

Significance of Pre-Service Teacher Education: From the English Teaching Methodology Instructor's Perspective Lens of the Instructor of the Methodology of Teaching English

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Abstract

Educational reform has been implemented rigorously for the past two decades. In 2003, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) announced “A Strategic Plan to Cultivate ‘Japanese with English Abilities’ in 2002.” This action plan referred to the English teachers’ competency, setting the target requirement of TOEFL 550 or the equivalent in order to have the students at schools acquire communicative competency. Enhancing students’ communicative abilities in English is consonant with upgrading the teachers’ competency in English. Most recently, the Course of Study for the secondary high school (grades ten to twelve) prescribed that English is to be taught by the target language in principle. This paper explores the importance of the pre-service teacher training to achieve the goal of English instruction in the Japanese context. Tracing the recent trajectory of teacher education reform, the author, an instructor of teacher preparation programs, discusses the role of English teacher trainers in light of the “Methodology of Teaching English”, which is one of the mandatory subjects to be completed towards the English teaching licensure.

Introduction

Overview of recent English education and English teachers

In accordance with the mobilization of people, the fluidity of economy and capital, and the rapid

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transfer of information across the world, English is interpreted as a global language. At present, the Japanese government is transforming the educational policy because of this growing need. So the emphasis of English language education is placed on practical and communicative English as the political and economical strategies of the nation. The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has announced a series of new reform plans in recent days. One of the most recent plans was MEXT's announcement of "A Strategic Plan to Cultivate 'Japanese with English Abilities' in 2002" (MEXT, 2003). As the rationale for the plan, MEXT maintains that it is essential for our children to acquire communication skills in English when English has become a common international language in the twenty-first century. Therefore, the plan proposed that the capability of teachers of English should be upgraded in accordance with the fundamental aspects of willingness and passion for education.

Most secondary school teachers of English (grades seven to twelve), in general, have received little training in communicative approaches in pre-service education at colleges and universities. This explains why Japanese English teachers' proficiency overall seems rather low (Nishino & Watanabe, 2008). Furthermore, these teachers have little time and few opportunities to learn how to better teach English in a communicative manner in their schools as part of professional development.

According to the statistics issued by the Educational Testing Service (ETS) in 2007, the score results of TOEFL test takers of Japanese people were quite low. Among others, the score of the speaking section was the lowest in the world, and the score of the listening section was the lowest in Asia. I speculate that the above facts are, in part, related to the teaching practice in the classroom including the proficiency of teachers of English.

The level of proficiency of teachers is crucial in English language teaching. In order to enhance communicative approaches in teaching so that children can acquire communicative ability in English, MEXT has established the target for the expected English-language abilities of English teachers in junior high and high schools (grades seven to twelve) as TOEFL-PTB 550 or its equivalent in other tests (MEXT, 2003). But less than fifty percent of secondary school English teachers have attained the English proficiency level MEXT has set as its goal (Nishino & Watanabe, 2008).

To address the issue, the plan also included intensive in-service teacher training at prefectural levels and a national level for the five years from 2003 to 2007. Although the five years have passed, the same problematic situations linger on. Kikuchi & Browne (2009) state that three roadblocks exist in the Japanese context in terms of improving the teaching practice of English, such as "the university entrance examination-oriented nature of the class, which tends to focus on receptive skills or translation skills, over-reliance on Yakudoku (grammar-translation) activities, and a severe lack of pre-and in-service teacher training" (p.174).

Framework of Teacher Education

Creation of “advanced kind” of teaching certificate

Prior to the implementation of the plan, the Teachers' License Act was modified in 1988, resulting in the creation of “advanced kind” teaching certificate. This newly created advanced kind teaching certificate is basically granted to the applicants after their completion of a master's degree (National research council -US- Office of scientific and engineering personnel & National Research council -US- Office international affairs, 1995). Given that people have greater expectations about the teacher as well as the education in the country, teachers with “advanced kind” teaching certificates would be increasing. This can be supported by the fact that the new governing party, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), has an educational platform that teaching certificates should be granted to the people who have completed a master's degree (Yomiuri Shinbun, 2009). In the teaching arenas of primary schools, and junior and senior high schools, the highest qualification in terms of “the kind of teaching license” is the ticket to climb a promotion ladder toward the management/ administrative positions. Among the teachers, some who wish to be part of the management have gained the highest kind of teaching certificates for the sake of their promotion. When the highest kind of licensure assures the quality of the teachers and their teaching practice, sense-making takes place.

Additional requirement of certificates for grades 1 to 9

In accordance with the revision of the Teachers' License Act, 1998, a new law adjunct to the above law was enacted. This new law stipulates that applicants for teaching certificates in elementary and junior high levels except for the high school level(grades ten to twelve) are mandated to engage in the experience activity at special schools (schools for the aurally-visually-intellectually-challenged students) and welfare institutions, totaling seven days at a minimum. Although the enactment of the law was the product of the politically-oriented tug-of-war between the parties in the Diet, this additional experience per se is conducive to enhancing the humanity of the pre-service teachers.

Impact on all the stakeholders

In March, 2008, the Course of Study Guidelines for elementary schools (grades one to six) and junior high schools (grades seven to nine) were officially announced. This document prescribes the standard curricula framework for each school level, delineating the units to be covered as well as the overall goals for the each subject. The main features of the revised two kinds of Course of Study Guidelines in terms of the English language are that an adoption of English teaching in grades five and six once a week at the elementary school level, and four times a week of English classes in the junior high school level are officially mandated.

Subsequently, in 2009, the Course of Study for senior high school (grades ten to twelve) was promulgated by MEXT, in which English should be taught in the target language in principle. This announcement has a great impact on all the stakeholders in education, in particular, the English teachers in secondary schools.

Teacher training: pre-service teacher training

As mentioned earlier, the Teachers' License Act was revised in 1998. Accordingly, the units that students who are enrolled in the pre-service teacher training program have to complete vary. The number of credits to be covered depends upon the teaching license of kindergarten (K), elementary school (grades one to six), junior high school (grades seven to nine), and senior high school (grades ten to twelve) respectively.

Historically, issuance of the elementary school teacher licensure was mostly taken over by the national universities for teacher education. As a result, at present, fewer private universities can offer the courses necessary for elementary school teacher training. The elementary school teachers are generalist teachers similar to the situation in other countries. So prospective teachers of elementary schools have to study comprehensive areas of education including psychological and mental components of the prepubescent. On the other hand, the secondary schools have a system that specialty teachers teach their classes. It is integral for the specialty teachers to have confidence in the subject teaching, with relevance in teaching the subjects in terms of in-depth knowledge and expertise, specifically in the case of the language teachers in having proficiency in the target language.

At present, most of the national and private universities nationwide offer courses for pre-service teacher training programs, in which students can obtain the relevant licensure in their disciplines on completing the pre-service teacher training as well as the associate degree programs, undergraduate programs, and master's degree programs respectively.

In the new scheme of the Teachers' License Act, 1998, prospective teachers study three categorized areas such as specialty subjects, professional studies, and optional subjects. While the units in the specialty subjects that would-be teachers have to complete have decreased in number, the units in the professional studies have increased except for the elementary school teacher category. Typically, the professional studies consists of an introduction to the teaching profession, principles of education, educational psychology, moral education, teaching methods, curriculum studies, career guidance, and practicum for an extended period mentioned above.

Moreover, it can be said that this modification of the units necessary to complete the program imposes greater workload on the prospective teachers in the national universities for non-teacher education and the majority of private universities than that on the national university students for education. While the national universities of education can incorporate the professional studies into the curriculum,

the other institutions have their own curricula based on the discipline areas so that the trainees in teacher certificate programs in those colleges and universities, in general, have to complete the increased credits. The students in the pre-service teacher education have to complete their degree programs and teacher training programs concurrently. In theory, when the special nature of education is taken into account, a broad range of experience and study could contribute to better educate youths in schools. Prospective teachers face the above constraints in reference to gaining teaching certificates. As well, they are expected to be future educators who could produce educational outcomes in the same manner as teacher candidates from national universities of teacher education could when serving in school settings.

The types of certificates and rigorous reform

Rigorous educational reforms have taken place in the last two decades. Accordingly, the issuance system of teaching licensure takes on complicated aspects. Few people even in the teaching settings have the accurate knowledge about the overall certifying process. In 2002, the Teachers' License Act had undergone a minor modification, which allowed the specialty teachers in junior high school and high school levels to be able to engage in teaching in the relevant class of their specialty in the grade level.

At present, teaching certificates are categorized under the three segments: (1) regular certificates, which include the advanced kind, first kind, and second kind certification; (2) special certificates; (3) and temporary certificates. Colleges and universities are mostly involved in the pre-service trainees regarding the three types of regular certificates above.

The accelerated deregulation was followed by the revision of the Ordinance for Enforcement of the School Education Act in 2000 (Hiroshima prefectural board of education, 2003). Accordingly, a new system was introduced in which some people who have relevant experience in private sectors can be invited as school principal even though they do not have legitimate certifications. The shift in the government's policy is mirrored in the appointment of those people in the process of educational reform. In a positive light, this can be viewed as the effort to upgrade the quality of education, meeting the changing needs in society overall.

One of the central government policies in education is to provide the same quality of education to the people in formal education nationwide. Promulgation of the Course of Study in each school level is rationalized as the distribution of the same quality of education across the country. Deregulation in terms of appointment of non-certified teachers in the formal education brought up the issue of the congruence of the nation's policy. How can the government assure the same quality of education when they appoint non-certified people in school settings and have them implement the school's management? Educational reform is imperative. However, when the reform is carried out too quickly, teachers and administrators at school cannot keep pace with the progression of the restructuring scheme. The reform without consensus of the stakeholders, confusion could result so that counter effects may arise. Indeed, the pre-service

teacher training has been provided at colleges and universities. When over-expansion of deregulation occurs quickly, in terms of appointment of non-certified teachers, the erosion of the teaching licensure system might occur, virtually resulting in degrading the quality of education overall. The possible problem of under-qualified teachers lurks. The intent of the central government is to provide the beneficiary of education with an equal quality of education across the country.

The importance of pre-service teacher training

Class of Methodology of English Teaching

In general, pre-service teacher training and degree programs are concurrently undertaken at colleges and universities. Among the necessary subjects for the prospective teachers of English to complete is the Methodology of Teaching English. This subject is prescribed in the Teachers' License Act as mandatory subject matter. Traditionally, the subject is conducted by covering the theoretical consideration and methodological practical areas, such as lesson planning, teaching strategies, mock class, and the management of English class although there is no precise prescription for the course in the laws concerned. Colleges and universities are autonomous entities, given discretion and latitude in order to achieve their educational goals. Regarding the teacher-training program accredited by MEXT, pre-service teacher educators undertake this class within the scope of their professional perspectives. It can be said that the Methodology of Teaching English may vary in terms of the discourse across the country.

English is a subject which has been taught in junior and senior high school. However, most people may experience the study of English out of context; that is, except for a small proportion of English learners, the majority of people have rare opportunities to use the language on a daily basis. Some emphasize that English in formal education is a learning experience for the sake of entrance examinations even though the Japanese government subscribes to principles of communicative language instruction. In teaching English in the secondary school levels, it is encouraged for the English teachers to use "classroom English" as much as possible. As is known, teachers have a propensity to teach as they were taught. If this is true with today's class, the status quo in the class of the foreign language teaching can perpetuate. Considering the teaching circumstances in English classes, I assume that many of the pre-service teachers of English were taught a large part of English by the conventional methods, which employed grammar-oriented strategies in their junior and high school days. The teaching practice in the Japanese context has been constructed by the intertwined factors over a long period. There is no panacea for the above. However, I assume that the measure to be taken in the first place includes pre-service teacher education.

Ferguson (1985) notes that "the tradition of greater autonomy among university faculty has minimized the concern for closely monitoring teacher preparation programs, and there has been little pres-

sure on Japanese teacher educators to certify the competence of their graduates” (p.23). Nowadays, most colleges and universities have adopted class evaluations from students at the end of the semester. Students’ evaluations are to be reflected in the subsequent semester course, which entails modification of the curriculum to meet the students’ expectations and their academic goals. In the evaluation process, sharing a space to discuss the feedback of the class with other faculty members would be a good opportunity to create the spirit of camaraderie and collaborative studies in the teaching community, producing academic merits to both learners and teachers. Inappropriate segments of the class in terms of educating prospective language teachers could be examined to better suit what students have to acquire. In fact, this effort better clarifies the weaknesses of the class so that the instructor’s reflection of the class can lead to the appropriate teaching discourse.

Significance of teacher training before entering profession. Strevens (1977) claims that “the general effectiveness of language teaching is heavily dependent on the nature and quality of the training that teachers undergo before entering their profession” (p.21).

As Articles 21 and 22 in the Special Law for Public School Educator stipulate, the teachers as civil servants are required to develop their teaching capacity in a self-directed manner on a constant basis. Professional development includes “maintenance of teaching skills, development of new skills, updating knowledge in the subject matter and in teaching methodology as well as in the theory of learning and teaching” (OECD, 2003, p.355). In this in-service professional development, some willingly participate, some can hardly access the opportunity for various reasons, and others are not keen about the in-service training. Regarding the in-service teacher training, a professor in the western part of Japan surveyed the participation of the professional training of “English Activities” in the elementary schools before the promulgation of the new course of study, 2008. In her survey, Professor Izumi (2007) revealed a surprising datum that 41 percent of the respondents have never participated in the in-service teacher training. This is a reality of great concern although the reason was not clarified why so many of the respondents did not attend the teacher training. However, it is true that once one has started to engage in teaching in the school settings, he/she will be provided with limited opportunities of in-service training due to a plethora of his/her daily responsibilities at school.

Noguchi (2009), who was then a high school principal and now a college professor, states that the majority of the mentor teachers at the school he works for point out the lack of adequate level of proficiency in given subjects when teacher trainees attempt to conduct the class as part of their practicum. Indeed, this applies to the student teachers of the English subject. This trend is regarded as a prevalent phenomenon in the practicum venue across the country. To address the issue, an instructor of the Methodology of Teaching English might want to pay regard to their acquiring the pedagogical framework of English instruction in the secondary school level and the development of the trainees’ funda-

mental language skills, which are prerequisite to their implementation of the class in the practicum.

The Course of Study for senior high school, 2009, which comes into effect in 2013, prescribes that English is to be taught by the target language in principle. Considering this mandate, the teacher trainer's employment of English in the class helps the pre-service teachers to acquaint themselves with the formation of and implementation of the English class when participating in their practicum or serving in school.

The trainees can participate in the "Methodology of Teaching English" class, reflecting on the English class they experienced when they were in secondary school. The instructor can make the most of their familiarity with this class, having them discuss a relevant topic in English. Being provided one topic in the discussion session, trainees discuss the topic in Japanese in the class. The facilitators from the trainees alternately summarize the participant's argument in English, encouraging the discussion to continue. This attempt might be a daunting task to the pre-service teachers. The teacher trainer should provide assistance when the facilitators have difficulty summarizing the peer's insight. This type of class formation seems to be conducive to helping enhance their language skills as a foreign language teacher/learner.

Making it a point to employ English in the class and having teacher trainees use English as much as possible comply with the policy prescribed in the Course of Study at the secondary school level.

Inclusive elements of teacher training in the Japanese context

Career path preparation

In the Japanese context, pre-service teacher education is entrusted to colleges and universities, and the authority for certifying the teaching license is the responsibility of the prefectural board of education. The power of the appointment of the public school teachers is in the hands of each prefectural board of education and each board of education of the ordinance-designated major cities.

Colleges and universities only grant the hallmarks when pre-service teachers have completed the units that are prescribed in the Teachers' License Act. The integral role of teachers of English is to teach the language. Accordingly, the proficiency level of language teachers is a serious consideration. The recommended level of the language abilities is suggested by the MEXT action plan, 2003. However, it is not binding regarding entering the teaching profession. After completing all the units that are required to apply for the legitimate teaching certificate to the prefectural board of education where the institutions of trainees are located, intended teachers have to take the "exam" of the prefectural board of education or of the designated major cities to become public school teachers. Public school teachers are included in the scope of public employees.

Appointment system. There are two ways of appointment processes in reference to public employ-

ees. The intended teachers wishing to teach at public schools are to go through “selection and screening exams” in the process as prescribed in Article 11 of Special Rules for the Public Educational Personnel and Staff Act while the applicants for ordinary public offices in the prefectures are left to mostly “competitive exams” in the appointment process (Chapter 15 in Local Public Service Law). “Selection and screening” indicates that applicants’ aptitudes are to be evaluated in comprehensive manner. In the case of English teacher applicants, their oral competence in English is examined through various ways in the interview along with other written tests. Competitive exams are straightforward, whereas “selection and screening” has blurred areas in terms of the evaluator’s judgment and invisible factors even though screening criteria must be fixed. Transparency of appointment with impartiality should be implemented so that the applicants with proficiency of the language and a passion for teaching can enter the profession.

Considering the rigorously competitive teachers’ appointments, most of the colleges and universities provide guidance for the teacher recruitment. The updates of teacher recruitment and appointment are seriously considered. In particular, I assume that it is characteristic of the teacher-training program to touch on the preparation strategies for teacher appointment examinations in the class. My belief is that the instructor in teacher-training programs should be armed with relevant knowledge of updated recruitment in teaching venues, wishing the career path of the intended teachers to be successfully materialized. In this regard, the teacher educators in the Japanese context are to impart the pedagogical aspects of the profession and the nuances and strategies of all facets of the teacher recruitment.

In closing

Keeping in mind that MEXT’s intent to have the students develop communicative competency in English, the instructor of the Methodology of Teaching English should be responsive to what is expected as a teacher trainer in terms of conducting the class. As well, teacher trainees in the class should toss away the preconception of the English class from which they have experienced in the traditional format of the class. By the time they serve at school, they should have acquired their own methods of teaching so that they can propel the active role of English teachers in school, which enhances the students’ communicative ability.

Where the Methodology of Teaching English is concerned, the instructor in this class can play an overarching role in terms of theory and practice. As the medical students of future doctors can share the hands-on experience of surgical operations in undergraduate medical education, future teachers of English are to be exhibited and involved in a “practical” class through the efforts of the instructor or some other sources. This can contribute to raising the awareness of trainees in terms of integration of theory into practice.

Theoretical and pedagogical concept is comprehensively to be dealt with on one hand in class, and communicative competence in English should be enhanced in terms of trainees' abilities on the other. In this regard, the teacher trainer in this class should undertake the aforementioned dual responsibilities concurrently. One feasible option would be that the instructor should employ English as much as possible during the class time, namely that the class should be conducted in a bilingual fashion, not in a monolingual manner. In effect, the teacher trainees are to be exposed to the English teaching/learning environment. When the instructor's class is partially organized employing English, some positive effects are expected. On top of useful words and expressions, the interactive experience with the trainer in the classroom context helps to enhance the trainees' competence in English. Their skills acquired as trainees in class are transferable when they serve in schools. This type of class delivery in English teacher education aligns with the MEXT's strategic direction.

The experiences of being involved in the oral / aural activities allow pre-service teachers to develop their more communicative abilities compared to the involvement of the Methodology class undertaken by all Japanese. In effect, teacher trainees of English have confidence in their teaching practice when entering the profession. Thus, they can play an optimal role as English teachers, enhancing students' communicative abilities in the school contexts.

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