



## Reflections on International School Practicums by Pre-Service Teachers

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One of the most important aspects of teacher training is the teaching practicum. At present Japan has one of the shortest requirements for teaching practicums in the world, which gives trainees a very narrow experience of classrooms and teaching styles. The aim of this study is to evaluate the effectiveness of pre-service teachers taking part in a voluntary teaching practicum at an international school in Japan. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with pre-service teachers who had experienced an extended period of volunteering. The results show that although all the pre-service teachers enjoyed the volunteer experience and felt that their English ability had improved, they did not feel the experiences were transferable to Japanese elementary schools. This has implications for teacher trainers regarding how to make these volunteer opportunities more effective for pre-service teachers.

教員養成で最も重要なもののひとつが教育実習である。現在、日本は世界で最も短い期間で教育実習を行う国のひとつであるため、実習生は教室や教え方について狭い範囲でしか学ぶことができない。本研究の目的は、日本のインターナショナルスクールで自主的に行われた教育実習の効果を観察することにある。日本のインターナショナルスクールで長期間にわたり自主的な教育実習を経験した教員を対象に、半構造化面接を実施した。その結果、すべての当該教員はその実習を楽しみ、英語力が向上したと感じていたものの、その経験が日本の小学校で役立つとは感じていないことがわかった。このことは教員がこのような機会を最大限に活用するために、どのように機会を設定し、反映させるかについて教員養成担当者に重要な示唆を与えている。

In order for pre-service teachers to develop their classroom skills, practical experience as well as theoretical knowledge of pedagogy are necessary. One of the most important ways in which pre-service teachers gain a working knowledge of teaching

is through teaching practicums (Gan, 2013). During teaching practicums, pre-service teachers can observe experienced teachers, gaining insights into teaching techniques and classroom management, giving them a chance for real teaching practice in front of children. Clements (2019) further noted that teaching practicums are also an important opportunity for pre-service teachers to develop a professional identity, which might lead to a greater motivation toward becoming a career teacher.

Given the importance of teaching practicums, it is necessary for them to be of an appropriate length and with enough variety to give pre-service teachers a wide experience of teaching situations. At present in Japan, practicums are usually carried out for shorter periods of time than in many other countries, often in the same schools from which the students graduated (Numano, 2010; Yonesaka, 1999). For example, Japan requires a minimum of a 4-week teaching practicum in one school, while the UK requires at least six weeks of practicum work in at least two different schools (Department of Education, 2022), and teachers in Finland spend the majority of their final year of teacher education in on-the-job training with five sessions of about 7 weeks each in a number of different schools (Sokka-Meaney & Haring, 2019).

Not only does the short length of practicum give pre-service teachers in Japan limited exposure to practical teaching experience before becoming qualified to teach full time, but there is also a lack of exposure to communicative language teaching (CLT). Since the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports and Technology (MEXT) designated English as a subject (2019), there has been an even greater need for elementary school teachers to improve their English language skills and knowledge of CLT. As the majority of English teaching in elementary schools in Japan is carried out by generalist teachers, with some support from native English-speaking assistant language teachers (ALTs), many teachers are concerned that their English ability is inadequate (Butler, 2019). It has also been shown that teachers with lower self-perceived English proficiency had a negative attitude to English in the classroom (Butler, 2007; Machida & Walsh, 2015). In order to counter this lack of confidence in teaching English and knowledge of CLT, the university



curriculum for pre-service teachers has been updated to include applied linguistics and CLT (MEXT, 2021). This means that pre-service teachers are in need of exposure to practical situations in which these techniques are used, as well as opportunities to improve English language skills.

In view of this, MEXT has been promoting improvements in teacher training for English teachers (MEXT, 2003). There have been various programs set up for pre-service teachers to engage in overseas teaching practicums (Cook, 2010; Honda et al., 2017), but these can be expensive and time-consuming, making it difficult for pre-service teachers to participate. For these reasons, alternative opportunities to engage in English language teaching practice might be beneficial to pre-service teachers. International schools, where students study English similar to a school in an English-speaking country, offer an English immersion experience in Japan as well as an opportunity to observe teachers using CLT techniques, making them an ideal location for supplementary teaching practicums.

In order to offer pre-service teachers an opportunity to experience an international school environment, in 2014 I set up a program jointly with a local international school whereby pre-service teachers could volunteer at the international school once a week in order to observe CLT, improve their English language skills, and gain more practical teaching experience. The program was implemented at the international school's Saturday school for elementary school students. The majority of students attend other schools Monday to Friday and the international school on Saturdays. Classes are from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., 34 weeks a year with class sizes ranging from 10 to 24 students. There are four literacy classes combining reading, writing, speaking, listening and project-based learning as well as sports and computer classes. It is an immersion program in which all teachers, teaching assistants and volunteers speak in English at all times. There are eight classes in the school, each with an experienced English teacher, a teaching assistant and one or more pre-service teacher volunteers. Since setting up the program, I have taken an active role teaching and advising on the running of the program. Initially the volunteers were from my own university, but now students from various universities in the area participate.

Although there has been considerable research into teaching practicums in general education (Lawson et al., 2015), there has been relatively little on the effect of practicums in international schools. Through this study, I seek to gain insight into ways in which pre-service teachers' English ability, attitudes to teaching, and knowledge of English language teaching methodology were affected by taking part in a volunteer program at an international school, and to find ways in which the program could be improved.

## Methodology

The seven participants in this study were all female students from three universities who had participated in the international school program as volunteers for over a year. One was a 1st-year undergraduate, one was a 2nd-year undergraduate, three were 4<sup>th</sup>-year undergraduates, and two had started full-time teaching jobs.

I gathered qualitative data through semi-structured interviews using questions developed based on the needs of the international school and teachers (see Appendix). All participants chose to be interviewed in English even though they were given the choice of being interviewed in English or Japanese. I recorded and transcribed the interviews before analyzing and coding the data using an iterative process of highlighting similar words and phrases, then further coded the data to try to find more fine-grained similarities among the experiences of the participants with the aim of providing an inductive summary of shared experiences (Charmaz, 2014). Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and the project was formally cleared with the coordinator of the international school program. The research question guiding this analysis is: What did pre-service teachers perceive as the main benefits and challenges of volunteering at an international school?

## Findings

Based on the coding of the data, five themes emerged: (a) reasons for volunteering, (b) attitudes on the first day, (c) what participants thought they had learned, (d) what support was given during the program, and (e) what participants thought were the main similarities and differences between the international school and Japanese schools. As all of the pre-service teachers elected to be interviewed in English, their quotes have been left verbatim despite occasional grammatical errors.

### Reason to Volunteer

All seven participants said that their main reason to volunteer was to improve or maintain their English language ability. Participant 2 had started the program because she wanted to improve her English before studying abroad, and Participant 1 wanted to maintain her English after coming back from study abroad. She expressed regret that she had not learned about the program before going abroad and wished she could have volunteered from the 1<sup>st</sup> year of university. Two of the participants did not have firm plans to study abroad but wanted to experience an international atmosphere, and two of them also stated that they loved children and wanted to spend more time with young



learners. Only Participant 6 talked about acquiring teaching skills. “Before I went I could not imagine my future career. I could not imagine being a teacher, but after going I could have confidence to teach. I really found my future career through this volunteer.” It seems that apart from Participant 6, most participants saw the volunteer experience as an opportunity to improve their English skills.

### Attitudes on the First Day of Volunteering

Nearly all of the pre-service teachers reflected on how nervous they felt on the first day and how different it was from their official practicum at a Japanese school. The fact that the school was an immersion program seems to have been a key factor in this. Most of the pre-service teachers felt nervous in an all-English environment as suggested by this comment from Participant 2: “I was very nervous. I didn’t know anyone. Everyone was speaking English.” Participant 6 also stated that she was very unsure about what she should do. “It was difficult to use English. I listened to the teachers and copied. It was also very difficult to know my position. I’m not a teacher and not a student.” This was not an official practicum program, which might have caused uncertainty and led to a lack of clarity over the pre-service teachers’ roles, which seemed to add to the confusion.

However, despite initial nervousness, the participants said that the teachers at the school helped them relax. Participant 4 commented that teachers took time out of their busy morning schedules to chat with her in the teachers’ lounge. Moreover, all of the participants said that their classroom and assistant teachers were very friendly. Participant 2 stated how happy she was to be in the sort of international environment she had experienced during study abroad: “It was so much fun! Everyone was friendly and speaking English.” Throughout the interview she reiterated how it had reminded her of the wonderful experiences she had had when studying abroad. This seems to indicate that she equated the practicum with a study abroad experience.

### What Did Pre-Service Teachers Gain From This Experience?

It was apparent that all pre-service teachers felt that their English had improved and that they saw this as one of the main benefits of the volunteer program. Participant 6 stated that her TOEIC score had improved by 100 points over the year of volunteering even though she was in her 4<sup>th</sup> year at university and was not taking any English classes. All the participants stated that they had more confidence in speaking English as a result of the program. Participant 2 stated, “After I came here 4 months, I suddenly could speak English more fluently.” Participant 6 recounted:

The atmosphere was scary. Only speak English, we can never use Japanese in front of children. After 1 month I got used to it. You just have to try to speak. In my university classes, sometimes I avoided speaking English, but at the international school I had to speak English. (Participant 6)

Participants also talked about other benefits of the program besides L2 improvement. Participant 7 said that, although in her job at a high school she could not do the same type of teaching as she had at the international school, volunteering gave her a lot of confidence. She also learned about team teaching. “I had never thought about team teaching, but this gave me ideas how to work together and what the roles should be. Sometimes I have to work with an ALT now, it helps me to know what to say to them having been a TA at international school.” Participant 6 also stated that through this program she “had a vision of what it is like to be a teaching assistant.”

Additionally, volunteering seemed to give students a window into the life of a teacher. Participant 6 commented on how observing teachers interact outside the classroom helped her to develop an image of what it meant to be a career teacher. “I saw teachers having a meeting at the end of each day. It was interesting to see teachers arguing about teaching and disagreeing. I had never thought about teaching like that.” She explained that she was really impressed with the fact that teachers discussed the best ways to teach and that teachers had different opinions on ways to teach.

### Support Given During the Volunteer Program

All the pre-service teachers recounted instances in which they were supported by teachers at the international school, although they seemed to have various interpretations of what “support” meant in this situation. Participant 4 stated that the teachers were always telling her to ask questions at any time, implying that she did not feel nervous or need to struggle with anything. She felt she could ask anyone in the school besides the teacher that she worked with in class, even the coordinator of the program. She stated that she had not experienced this level of support in her previous practicum at a public school, where the teachers were so busy she felt that she should not ask for help.

Aside from being generally accessible, program teachers offered other types of support, such as help with university assignments. Participant 2 expressed surprise at how helpful the teachers were: “When I had an English presentation and I needed to survey foreigners, some teachers helped me. They answered my surveys. I didn’t have the chance to meet many other foreigners.” Teachers and other assistants also offered



emotional support. Participant 1 stated that just feeling relaxed in the international school alleviated her anxieties about university and finding a job. She noted that there were snacks and drinks available and all the teachers seemed to be happy. “If teachers are happy then we can do the best to kids and then we can make kids happy. I was surprised. It’s very natural, but I think it is amazing and I’m so happy to be able to be here.” In short, the atmosphere of the school seemed to offer support in the pre-service teachers’ private life beyond a volunteer teaching situation.

### Perceived Differences Between Japanese Elementary School and International School

The final theme that emerged has to do with the perceived similarities and differences between Japanese public schools and the international school program. The participants generally seemed to feel that the international school was completely different from the elementary schools that they had experienced, both as students and later as practice teachers. The biggest difference was related to relationships between teachers and students as well as relationships among teachers. Participant 2 was surprised that the teachers, assistants and students were all very close, and Participant 1 stated, “It is much more friendly . . . Relationships between teachers are very friendly. When the students see that, they feel safe.” Participant 4 also noted, “The teachers seem very warm. Students are not afraid to use gestures and loud voice. The children are free to ask anything.”

Another major difference was in the style of teaching. Participant 2 said that at elementary school she had been taught in the style of a *juku* (cram school), centered on the teacher. She said that she had memorized many things but had not retained any of them. On the other hand, in the international school students did far more active project-based learning. “If they do projects, they learn from their heart. They learn something they remember in their heart.” Participant 4 described in detail how the project classes allowed children to learn in a more active style:

My elementary school let us to do just sitting on a chair and just reading the textbooks . . . Teachers are doing class and children are just quiet, just listening, and it is even not sure if the children are really learning something . . . However, in this school, firstly the teachers try to make the children encouraged, engaged to the classes . . . In my school there was nothing like touching or seeing or listening directly, but compared to the elementary school there are a lot of chances or opportunities to experience those things here. (Participant 4)

Thus, participants suggested that the international school used more active learning teaching techniques, which were unfamiliar to them from their own schooling and teaching methods classes at university.

A number of participants also commented on the attitude toward error. Participants 2 and 4 stated that the teachers they worked with deliberately made mistakes, which the children would then correct. In this way an acceptance of mistakes as a natural part of learning was established. Participant 4 said that when she was in elementary school mistakes were viewed negatively as something that should be avoided. She recalled being afraid of making mistakes in public school but noted that at the international school mistakes were regarded as a natural part of learning. Participant 2 said that one teacher would deliberately show students that even teachers sometimes did not know the spelling of a word and had to check it in the dictionary, demonstrating tools for self-study.

### Discussion

Participants experienced a number of benefits to volunteering as well as certain challenges. They all saw the program as helping them improve their English language skills substantially and commented on how their TOEIC test scores and listening ability had improved. English language ability is crucial for Japanese teachers of English, and confidence in speaking English has been shown to lead to teachers using more communicative styles of teaching as well as increase enjoyment of their teaching experience (Butler, 2019).

On the other hand, despite one of the main goals of the program being to learn about English language pedagogy, the participants did not see the teaching techniques at the international school as transferable to public school. The teachers seem to have been using a variety of communicative and active learning techniques, which are being promoted in Japan by MEXT (2021). However, most of the participants seemed to regard the school as completely different from Japanese elementary schools and thought that the activities and teaching techniques used there were not applicable.

Nearly all participants expressed a feeling of initial nervousness similar to experiences reported in official practicums (see also Clements, 2019). The initial anxiety at the international school was mainly due to lack of confidence in language ability, but the attitudes of the teachers and paid assistants enabled volunteers to have a very enjoyable experience. The participants felt that the teachers at the international school were willing to help with tasks within the school and also in other areas. In contrast, when





they did their “official” teaching practicums in Japanese elementary schools, the teachers seemed to be so busy and did not appear to have time to provide support to pre-service teachers.

There are a few possible reasons for teachers appearing to be more helpful at the international school. First, the international school program is a private program, where the teachers are all given two free periods in the day to grade student work and to prepare for classes. This is very generous compared to teachers in public schools, and it gave international school teachers the time to share with volunteers, creating a supportive and friendly atmosphere. In addition, the teachers were not burdened with the paperwork and reports required of public-school teachers. This contrasts with the findings of Gan (2013), who stated that although the mentoring teacher in his study was the person trainees should turn to for advice, those teachers were not always approachable. Clements (2020) also describes pre-service teachers’ interactions with mentors as being “presented in a positive light” (p. 4), but that mentors were sometimes strict, leading pre-service teachers to occasionally seek out other pre-service teachers as a way of coping with stressful situations.

In sum, according to participants, the greatest benefit of this volunteer program seems to have been improved English language proficiency and confidence. The pre-service teachers had a positive “international” experience that could almost be equated to a study abroad program. Some of the volunteers also appeared to have gained insights into how professional teachers interact with each other outside the classroom, which could help to bridge the gap between being a university student and being a teacher. In addition, the pre-service teachers had a positive experience making friends and enjoying the international atmosphere.

### Conclusion

As this study focused on interviews with seven pre-service teachers, it is not possible to generalize findings. In addition, the interviews were only carried out with volunteers who remained in the program for an extended period and had very positive attitudes to the program. It would be beneficial to carry out a long-term study of all pre-service teachers’ attitudes on the first day and again at various intervals during the program until its completion, possibly through anonymous questionnaires. This could help to evaluate how pre-service teachers’ attitudes change over the period of volunteering and whether there is a difference in perceptions between volunteers who continue for an extended period and those volunteering for shorter periods.

There are useful lessons to be learned from pre-service teachers to improve this program in the future. Although one of the main aims of the program was to introduce pre-service teachers to communicative language teaching, it appears that most of the participants in this study did not consider the teaching techniques used by teachers at the international school could be transferred to a regular Japanese elementary school. This might be changed with more reflection and guidance by a mentor. As Clements (2020) noted, one way in which to make practicums a more meaningful part of pre-service teachers’ experience is to encourage them to share their stories of teaching practicums with other pre-service teachers and receive feedback and advice from university teachers. In light of this, it would seem that the class teacher or volunteer supervisor needs to spend time reflecting with the pre-service teachers after each volunteer experience or at least once each term. This might enable pre-service teachers to identify teaching techniques and activities that might be useful in their future careers. Reflective discussions would certainly be beneficial, but it needs to be noted that everyone is tired at the end of a day of teaching young learners. A possible alternative would be for all pre-service teachers to keep a reflective journal which is exchanged with the volunteer supervisor. Cakmak and Gunduz (2019) noted that teacher educators need to take on the important role of identifying and bridging gaps between theory and practice.

In short, participants seem to have appreciated the opportunities offered through this volunteer program in a variety of ways. There are further benefits to be gained by providing more systematic orientation and feedback on the volunteer experience both in the international school and at universities as a way to reduce initial anxiety and encourage reflection by pre-service teachers on their path to becoming full-time teachers.

### Bio Data

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## Appendix

### Interview Questions

Volunteer, teaching practicum or internship

1. Is there anything you were worried about before you went to International School for the first time?
2. What do you think you learned from your experience at International School?
3. What was the biggest problem or challenge you had at International School?
4. What was your best experience at International School?
5. In what way were you helped by teachers or other student volunteers?
6. What type of help or preparation would you have liked to receive?
7. What advice would you give to other student volunteers?