

Challenges of University English Teachers in Japan: A Preliminary Study

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In the field of language learning psychology, research on teachers has gained prominence, as teaching is widely recognized as a highly stressful profession associated with low well-being and high attrition rates. This qualitative study explores the experiences of three English teachers at Japanese universities through semi-structured interviews, examining the challenges they face and the strategies they use to manage them. The findings highlight significant difficulties, including teaching under institutional constraints, feeling insecure about their language skills, and coping with students' unexpected behaviors. The results suggest that cultivating self-compassion may help teachers navigate these challenges more effectively. Additionally, the study implies that administrative support can enhance teachers' job satisfaction.

言語学習における心理研究にて、教師に対する注目が近年高まっている。教師はストレスレベルが高く、幸福感が低いことから、離職率が高い傾向にある。本研究は、日本の大学にて英語を教える教師の経験に焦点を置き、どのような困難を経験しているか、困難にどのように対処しているか、半構造化インタビューにて調査を実施した。教師は制限がある中で教えることや学生の予期せぬ行動から影響を受けていることが示された。困難に対処する上で、セルフコンパッションが重要となることが示唆された。また、組織のサポートが教師の支えとなる点も示唆された。

In the field of the psychology of language learning, studies focusing on teachers have become increasingly common in recent years. Teaching is widely recognized as one of the most stressful professions (Wang et al., 2024), with teachers often working under high levels of stress and experiencing low levels of well-being. This is thought to contribute to a high attrition rate, posing a serious problem globally. In particular,

foreign language teachers face unique challenges compared to teachers of other subjects (Haukås et al., 2022). Foreign language teachers who teach in their second or additional language must manage both their own and their students' anxiety about using a foreign language. Moreover, foreign language classes often have relatively large numbers of students with varying levels of proficiency, further increasing teachers' workloads (Davin & Donato, 2024). As a result, foreign language teachers face significant stressors, and this has led to the need for further research.

This study focuses on English teachers working at a university in the Kanto area in Japan to explore the challenges they face and how they manage them. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants to gain insight into their experiences. The findings emphasize the importance of teachers identifying effective ways to cope with the challenges and negative emotions they encounter.

The Importance of Teacher Psychology Research

Maintaining a positive psychological state is crucial for teachers to sustain their careers. Language evolves over time, requiring teachers to continuously update their knowledge (Haukås et al., 2022). Additionally, language teachers must navigate their own anxiety as well as their students' anxiety about using a foreign language (Haukås et al., 2022). The high levels of stress that teachers endure contribute to a relatively high attrition rate worldwide (Greenier et al., 2021). Teachers often experience low well-being, which can lead to frustration, burnout, and ultimately, leaving the profession. Thus, maintaining a healthy psychological state is essential for teachers to continue working effectively.

Teachers' mental state is not only vital for teachers themselves but also has a contagious effect on their students. Teachers who enjoy their work and maintain high levels of well-being and motivation can positively influence their students' attitudes and motivation (e.g., Mercer, 2020). Moskowitz and Dewaele (2021) explored whether

teacher happiness influenced students' happiness and motivation. Their study involved 129 adult EFL/ESL learners worldwide and examined student attitudes, motivation, and perceptions of teacher happiness. The findings revealed a significant correlation between students' perceptions of teacher happiness and their own attitudes and motivation. When students perceived their teachers as happy, they were more likely to demonstrate positive attitudes and higher motivation. Thus, teacher psychology is a crucial factor for both teachers and students.

Teacher Stress and How They Manage

Given the heavy workloads and challenges teachers face, numerous studies have examined teacher stress. For example, Liu and Onwuegbuzie (2012) investigated sources of teacher stress in China, involving 510 middle school teachers in Jilin Province. Their findings indicated that heavy workloads and parental pressure were primary stressors. Similarly, Gregersen et al. (2023) conducted a study involving six teachers from a larger sample of 47 participants who teach a variety of languages at various levels from pre-school to adult education. The study identified time pressure and juggling multiple roles as the most significant stressors.

In the context of Japan, studies have been conducted on demotivating factors for language teachers in universities. Sugino (2010), for instance, investigated salient demotivating factors for language teachers using a questionnaire. The participants were 97 language teachers who teach various languages in universities, and they answered the teacher job satisfaction questionnaire with a five-point Likert scale. The findings showed that students' behavior such as using a smartphone and sleeping during the class can be demotivating. The teachers also felt working conditions such as long meeting hours and paperwork can be demotivating.

To navigate these challenges, it is essential for teachers to manage their negative emotions effectively. One important strategy is cultivating self-compassion. Self-compassion involves adopting a kind, positive, and caring attitude toward oneself (Zessin et al., 2015). Just as we show compassion to others facing difficulties, we can extend the same compassion to ourselves. Mairitsch et al. (2023) investigated the role of self-compassion in the well-being of 21 foreign language teachers from various countries, including those in Europe, Oceania, North America, and Central and South America. The study provided examples of self-compassionate practices, such as carefully assessing workloads and declining non-essential tasks.

As these studies illustrate, language teachers often experience negative emotions, including anxiety, primarily due to heavy workloads. These difficulties can lead to high attrition rates and negatively affect students (Mercer, 2020). Consequently, teacher psychology research has become more prominent. While research has been conducted in various contexts, studies focusing on how challenges affect teachers and how they manage these challenges in the Japanese context remain limited. This study addresses this gap by exploring the following research questions:

RQ1. What kinds of challenges do teachers experience when they teach English at universities in Japan?

RQ2. How do these teachers manage the challenges?

Method

The participants for this study were three teachers who work in a university in the Kanto area. They are not the authors' colleagues, and they were recruited through personal connections. I have a good relationship with all of them, having known them for several years. The research was initiated after obtaining approval from the university research ethics committee. Participants were first provided with an ethical briefing, which included information on the study's objectives, the handling of research data, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time. Subsequently, participants signed informed consent forms.

Data Collection and Analysis

Interviews were conducted using the protocol described in the appendix and lasted about one hour. Interviews were held in convenient locations for the participants such as their offices. Basic demographic and professional information about the participants is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1
Background Information of the Participants

Name	Gender	Nationality	Age	University teaching experience	Working condition
Teacher A	Female	Japanese	30s	three years	part-time
Teacher B	Female	Japanese	60s	eight years	full-time
Teacher C	Male	Non-Japanese	40s	ten years	full-time

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant as interviews are suitable to understand people's experiences (e.g., Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Each interview was conducted in Japanese as all of the participants are proficient in Japanese. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent. The interviews focused on the difficulties and challenges participants face in their roles as teachers and how they manage these challenges. Example interview questions are provided in the Appendix.

After the interviews, the recordings were transcribed verbatim. The data were then analyzed by the author using thematic analysis following the guidelines of Braun and Clarke (2021). This involved coding the data and categorizing it into overarching themes. As a result, three key areas of difficulty emerged: anxiety about English skills, restrictions in teaching, and students' behavior. These themes are explored in the following sections, along with the strategies teachers employed to manage them.

Findings

The interviews highlighted three recurring challenges: anxiety about their English proficiency, limitations imposed by institutional policies or curriculum structures, and issues stemming from students' attitudes and classroom behavior. This section outlines these challenges and examines how participants managed them.

Anxiety About English Skills

The first major issue that emerged was teachers' anxiety about their English proficiency. As Haukås et al. (2022) note, it is common for language teachers to experience such anxiety. Teacher A, for example, expressed concern about her own abilities.

I have a lot of anxiety about learning English, and I also feel insecure about my English skills, so I became worried about students who encounter teachers like me. I don't know what to convey, and I can't imagine what someone who loves English is thinking, so that was unsettling. Also, well, simply put, I've always been, well, and still am, anxious about whether my English skills are sufficient. (Teacher A)

Teacher A did not major in English-related subjects, nor did she complete a teacher training program for English. As a result, she expressed strong anxiety about both her English proficiency and her teaching abilities.

Restrictions in Teaching

Another significant challenge was the restrictions teachers face in their teaching. In some Japanese universities, teachers are required to follow pre-determined syllabi, limiting their autonomy in lesson planning and content selection.

In compulsory classes, I can't teach what I want to that much. The textbook covers important material, but it's overwhelming due to its volume. Trying to study everything in one semester is impossible. As a result, I always felt overloaded and unable to absorb the content completely. Knowing that the [other] teachers were also overwhelmed made me feel even worse, realizing that students must be struggling even more. This situation left me feeling frustrated and uneasy. (Teacher B)

Teacher B noted that she was required to teach using a university-mandated textbook and to complete its contents within one semester. She found the textbook overly dense and struggled to cover all the material, leading to feelings of frustration and overwhelm.

Students' Behavior

Both teacher A and C also felt that certain aspects of students' behavior posed challenges for them. Students can be demotivators for teachers (e.g., Sugino, 2010), and participants seem to receive negative influence from them.

I feel that second-year students are less motivated compared to first-year students. Another challenging aspect is that the class is held during the first period. Students who find it difficult to attend first-period classes choose repeat courses from the beginning. (Teacher C)

I conducted an exam in a TOEIC class the other day. I was planning to use the practice questions from the textbook for the exam, and I told the students to bring

their textbooks, but some of them didn't. Right before we started, the students told me they had forgotten to bring their textbooks. They also asked, 'Can I share the textbook with my classmates?' It was a listening exam, and I was surprised. Do you share a textbook during a TOEIC listening test? I couldn't understand that. (Teacher A)

Teacher C highlighted a lack of motivation among second-year students and challenges related to scheduling classes in the first period. Meanwhile, Teacher A described being surprised and frustrated by students' unexpected behavior, such as forgetting textbooks during an important TOEIC listening exam and making inappropriate requests.

How Teachers Manage Challenges

As highlighted earlier, teachers encountered various challenges in their roles. The interviews also explored how these teachers managed to address and mitigate these difficulties.

Clarifying the Focus of the Class

Teacher B addressed her challenges by clearly defining the focus of her classes.

I've decided to make speaking the main focus of my classes. While there are plenty of teachers who focus on writing, there aren't many who specialize in speaking. Most students have been working on their writing and reading skills, but many of them really want to improve their speaking. From my experience working in a company, I've seen a lot of people struggle because they couldn't communicate well. That's why I think speaking is really important. I believe I have a certain level of skill in teaching speaking, so I have decided to focus on speaking. (Teacher B)

Teacher B taught a course titled Speaking and Writing, where the prescribed textbook primarily emphasized writing. However, she observed that her students needed more opportunities to develop their speaking skills. Drawing from her own professional experiences, she recognized the critical importance of communication skills in real-world contexts. By prioritizing speaking, Teacher B effectively navigated institutional constraints and provided targeted instruction that better met her students' needs, ultimately enhancing their learning outcomes.

Establishing Clear Rules

Another strategy for managing challenges was setting clear expectations and rules. Teacher C said, "I have written in the syllabus that students are allowed to be absent up to three times. If they miss more than four classes, they will not receive credit. I've set strict rules."

Consulting Colleagues

Teacher C also emphasized the value of seeking advice and support from colleagues. He noted that having strong professional relationships enabled him to address challenges more effectively.

When in trouble, the best solution is to ask colleagues. It's the quickest way. In our department, there are three English teachers, and one of them has been teaching for over 20 years. I make sure to check with my colleagues about what needs to be covered in English classes and the minimum standards. We have a good working relationship, so I can ask them for confirmation right away. (Teacher C)

By leveraging the expertise of a colleague with over 20 years of teaching experience, Teacher C was able to gain clarity on curriculum requirements and minimum standards. This collaborative approach not only resolved issues but also seemed to foster a sense of community within the department.

Discussion

This study investigated the professional struggles experienced by three English teachers in Japanese universities, focusing on how they responded to these difficulties. Semi-structured interviews revealed that the participants were particularly affected by concerns about their English, constraints in how they could teach, and the challenge of managing student engagement and behavior. Several coping strategies were identified, including narrowing the scope of lessons, clarifying classroom expectations, and seeking peer support. These findings highlight the importance of both individual and institutional responses to teacher stress.

Participants expressed negative feelings about their students' attitudes and behavior, which appears to be a common experience. Research on motivators and demotivators for teachers in various contexts has demonstrated that students can act as demotivating factors (Sinclair, 2008; Tsutsumi, 2014). Specific forms of student behavior, such as using smartphones during class or attending without completing assignments, have been

identified as particularly discouraging for teachers (Sugino, 2010). Therefore, it is crucial for teachers to develop strategies to cope with their negative emotions stemming from such behavior.

Teachers' anxiety about their abilities is also a common issue. It is particularly important for teachers to address feelings of inadequacy and manage their anxiety effectively. Language teachers often experience more anxiety about their professional skills than teachers of other subjects, which can result in higher stress levels (Haukås et al., 2022). Developing mechanisms to handle these feelings is essential for their professional longevity.

There are several things teachers can do, and one potential approach is cultivating self-compassion (Zessin et al., 2015). People often feel compassion for others in difficult situations; similarly, they can learn to extend compassion toward themselves. By practicing self-compassion, teachers may gain a more flexible and holistic perspective on themselves. Furthermore, understanding how to maintain their well-being while teaching is vital. Cultivating self-compassion and adopting a reflective mindset can help teachers overcome some of these challenges.

Teachers can also cultivate their mindfulness. Mindfulness means the process of regulating emotions to help concentrate on the present while ignoring the past or future concerns (Li, 2021). Previous studies show that mindful teachers can experience more enjoyment and manage stress better (Yang et al., 2023), and mindful activities can help teachers to reduce the level of stress (Taylor et al., 2021). Doing mindfulness-related activities such as meditation can help teachers to deal with difficulties they experience in their daily lives.

Effectively managing negative emotions can benefit both teachers and their students. Previous research indicates that teachers and students mutually influence each other, and their psychological states can be contagious (Moskowitz & Dewaele, 2021). When teachers are in a positive psychological state, their students are more likely to experience a similar level of well-being, ultimately enhancing academic outcomes. Thus, maintaining a healthy psychological state is essential not only for teachers but also for their students' success.

Conclusion

This study used interviews to explore how three English teachers in Japanese higher education coped with key professional challenges. Across participants, common sources of stress included linguistic self-doubt, teaching constraints, and student-

related difficulties. Addressing these issues requires both personal strategies—such as cultivating self-compassion and regulating negative emotions—and institutional support. University policies that promote teacher well-being and collegiality are also crucial as they increase teachers' satisfaction, reduces burnout, and decreases attrition rates (Davin & Donato, 2024).

Future research should consider adopting alternative methodologies to gain deeper insights into teachers' experiences. For example, classroom observations and the use of the experience sampling method (ESM) could be valuable. ESM involves participants answering short, simple questionnaires multiple times over a specific period, often using an application (Arndt et al., 2021). This method enables participants to report their experiences in real time, reducing reliance on retrospective memory and providing more accurate data.

Bio Data

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Appendix

Example Questions in the Interviews

1. Could you kindly inform me about the English courses you are currently teaching?
2. What challenges or difficulties do you encounter in the process of teaching your classes?
3. Do you experience any stress while teaching English?
4. How do you manage the difficulties and stress you face?