

Training and Support for Elementary School English Teachers in Japan

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This study investigates the training needs of elementary school English teachers in Japan following MEXT's 2020 Course of Study (CoS) reforms. Building on previous research distinguishing between homeroom and *senka* teachers (specialist English teachers), this study attempts to derive national training needs from among participants who attended the NITS 2025 workshop. Data include surveys from 43 participants and three interviews. Findings indicate parallels among homeroom teachers (HRTs) and *senka* teachers, including CoS-aligned lesson design, communication-centered instruction, assessment literacy, and effective information and

communication technology (ICT) integration. The analysis shows that, despite high levels of motivation, logistical barriers hinder professional development (PD). Teachers expressed strong support for differentiated yet collaborative training models for PD, and enthusiasm for in-service hybrid programs combining in-person training and online support materials. The study concludes by recommending university-school partnerships and collaborative learning frameworks to enhance teacher efficacy in elementary English education.

本研究は、2020年学習指導要領改訂後における、小学校外国語担当教員の研修ニーズを明らかにすることを目的とした。学級担任と専科教員の違いを指摘してきた先行研究を踏まえ、混合研究方法を用いて、独立行政法人教職員支援機構による全国研修の観察、43名を対象とした質問紙調査、ならびに3名への追跡インタビューを分析した。分析の結果、学級担任と専科教員の両者に共通して、学習指導要領に基づく授業デザイン、コミュニケーション中心の指導、評価理解、ICT活用が重要課題として示された。一方、高い学習意欲にもかかわらず、時間割編成や人員配置といった運営上の制約が研修参加の障壁となっていることも明らかになった。さらに、役割に応じて差別化されつつ協働的に学ぶ研修モデルや、対面とオンラインを組み合わせたハイブリッド型研修への強い支持が確認された。本研究は、小学校英語教育における教員の指導力を高めるため、大学と学校との連携、および協働的な研修の枠組みの構築を提言する。

Recent reforms to Japan's elementary English curriculum under the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology's (MEXT) 2020 Course of Study (CoS) have increased expectations for both homeroom teachers (HRTs) and *senka* teachers, who are subject-specialist teachers without homeroom duties, to deliver communicative, assessment-informed instruction. These changes have highlighted the need for professional development (PD) models that respond to diverse teacher backgrounds and institutional contexts. Building on previous research into the expressed needs of HRT and *senka* teachers, this mixed-methods study explores the training needs identified by teachers who participated in the 2025 national training workshop for primary school foreign language teachers, with the aim of informing more responsive and sustainable PD design.

JALT2025 Postconference Publication Selected Paper

This paper was chosen as a Selected Paper through consultation with the JALT Publications Board. We express our congratulations to these authors and our appreciation of their well-written paper.

As outlined in Fennelly et al. (2023a, 2023b), the introduction of English at the elementary level in Japan has transitioned through several distinct periods (Matsukawa & Oshiro, 2008). During the 1980s and 1990s, government-designated trial schools often relied on visits by L1 English speakers and assistant language teachers (ALTs). In the 2000s, elementary schools implemented lessons called “English Activities” as part of the Period of Integrated Studies, which became a flexible cross-curricular instructional block within the CoS. However, these lessons continued with heavy reliance on ALTs. Disparities in content and the regularity of instruction prompted the government toward a more formalized approach. With the 2011 revision of the CoS, Foreign Language Activities (FLA) became compulsory, and HRTs, or those responsible for FLA, were designated as lead instructors.

The most recent CoS revision in 2020 further expanded elementary English education by introducing weekly FLA classes in Grades 3 and 4, and twice-weekly English instruction as a formal subject in Grades 5 and 6 (see MEXT, 2022, for the English translation). The revised CoS also emphasized the use of authentic communication through language activities. The elevation of English to the level of an official subject meant that an expanded skill set was necessary, leading to greater inclusion of outside *senka* teachers.

These changes have produced increasing diversity in the formats of elementary English instruction. Studies such as Yorozyu (2019) and Fennelly et al. (2025) have documented differences in attitudes, beliefs, and PD needs between HRTs and *senka* teachers. MEXT (2024) survey data similarly indicate growing variation in how instruction is implemented nationwide. While the inclusion of *senka* teachers was intended to relieve the administrative and teaching burden on HRTs (MEXT, 2023), this policy has inadvertently limited the opportunities for HRT and *senka* team teaching. For instance, *senka* teachers often take over the classroom independently to allow HRTs preparation for other classes.

Previous research by Fennelly et al. (2023a, 2023b, 2025) employed a mixed-methods approach, utilizing a prefectural-level survey of 42 elementary school teachers alongside follow-up interviews and classroom observations. That research found that HRTs tended to excel in classroom management, communication with students, and student familiarity but lacked English proficiency and often over-relied on Japanese during English lessons. Conversely, *senka* teachers had better English understanding and more confidence communicating in English but tended to have less familiarity with the students. Rapport with the children was sometimes lacking, and classroom management concerns were more prevalent. Observation of classes conducted by both HRTs and *senka*

teachers revealed a tendency to focus on pattern practice, rather than communication, which may be a result of washback from previous educational experiences. The distinct strengths and challenges identified for both HRTs and *senka* teachers underscore the urgent need for more personalized and collaborative PD (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

To examine whether these locally identified needs were observable at the national level, we observed the National Institute for School Teachers and Staff Development (NITS) Program for Foreign Language Instruction for Primary School Teaching held February 3–5, 2025. The training program was attended by 120 participants, primarily elementary school teachers, together with some junior high school teachers and Board of Education (BoE) representatives. The training commenced with a lecture from the Senior Specialist for English Education, a joint representative of both NITS and MEXT, who reaffirmed important aspects of the CoS, and participants received practical guidance from an expert teacher. Participants then used what they had learned to revise pre-prepared lesson plans through discussion with peers. Finally, participants conducted microteaching activities and took part in peer reflection. Workshop organizers held the expectation that participants would disseminate what they had learned within their local learning communities.

Methodology

Research Design

We employed a mixed-methods design to examine the PD needs of Japanese elementary school teachers involved in English instruction. Building on prior prefectural case studies (Fennelly et al., 2023a, 2023b, 2025), which identified role-based differences in PD needs, we extended the analysis to a national sample of teachers who participated in the NITS training workshop. Quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed to capture both broad trends and contextualized teacher perspectives.

The design aimed to address three research questions:

- RQ1. Are the training needs identified locally also observable among participants from across Japan attending a national training program?
- RQ2. Can collaborative PD, whether conducted in schools or online, effectively support HRTs and *senka* teachers?
- RQ3. How can schools and BoEs overcome systemic barriers to teacher training?

Participants and Context

The quantitative phase surveyed the entire cohort of 120 attendees to the 3-day NITS workshop, representing multiple prefectures, with 43 completed responses (36% response rate). The training schedule was intense, and participants were also asked to complete several other government surveys during the program, which may have contributed to the low response rate.

Participants represented multiple positions as well: (a) HRTs, responsible for general classroom teaching including English; (b) *senka* teachers, English specialist teachers; and (c) BoE teachers' consultants, responsible for curriculum and training in their respective prefectures. Experience levels varied widely among teachers. Participation was voluntary and anonymous.

For the qualitative phase, follow-up interviews were conducted with three teachers from a single prefecture who had taken part in the workshop to confirm the quantitative survey data. These participants were chosen due to their varied career pathways, enabling them to speak from multiple perspectives—namely, everyday classroom practice (HRTs), specialist instruction (*senka*), and administrative oversight. These participants provided depth to the national survey findings by elaborating on individual practices and PD experiences. The pseudonyms *A-sensei*, *B-sensei*, and *C-sensei* are used in the paper to preserve anonymity:

- *A-sensei*: Former *senka* teacher now in a BoE teachers' consultant position.
- *B-sensei*: Veteran teacher serving as a curriculum supervisor.
- *C-sensei*: Younger HRT with a master's degree in education.

Data Collection and Instruments

A digital survey was distributed during the final day of the workshop. It contained 28 items combining multiple-choice questions, 4-point Likert-scale questions, and open-ended questions, covering five areas:

1. Teacher background
2. English proficiency and confidence
3. PD participation and frequency since 2020
4. Perceived importance of training content (e.g., ICT, assessment, language)
5. Attitudes toward collaborative or in-school PD

Open-ended questions allowed respondents to elaborate beyond fixed response options. For example, participants were asked, "What types of training do you consider most useful for improving elementary English instruction?" The survey was modeled after Fennelly et al. (2023a, 2023b, 2025) to enable comparison with previous data. The survey instrument is available from the authors upon reasonable request. The interviews were semi-structured, lasting around 60 minutes each, and were conducted in Japanese, the participants' first language. Questions examined confidence using English, training experiences, and views on collaboration. We recorded the interviews with consent, then transcribed, pseudonymized, and translated them into English for thematic analysis. Participants' comments are accordingly presented in the authors' English translation and paraphrase, rather than as verbatim quotations.

Data Analysis

Responses to the multiple-choice and Likert-scale items were analyzed across the five areas of research interest. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize participants' responses and identify overall patterns. Percentages and frequency counts were calculated for each item, and cross-tabulations compared patterns among HRTs, *senka* teachers, and BoE teachers' consultants. Given the modest sample size, emphasis was placed on identifying tendencies rather than conducting inferential tests.

Qualitative data from both the open-ended survey responses and the interview transcripts were coded thematically. Qualitative data from open-ended items were analyzed through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Coding was conducted inductively, then grouped into broader categories relating to the study's objectives (e.g., role-specific challenges, preferred training formats, and collaboration dynamics). Thematic clustering highlighted links among teacher role, self-efficacy, and PD experiences.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was granted through institutional review. All participants were informed of the study's purpose, anonymity safeguards, and right to withdraw. No identifying information was retained.

Results

Survey Results

Teacher Background

Survey respondents came from both urban and rural contexts across Japan. Approximately half were HRTs, one-third were *senka* teachers, and the remainder were BoE members. Among participants, 35% had under 5 years of experience, 30% 6–10 years, and 35% over 10 years. English teaching experience varied even more widely, from newly assigned instructors to specialists with more than a decade of experience. Seventy percent of respondents reported only partial understanding of the 2020 CoS, and 55% expressed anxiety about applying it effectively in the classroom.

English Proficiency and Confidence

A majority of the respondents (62%) reported being *somewhat confident* in their English ability, while 38% described themselves as *not confident*. No participants rated themselves as *very confident*. These results reinforce our earlier study's findings (Fennelly et al., 2023a), indicating that many teachers, including *senka* teachers, continue to experience insecurity when using English in the classroom. Though we may assume *senka* teachers have higher confidence in English, higher expectations and requirements beyond language ability may lead to the results seen, an area for future research.

PD Participation and Frequency Since 2020

On average, respondents had attended three PD sessions since 2020; however, only 42% had participated in joint training with other teacher types. Nonetheless, 91% of respondents stated that such collaboration would be *highly useful*. Teachers frequently expressed a preference for practical PD formats, such as classroom demonstrations, model lessons, and feedback sessions.

Contrary to expectations, most respondents indicated that they had adequate time for training. However, open-ended responses suggested that this finding may reflect the characteristics of the sample (i.e., experienced and motivated teachers with institutional support for PD), rather than typical school contexts. Several respondents noted that while time for PD may exist in theory, scheduling constraints often limit actual participation.

Perceived Importance of Training Content

Distinct patterns emerged across roles. HRTs emphasized the need for support with lesson organization and classroom English use, and they preferred observation-based PD. *Senka* teachers prioritized ICT integration as well as feedback and assessment methods, and they desired support for bridging theory with practice. BoE respondents emphasized improving teachers' English proficiency and comprehension of the CoS. All groups shared an interest in communicative language activities (*gengo katsudō*), small talk, and assessment, suggesting common ground for collaborative PD.

Attitudes Toward Collaborative or In-School PD

Across all roles, respondents expressed strong support for collaborative PD models in which teachers share expertise and participate in mutual lesson observation. Participants highlighted the complementary strengths of HRTs (i.e., child understanding) and *senka* teachers (i.e., language and methodology expertise). Common areas of interest here included ICT integration, team teaching, and assessment.

Summary of Survey Findings

Overall, the NITS training workshop survey revealed three consistent trends:

1. Self-perceived limitations in English proficiency and curriculum knowledge.
2. Strong demand for practical, differentiated, and accessible PD.
3. Widespread endorsement of school-based, collaborative training models.

These quantitative findings provided the foundation for the qualitative interview analysis described below.

Interview Results

Training Needs Across Key Pedagogical Areas

To further contextualize the survey findings, follow-up interviews were conducted with three teachers who attended the training workshop, each representing different professional roles. Thematic analysis of the interview data identified six themes related to participants' perceived needs for more comprehensive PD: communication skills, classroom management, lesson design, teaching foreign language as communication, assessment, and instructional scaffolding.

With respect to communication skills, interviewees emphasized the importance of building rapport with students and fostering positive classroom relationships. Regarding classroom management, interviewees underscored the need for strategies to sustain learner engagement and maintain productive learning environments. Training needs related to lesson design and assessment centered on aligning instructional practices with the expectations and evaluative frameworks of the CoS. B-sensei observed that speaking English fluently was not in itself sufficient, and that strong teaching ability was more important than language proficiency. B-sensei went on to emphasize the importance of lesson design, familiarity with the CoS, and effective use of textbooks.

In terms of approaching English as communication, interviewees expressed a desire for deeper understanding of language activities (*gengo katsudō*) to be able to move beyond pattern-focused instructional approaches. Finally, the theme of instructional scaffolding reflected interviewees' recognition that more explicit guidance in supporting diverse learners through appropriate and differentiated instructional support is needed.

Senka-Specific Training Needs

Interview data revealed concerns specific to *senka* teachers, particularly regarding the need for a thorough understanding of the aims and pedagogical foundations of the elementary school CoS. This issue was also raised in relation to junior high school teachers assigned to elementary school contexts. B-sensei expressed concern that in some municipalities, individuals with high English proficiency are hired directly as specialists but sometimes lack sufficient pedagogical training for the elementary school context. B-sensei felt that as a result, if the training provided to such teachers is insufficient, or if they themselves do not fully understand the current CoS, they may end up conducting lessons in their own way, sometimes in ways that actually make children dislike English. B-sensei emphasized that lesson design should be carried out in accordance with the current CoS and that only those who grasp that foundation should serve as specialists.

C-sensei similarly noted the need for more structured, MEXT-led training opportunities, explaining that, with appropriate training, *senka* teachers would better understand how to center lessons on language activities (*gengo katsudō*), including spiral and layered practice leading toward expression. In the absence of such training, C-sensei felt that lessons end up focused on traditional pattern practice instead of communicative expression. Together, these perspectives highlight the need for systematic, pedagogically grounded training to support effective implementation of communicative instruction.

ICT-Related Needs

All the interviewees viewed ICT training as both necessary and desirable, particularly when grounded in hands-on practice. C-sensei emphasized that teachers often discover useful digital textbook features only through regular use and noted the importance of clarifying differences between teacher and learner versions. At the same time, B-sensei cautioned that ICT training should not overshadow foundational pedagogical competencies, stressing the importance of face-to-face interaction, student-centered communication, and lesson design. These perspectives suggest that ICT training is most effective when embedded within authentic instructional contexts and when positioned as a complement to core pedagogical development.

English Language Development

All three interview participants emphasized the importance of ongoing English language development as part of continuous PD. B-sensei described such training as absolutely necessary and effective, noting that expressions learned earlier in teachers' careers may become outdated over time.

C-sensei highlighted the value of refining classroom English to improve lesson flow, expressing a desire to learn how to begin the lesson so small talk flows naturally into the main topic, and also how to employ phrasing that enables activities to connect smoothly. These comments underscore the role of ongoing language development in supporting effective classroom instruction.

Logistical Barriers to Participation

Despite strong interest in PD, teachers reported substantial logistical barriers to participation. Scheduling constraints were particularly salient: participants indicated that weekday training is difficult because there is often no one available to cover classes, making weekend or vacation-period training more feasible. These challenges were linked to broader staffing shortages and reductions in support personnel. Teachers also noted that diminished support staff and team-teaching allocations further complicate opportunities for peer observation and external training participation.

Current Realities of In-School Training

Formal in-school training opportunities were described as limited. Most elementary schools reportedly offer only one or two officially scheduled training sessions per year,

typically lasting 60–90 minutes. These sessions must be incorporated into an annual, school-wide training plan finalized at the beginning of the school year, leaving little flexibility for additional or responsive PD. As a result, much in-school learning occurs informally among motivated teachers. While such informal collaboration can be valuable, it remains uneven and unsystematic.

Training Delivery Formats

Participants expressed a clear preference for in-person PD, which they viewed as more conducive to meaningful discussion, collaboration, and relationship building. In contrast, synchronous discussions via Zoom and similar platforms were perceived as less effective for deeper professional exchange. While online platforms were acknowledged as potentially useful supplements, participants consistently identified face-to-face training as the more pedagogically productive mode.

Online Training Materials

Teachers emphasized the need for online training materials that are concrete, practice-oriented, and closely aligned with classroom realities. Participants requested explicit models of lesson design linked to the CoS, accompanied by authentic classroom examples and commentary. A-sensei highlighted the value of observing real lessons to understand how language activities and small talk function in practice.

B-sensei expressed interest in step-by-step guidance for unit and lesson design, while C-sensei noted the usefulness of materials illustrating lesson flow, language activities, and methods for capturing assessment evidence, including “Attitudes” (as a formal assessment category). Collectively, these findings indicate strong demand for explicit, structured, and classroom-grounded online training resources.

Discussion

The findings from the survey and interviews revealed persistent challenges in teacher confidence and curriculum implementation alongside strong, convergent support for practical, school-based, and collaborative PD models. In this section, we interpret these findings in relation to prior research and national policy, and we consider the implications for the design of sustainable teacher PD systems.

RQ1a: Linguistic and Curriculum-Related Insecurity

One consistent finding across both quantitative and qualitative data was a sense of insecurity regarding English use and curriculum implementation among participants. Despite variations in experience and role, as noted in the results, no survey respondents rated themselves as *very confident* in English, and a majority reported only partial understanding of the 2020 CoS. Interview data further contextualized these results, illustrating how linguistic uncertainty and curricular ambiguity affect lesson flow, confidence, and teachers’ ability to implement communicative language activities effectively.

These findings align with earlier research (Fennelly et al., 2023a) indicating that English proficiency alone does not guarantee instructional effectiveness in elementary school foreign language education, particularly considering the need for teachers to integrate language use, pedagogy, and curriculum knowledge simultaneously. The interview data reinforce this point: teachers emphasized that effective instruction requires not only language ability, but also a deep understanding of lesson design, textbook use, and the pedagogical aims of the CoS. This suggests that PD initiatives that focus narrowly on language proficiency or specific teaching techniques may be insufficient unless they are integrated within a broader, curriculum-informed framework for PD.

RQ1b: Practical and Differentiated PD

Across the survey and interview data, teachers expressed a strong preference for PD that is concrete, practice-oriented, and directly applicable to classroom instruction. Survey respondents consistently favored formats such as model lessons, classroom demonstrations, and feedback sessions, while interview participants emphasized the value of observing authentic lessons and receiving step-by-step guidance on lesson flow, unit design, and assessment practices.

These preferences reflect a broader shift toward situated and practice-based PD. Teachers in this study sought opportunities to understand how communicative activities, small talk, and assessment practices function in real classrooms. Importantly, the findings also highlight the need for differentiated PD content. While HRTs prioritized basic lesson organization and classroom English, *senka* teachers expressed greater interest in ICT integration and in assessment practices, and the BoE respondents noted concerns about curriculum comprehension and overall teacher competence. Designing PD systems that acknowledge and respect these diverse perspectives is a key challenge.

RQ2a: Collaborative PD

One of the strongest and most consistent findings was teachers' endorsement of collaborative PD. Although fewer than half of the survey respondents had previously participated in joint training, an overwhelming majority expressed interest in doing so. Interview data illustrated how teachers view collaboration as a means of benefiting from complementary expertise: HRTs' deep understanding of elementary-age children and classroom dynamics, *senka* teachers' English language and methodological knowledge, and the BoE respondents' past experience in the classroom paired with the curricular and administrative perspectives of their BoE roles.

RQ2b: ICT in PD

Teachers viewed ICT training as valuable, particularly when training emphasizes hands-on exploration of digital textbooks and tools. At the same time, interview participants cautioned against positioning ICT as a substitute for foundational pedagogical skills. ICT was viewed as most effective when integrated into broader instructional practices such as supporting lesson design, communication, and student engagement.

These findings suggest that ICT training should be embedded within pedagogically grounded PD. Such an approach aligns with teachers' expressed desires and reinforces the importance of maintaining a balance between exploring technological possibilities and ensuring sound pedagogical competence.

RQ3: Structural and Logistical Constraints

Despite strong motivation for PD, both the survey and interview data revealed serious structural barriers to participation. Teachers described difficulties attending training during regular school hours due to staffing shortages and the lack of substitute coverage, with weekend or vacation-period training often emerging as the only feasible option. In-school training opportunities were similarly restricted, typically limited to one or two short sessions per year and embedded within rigid annual planning structures.

These constraints highlight a critical tension between teachers' willingness to engage and the institutional conditions that shape their capacity to do so. Addressing these structural barriers will be essential to translating teachers' interest in collaborative PD into sustainable professional growth.

PD Design Implications

The findings suggest several implications for the design of effective PD. First, PD initiatives should integrate language development, pedagogy, and curriculum training where possible, rather than treating them as separate domains. Second, training should prioritize practical, classroom-grounded content, including authentic examples from lessons, with opportunities for observation and reflection. Third, collaborative training models that bring together HRTs, *senka* teachers, ALTs, and others appear promising, given teachers' strong endorsement of shared learning and complementary expertise.

Realizing the potential of collaborative PD will require attention to scheduling flexibility, staffing support, and the systematic incorporation of PD into school-level planning to achieve sustainability.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, participants were drawn from a voluntary national PD workshop, introducing the possibility of self-selection bias. Teachers who chose to attend may have been more motivated or institutionally supported, potentially contributing to the generally positive attitudes toward PD observed in the data. Second, the qualitative component was based on interviews with only three participants from a single prefecture.

While these interviews provided rich contextual insights that helped interpret broader national survey results, they are not representative of all teachers' experiences across different regions of Japan and should be understood as illustrative rather than generalizable. Consequently, while the survey provides a national snapshot, the qualitative depth is localized. Future research incorporating larger and more diverse qualitative samples from multiple prefectures would help to further validate and expand understanding of these findings.

Conclusion

This study examined the PD needs of elementary school teachers engaged in English instruction in Japan, drawing on a survey of participants in a national training program and follow-up interviews with teachers representing diverse professional roles. Building on earlier prefectural-level research, the findings confirm that many of the challenges identified at the local level—notably HRTs' lack of confidence in their English

language ability, *senka* teachers' difficulties with student understanding and classroom management, limited understanding of the CoS, and uneven access to meaningful PD—were also evident among participants in the national training program.

In conclusion, the study suggests that the future of elementary English teacher PD in Japan lies in coherent, curriculum-informed, and collaborative models that integrate language development, pedagogy, and practical classroom application. National training initiatives, such as those offered by NITS, play an important role in establishing shared understandings; however, their impact is likely to be maximized when complemented by sustained, school-based professional learning communities supported by appropriate online PD resources. By aligning policy intentions, teacher expertise, and workplace realities, such an approach holds promise for supporting teachers and improving the quality of English education in Japanese elementary schools.

In particular, guided in-school, collaborative PD between HRTs and *senka* teachers has the potential to help teachers learn from one another, address complementary areas of need, and bridge gaps in classroom communication patterns. This approach shows promise for facilitating implementation of more communication-centered lessons and contributing to the achievement of MEXT's aim of enabling students to learn through authentic, contextualized communication.

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Bio Data

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