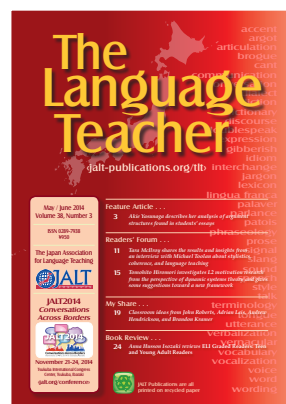# JALT Publications • Online Journals

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Challenges with creating professional development workshops for Japanese elementary school teachers

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Since 2011, elementary school teachers (ESTs) in Japan have become responsible for "Foreign Language Activities" (Gaikokugo Katsudo) in their 5th and 6th grade classes. In addition to this, teachers of younger grades may also be expected to team teach with an assistant language teacher who is often a native English speaker. Many ESTs lack confidence in their ability to use English effectively in the classroom, are unsure of communicative learning techniques, and unpracticed in communicative competence instruction. This situation has arisen due to limits in their past training and present professional development programs. This paper offers a focus on these issues and some practical ways to deal with them through university/Board of Education co-coordinated consultations and workshops.

2011年から日本の小学校の教師は、高学年では外国語活動を指導し、低・中学年では英語を母国語とする外国人のアシスタントと一緒にティームティーチングという形で、外国語の授業を行うことになった。しかし文科省が提示した目標をもとに学習活動を行う際、授業中に英語をうまく使いこなせない多くの教師は、コミュニケイティブラーニング指導法（communicative learning techniques）がどんなものかはっきりわからず、実践されていない状態であった。これは、これまでの研修不足や専門性の高い教員育成プログラムに参加する機会が少ないために起こったものである。本論では上記の問題に焦点をあて、この問題にどう対処していくか、いくつかの実践法を大学と教育委員会の共同ワークショップを通じて提案したい。

Currently in Japan elementary school teachers of the 5th and 6th grades are responsible for *Gaikokugo Katsudo*, or Foreign Language Activities (FLAs). As the name suggests, and as the Ministry of Education (MEXT) proscribes via national guidelines, these activities are not meant to have a primarily grammar or vocabulary memorization-based focus on English, but rather are intended to foster communicative skills. "To form the foundation of pupils' communication abilities through foreign languages" is the crux of MEXT's overall objectives for 5th and 6th grade Foreign Language Activities (MEXT, 2010, p. 1).

The nature of the educational system in Japan means that goals created for MEXT's *New Course of Study* are filtered through prefectural and local boards of education and then transmitted to individual schools. The *New Course of Study* is revised every 10 years or so, with updates in the interim, and teachers are expected to stay abreast of and incorporate these revised curriculum objectives into their classroom teaching. For examples of *New Course of Study* changes related to elementary schooling in the last 10 years, we can find that the "*Period of Integrated Studies*," which brought team teaching and non-compulsory and un-assessed English—in the form of FLAs—to the primary classroom, was introduced in 2002 (MEXT, 2001). *Foreign Language Activities* (*Gaikokugo Katsudo)* and the *Eigo Noto* textbook were introduced in 2008 (MEXT, 2008; 2010). Most recently, in 2011, *Eigo Noto* was usurped by *Hi Friends!* as the designated text to be used in what is now compulsory FLA class time for 5th and 6th grades (MEXT, 2012). As a result of these types of changes, it can be challenging for teachers to understand fully or incorporate the new ideas into their curriculum.

It is equally challenging for those who offer training to prospective teachers or professional development for in-service teachers to remain current with changes and offer solutions.

Previous research has tended to decry (Crooks, 2001; Gillis-Furutaka, 2004; Lamie, 2000; Yonesaka, 1999) or discuss (Shimahara, 1998) the limits of the types of training Japanese teachers may receive during their periods of study in Japan's educational departments. Much of this research has been focused on teacher training for secondary teachers who will be expected to teach English in junior and senior high schools. Discussion of elementary school teacher training as facilitators of FLAs or team teachers with JET Program ALTs has also tended to point out the weak aspects of their training (Crooks, 2001; Fennelly & Luxton, 2011; Kusumoto, 2008).

Shimahara (1998) notes that university teacher training programs were not designed to offer extensive training in teaching practices and it is mainly after teachers are hired that they actually begin studying the "craft" of teaching (p. 453) during in-service teacher professional development (TPD). According to Shimahara and others (Fernandez, 2002; MEXT, 2011; Yukawa, 2011) there are ample opportunities for teachers to take part in some kind of TPD once they are assigned to and teaching in schools. Nevertheless, as ample as TPD may be, some elementary school teachers have expressed that they feel unprepared to handle FLAs (Kusumoto, 2008). Thus there seems to be a need to augment university level teacher training as well as TPD programs so they include more opportunities for teachers to develop their own English skills while studying techniques related to communicative-based learning and communicative competence instruction.

Issues surrounding elementary school teachers

MEXT guidelines specifically state, among many other things, that ESTs must have

1. a deep understanding of the daily lives and interests of the pupils;
2. the ability to respond flexibly to the pupils' reactions;
3. knowledge and skills regarding the teaching of languages and cultures;
4. the ability to develop a curriculum (MEXT, 2008, p. 16).

In addition, there are "three pillars" of the MEXT *New Course of Study Objectives*:

1. To develop the experiential understanding of languages and cultures through a foreign language.
2. To foster a positive attitude toward communication through a foreign language.
3. To familiarize pupils with the sounds and basic expressions of foreign languages (MEXT, 2008, p. 74).

Number three in the guidelines "knowledge and skills regarding the teaching of languages and cultures" seems rather problematic, given what is known about some of the current undergraduate teacher training programs (Crooks, 2001; Fennelly & Luxton, 2011; Kusumoto, 2008). Additionally, the "three pillars" of the *New Course of Study* will be difficult for ESTs to help students attain when the teachers themselves lack English ability or a basic understanding of what precisely these objectives mean and how to create classroom activities that meet the objectives.

Further examination of the literature, detailed in (a) ~ (g) below, which looks at the current state of affairs of teacher training programs and in-service teacher conditions, highlights confusion and lack of confidence among some elementary school teachers' (EST) regarding foreign language activities. In addition to the obstacles inherent to the above-mentioned MEXT guidelines and "pillar" objectives, there are many other factors that discourage or impede ESTs in their *Foreign Language Activities* such as

(a) ESTs may not have received training in "strategic competence" which Fennelly & Luxton concisely explain (paraphrasing Savignon, 1983) is "the ability to compensate, when one does not know a specific word or phrase, through re-phrasing, gestures and so on" (2011, p. 22). (For a very useful example of ways to nurture and assess this competence, see Yukawa, 2011.)

(b) Surveyed ESTs tend to admit a lack understanding regarding how to use the textbook—this includes how to adapt it to meet the needs of their students (Kusumoto, 2008) and create activities that match the objectives set by MEXT (Fennelly & Luxton, 2011).

(c) There are ESTs who are not confident teaching English alone in the classroom because of insufficient English language skills (Fennelly & Luxton, 2011) or those who lack training in communicative based learning and teaching

(Gillis-Furutaka, 1994; Lamie, 2000; Medgyes, 1999; Wada, 2004; Yonesaka, 1999).

(d) Some ESTs have articulated that they have not been trained to be able to "take the lead" while team teaching with their ALT (Crooks, 2001; Kusumoto, 2008).

(e) Still other ESTs who are proficient in English may nevertheless see themselves as Non-Native English Speaking Teachers (NNESTs) and may feel inadequate due to "the Native Teacher fallacy" that occurs when NNESTs believe and insist "that NSs [Native Speakers] are better qualified to teach English communication" (Miyazato, 2008, p. 74).

(f) ESTs may feel inadequate as *English teachers* spite of the fact that MEXT goals do not require ESTs to be English teachers per se, (MEXT, 2008; Fennelly & Luxton, 2011) (as mentioned earlier, ESTs are intended to be "facilitators" who are strong homeroom teachers who understand their students and the needs of their particular students very well rather than English teachers).

(g) ESTs may not have been exposed to or necessarily know about Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) or may not know how to address the goal of fostering communicative competence (Tahira, 2012).

The above list offers a glimpse into the conditions or states of mind that some participants may bring with them to in-service TPD. While not comprehensive, it can be used to inform TPD workshops and other types of pre-service training or in-service onsite TPD.

University involvement in professional development: Lesson study

There is a growing trend (Crooks, 2001; Fennelly & Luxton, 2011; MEXT, 2011; Yukawa, 2011) for boards of education to collaborate, consult, and make use of university resources in order to design and carry out TPD programs, although numbers are still limited (MEXT, 2011, p. 13). Our university currently has arrangements with three local boards of education to offer consultation and workshops as part of their "*shokuin kenshu*" (in-service TPD) programs.

There are two types of professional development with which our university has become involved. The first type finds us playing a consultative role in the "lesson study" program run by a local board of education (BOE). Lesson study is a type of professional development that is used throughout Japan to sharpen teaching skills (Shimahara, 1998; Fernandez, 2002). The basic structure involves one teacher (or often several teachers working together) creating a lesson, teaching the lesson, and then reflecting on its strengths and weaknesses. This sounds quite similar to the practice of Action Research, however there is one major difference; in lesson study, the performance is observed and critiqued by peers. Lesson study requires teachers "to work collaboratively and to open up their class-rooms for observation and candid discussion with peers" (Fernandez, 2002, p. 398). The nature of lesson study creates a rich and powerful resource from the planning to the evaluation stage and is an effective bottom-up way for teachers to become "reflective practitioners" (p. 404).

The local lesson study program for which our school offers consultation has created a network among the elementary, junior high, and high schools which fall under one particular (city) BOE. This BOE helps to connect these schools, invites local university collaborators, and sends BOE representatives along to observe and critique the studied lessons. The lesson study system is as follows: responsibility for conducting the observation lessons rotates among schools; teachers decide on objectives and methodically create a lesson; on the observation day, representatives from each local school are given a complete lesson plan, attend the lesson and afterward take part in a post-lesson reflection session. Everyone in attendance is expected to extend thoughts on some point of the lesson plan or the just-observed classroom activities. The BOE representative and university representative also tender their views.

As Fernandez maintains, the practice of lesson study is an effective tool to help teachers learn from each other and can enrich their teaching skills during the entire process, which helps them to escape the isolation of their individual classrooms (2002). At the same time it allows teachers to "hone their craft" through peer collaboration (Shimahara, 1998). Furthermore, MEXT has outlined cooperation between schools, particularly elementary and junior high, as a vital part of creating a more coherent and efficient school system (2008). The classes that I have observed have been of high quality, and the feedback from other observers thoughtful and well received. Moreover, many ideas were shared among the participating teachers during the reflection sessions. It seems that lesson study programs can therefore also offer an effective

means to create and maintain connections between schools. Boards of education and universities and are a way to ensure that there is a flow of information between primary, secondary, and tertiary levels as well. University consultants who are invited to attend and critique lesson study bring with them an eye that can focus on aspects of the lesson which other in-service primary and secondary teachers who have not been trained in communicative teaching or four skills teaching, may not see.

Professional development: Workshops

The second type of in-service teacher professional development in which our university is involved is workshop development. This type of training differs from the lesson study model and requires institutions to keep a number of other points in mind when creating activities. Described in more detail below, our workshops include explanation of key concepts related to developing English skills (skill levels of ESTs and their students), a focus on basic tenets of communicative language learning (such as creating a purpose for communication), and model lessons which help to illustrate these concepts and tenets. Typically the final section of our workshops is devoted to micro-teaching activities fronted by workshop participants.

First, as a general suggestion, it is helpful to include hands-on activities. Teachers attend TPD seminars for a variety of reasons; some attendees are there more willingly than others and asking teachers to take on the role of student helps to enhance both engagement and post-activity reflection (Saraswathi, 1992). It is possible that some participating teachers may have initial doubts about active participation, especially if they are expecting a more traditional "transmission model" of TPD. If the workshops are well designed, however, teacher participants will become involved in the learning process and see the value in this approach (Moser, Harris, & Carle, 2012, p. 87).

Our TPD programs are generally one or two all-day seminars divided into themed workshops. The topics are decided through discussion with the BOE which also helps to coordinate the seminars by letting teachers know what they need to prepare before attending. Longer TPD courses such as the one described by Moser et al. (2012) would naturally lead to even more active learning, raised awareness, and classroom application of workshop concepts.

The following is an overview of one of the day-long workshops that took place at our university in 2013. There were three main sessions: a session focusing on English skill building, several short model lessons, and a micro-teaching session.

Prior to the participant's micro-teaching, we included instructor-led activities and model lessons. In these early stages of the day there was a focus on the way basic stress (prosody and intonation) is used to convey new and important information in English (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 1996) and how it can be transferred to other situations in the classroom. The model lesson portion of the workshops also had the participant teachers acting as "students". The intention of this arrangement was to allow the ESTs to become more knowledgeable of key concepts of CLT with young learners while at the same time helping to raise participants' own skills and awareness about the features of English. The micro-teaching will be detailed later on, however the general purpose of the overall workshop design was to help ESTs learn about prosody in their own spoken English as well as with the language that arises in the FLA lessons they teach, and to enable them to begin to understand and incorporate a focus on communicative teaching rather than "conversation" or simply a string of unconnected songs, games and activities.

The workshops at our university were tied to a three-pronged objective. By this I mean they should (1) include "plug and play activities" (described in more detail below); (2) include opportunities for teachers to improve their own English Skills; and (3) provide ways to for teachers to learn first-hand about communication skills and how to plan activities that create communication opportunities for students.

"Plug and play activities" are those that can simply be used in the classroom without much modification and that the ESTs can take back with them to their schools to share with other teachers. It is vital that these kind of activities match MEXT goals and that participants in the workshops learn to see the connections between the activities and the tenets. An example activity is a simple information gap type "What's in the box?" game. For this game, the teacher places an item (e.g., a flashcard picture of a panda) in a box without showing it to the students. The teacher then gives hints about the item such as "It's a big animal." "It's black and white." "It comes from China." Students listen to the hints and guess the name of the item. The teachers who are

taking part in the seminar learn that information gap (I know, but my partner does not know) activities inherently promote communication, one of the key MEXT goals. This same activity can be used to offer an opportunity for teachers to work on their own English language skills/confidence and to learn how to better provide a richer more "animated" English environment for their students (see Moser et al., p. 86). The teacher-targeted language skill that was included in this segment of the workshop attempted, as mentioned above, to raise participant awareness of prosodic features, particularly stress patterns, in spoken English (i.e., "It's a **BIG animal**." "It **comes** from **CHINA**.").

The final segment and objective of the workshops, the inclusion of a focus on communication skills and how to plan activities that create communication opportunities for students, was emphasized during the "micro-teaching" sessions discussed below. The importance of this focus is pointed out by Moser et al. who rightly describe the confusion which persists among some elementary school teachers that FLAs mean teaching *conversation* (2012, p. 88).

For the micro-teaching, participants were asked to prepare a 4-5 minute activity that they have (a) used in class successfully or (b) would like to use in class, but are unsure about. One participant demonstrated the model lesson using the other participants as "students." This was followed by feedback time in the form of discussion among the participants and a feedback sheet (see Appendix A) from fellow ESTs. Criteria for the critique of the model lesson include teacher language, communicative purpose, lesson objectives, sequencing during the lesson period or year-long plan, effectiveness of visual materials, etc. Teachers who took part gave us very positive responses to the micro-teaching demonstrations, explaining that they enjoyed having the opportunity to see how others approach FLAs. Additionally, most participants stated that they had learned many new ideas that they planned to try out in their classes, and felt that they had learned more about connecting MEXT goals to classroom practices.

Their feedback pointed out to us that much can be done in workshops to help "demystify what constitutes 'communication' at the primary school level in Japan" (Moser et al., 2012, p. 88) for teachers, teacher trainers, and other stakeholders alike. Workshops that are designed in this way can better help to fill participants' conceptual and language gaps. Addition-

ally, experience from these and previous TPD workshops and discussion with ESTs, confirms Butler's assertion that there is uncertainty among some teachers in Japan, regarding communicative based learning (Butler, 2005) as well as with how to connect class activities with MEXT goals. In order to address this confusion, to make workshops understandable, effective, and valuable for teachers it is important not to separate the "what" from the "how" as you are teaching them (Moser et al., 2012).

Conclusions

Improving teacher training, lesson study, and professional development to include a focus on English communication designed to help teachers be more proficient and confident using and teaching in English is a worthy goal. We can offer, through pre-service training and professional development, more opportunities for teachers to learn about communicative practices in foreign language teaching and how these practices connect with the larger curricular goals for FLAs. Moreover we need to help teachers understand that they *can* teach communicatively, for which I would argue, elementary school teachers who have less grammar fixated/grammar-translation baggage about language teaching are prime candidates. We need to help them see that NNS English teachers can be good *Foreign Language Activities* leaders (Medgyes, 1999, p. 178).

Another key point in creating effective EST professional development that may be difficult to accomplish fully due to the often closed-nature of local schools or BOEs is to understand the teaching situations of those who will be participating. General needs analysis and specific surveys of teacher perceptions should be thoroughly taken into account when deciding specific content. It is unwise to simply review the current literature (which may never have completely reflected the entire situation in one's area or may be outdated because of updates to the curriculum) and decide arbitrarily which challenges local teachers face in their particular schools and classrooms (Aline & Hosoda, 2006; Matheny, 2005). Teachers are busy people and no one wants to attend a workshop that is perceived as irrelevant. Hiramatsu contends, and justly so, that teachers may be unwilling (as anyone would be) to attend workshops that are not well designed or tailored to the needs of the teachers who will be attending (Hiramtsu, 2005, p. 125). So, when agreeing or volunteering their services, universities should work closely with local

boards of education and additionally, should survey formally and informally the teachers who take part in workshops in order to hear the true voices of those they propose to serve.

There is much more research to be done in this dramatically changing area of teaching and teacher training. However, in the interim, it is hoped that this paper can offer some insight and implementable ideas for those involved in creating and running programs for training and professional development of elementary school teachers.

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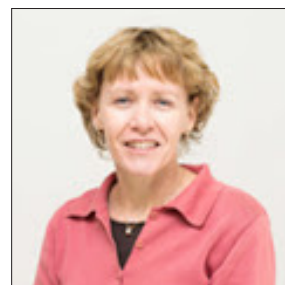
Appendix

<u>Type</u> (活動の種類): Game Song Activity Other ( )	<u>Topic</u> (トピック・テーマ):
<u>Source</u> (情報源): Hi Friends ALT's idea Other ( )	Communicative purpose (どんなコミュニケーションが起こっていますか):
<u>Positive Point</u> (良いところ): <u>Advice</u> (助言):	<u>I can use this in class</u> (授業で利用になる): Yes はい No いいえ Maybe たぶん Why or why not? (理由を教えてください。)

Remember MEXT GOALS:〔第5学年及び第6学年〕(MEXT, 2008, p. 74).

１．外国語を用いて積極的にコミュニケーションを図ることができるよう，次の事項について指導する。

    (1)　外国語を用いてコミュニケーションを図る楽しさを体験すること。

    (2)　積極的に外国語を聞いたり，話したりすること。

    (3)　言語を用いてコミュニケーションを図ることの大切さを知ること。

MEXT goals: value other cultures, value differences, enhance communication skills.

Tenets of Best Practices for FLT: relevant to student's lives, real to students, communicative purpose.