finally, while these results appear to suggest some implications for teacher education programs, it must be noted that the teacher training programs discussed were specifically coordinated for Japanese EFL teachers. Hence this inhibits the generalizability of the study. However, I hope this study will stimulate further discussions about the impact of overseas teacher education programs on EFL professionals so their unique experiences can be incorporated into research on teacher education.

Yuka Kurihara is a Ph.D. candidate in the Foreign and Second Language Education program at the Ohio State University. Her research interests include L2 teacher education, L2 reading and writing, and sociocultural aspects of language teaching and learning.

Acknowledgments

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