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## A personal re-examination of secondary English teacher in-service training 2002-2007

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### Abstract

Strongly believing that *the teacher is the single most important educational resource in the classroom*, how additional training is provided to in-service English teachers becomes a key element in improving the quality of language instruction in classrooms across Japan. This paper re-examines the past five years of Ministry of Education and Science (MEXT) sponsored English teacher training, from the former National Center for Teacher Development (based at Tsukuba) model through the current prefectural in-service programs, from the personal experiences of a teacher trainer of over 2,500 secondary school English teachers since 2002.

After evaluating the differing sets of in-service provided skills needed by junior high school Japanese Teachers of English (JTEs) in comparison with JTE high school teachers, the complex question of Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) in-service training requirements at all levels will be addressed. Finally, based on these five years of experience, I will discuss the future of MEXT in-service training for both secondary – and especially for elementary school – English teachers (both JTEs and ALTs) in Japan.

### Introduction

My introduction to secondary school English teacher in-service training took place in August of 1981, when I taught over 100 Japanese commercial high school (商業高等学校) English teachers in Hakone at their annual summer seminar. For each of the four days the four native-speaker teachers conducted activity-based classes for the different groups in rotation, we also held two evening sing-along sessions, and we helped the participant classes prepare English skits. (Additionally, a well-known English expert lectured the entire group.) As everyone stayed in the same (rather isolated) facility, there were many opportunities for the native-speakers to meet the participants informally. Furthermore, as a number of teachers slept in the same room, they had the opportunity to discuss school related problems, share practical information, and form lasting friendships with teachers from around Japan.

In my first few years, some teachers (usually older and male) had difficulty with communicative English, but they could read and explain grammar well. From about 1984, however, this problem vanished as more and more teachers mastered spoken English. Every year at Hakone there were “repeaters” who had been there before. However, gradually the number of applicants declined. So, in 1997, the summer seminars were shifted to the Tokyo *Zensho Kaikan* building (with the teachers arranging their own accommodations). We also began to accept more business teachers who were interested in English. And, although this has worked reasonably well, the participant numbers have

continued to drop resulting in a reduction of the number of native-teacher instructors (down to two, in 2007), as the percentage of business teachers has greatly increased.

Over the 26 years, my lessons have widely varied, but the central idea has been to engage the teachers in using English as a communication tool. Therefore, classes were structured to have the learners interact as much as possible while I modeled, coached, and facilitated learner practice. For example, I usually had the participants present about English (or business) education in their schools for two or three minutes each, while I stayed in the back of the classroom and wrote out evaluations of their oral presentations. Often, the class then progressed to two-person conversations and on to group discussions. However, in all cases my purpose was to maximize participant output and focus my feedback on specific skill improvement (e.g. pronunciation difficulties, problems with syntax, unnatural expressions, lack of eye contact, and insufficient flow of words). To build confidence, I always tried to praise each participant for three aspects of their presentation or conversation for every single suggested improvement that I made.

Since 1981, English teaching and learning in Japan (including that in commercial high schools) has changed greatly. The seven most significant developments have been: (1) The 2003 MEXT Action Plan to Cultivate “Japanese with English Abilities” which clearly articulated the need for communicative skills, (2) The 20 years of ALTs, in ever increasing numbers in more classrooms team-teaching with JTEs, that have accustomed the students (and JTEs) to speaking English, (3) The expansion of English teacher in-service training, (4) The tendency of more JTEs (along with working adults) to take standardized English tests, like *Eiken* and TOEIC, to demonstrate their English proficiency, (5) The initiation of Super English Language High Schools (SELHis) that have developed innovative approaches to learning English, (6) The fact that almost all elementary schools (currently, over 95%) are now teaching English, and (7) The 2006 inclusion of listening into the national *Daigaku Nyushi Center* English test. (Furthermore, Japanese schools have been adversely affected by the falling demographics that have led to school closures, mergers, and serious budget cuts.)

### **The National Tsukuba Leader/Teacher-Training Model**

As an international school teacher (and later administrator) during the 1980s and 1990s, it was only after moving to Hakuoh University that I could become more involved in JTE in-service training, other than the yearly summer seminar for commercial school teachers. English teacher training, or more exactly JTE leadership training (英語教育指導者講座), had been carried out under the auspices of *Kokuritsu Kyoiku Kaikan* for over 25 years, but it was not until September of 2002 that I was able to participate, just before the system was discontinued. Although I only presented for one day, it was an honor to work in the same program with such distinguished teacher trainers as Professors Kensaku Yoshida, Shigeru Matsumoto, Hideko Midorikawa (whom I later got to know quite well when we worked in the Tokushima in-service program), James Bowers, and Timothy Wright – who had introduced me.

Like the pre-1997 summer in-service for commercial teachers, in the Tsukuba model, teachers were drawn from around the country and resided together at the training center. However, the intensive four-week term of study gave rise to the “Tsukuba prison” appellation coined by some unhappy teachers. The groups varied in size from 60 to over 100 and became quite tight-knit as a result of their time

together. The focus was on developing leadership abilities while boosting English and teaching skills: and many of the trainees went on to administrative positions.

As I had the Tokyo municipal teachers (Block 4) for only one day, half the group from 9:30 to 12:30 and the other half from 1:30 to 4:30, I began with some motivation and speaking activities readily applicable to their classrooms. Next, I charted the shift from English as a native language (ENL) or English as a second language (ESL) to English as a foreign language (EFL) with the explosion of EFL learning in Europe, especially the former Soviet block, East Asia, and around the world over the Internet. Then, the participants listened to a taped conversation between a British and an American university student about regional accents, noting the native errors in syntax and grammar (to stress flow and communicative quantity, over 100% accuracy).

However, most of the time was used for ‘hands on’ speaking activities in which the participants made presentations while I evaluated them. Their intensity, wit, and confidence were remarkable, and the questions at the end of the session, such as the man who asked about the necessity of training students to pronounce ‘l’ and ‘r’ perfectly in an EFL-dominated world, showed how perceptive and forward-thinking many of the teachers were. I wish I had had more time with this fascinating group.

### **The Prefectural In-service Training Programs: 2003-2007**

Beginning in 2003, and budgeted for five years, MEXT decentralized secondary JTE in-service by having the 47 prefectural Boards of Education (BOE) plan and run shorter training seminars for greater numbers of participants. “All English teachers were to take in-service courses to train them how to teach students to use communicative English.... In 2003, 7,268 junior and senior high JTEs participated in in-service training.... in 2004, the number of JTEs trained was 9,823.... and in 2005, the plan was for 7,425 JTEs to attend in-service training,” according to the March, 2006 MEXT English Forum publication. (MEXT 2006 English Forum, page 15, my translation.)

To train all JTEs, the various prefectures usually separated the junior and senior high school teachers and tried to provide more reading and writing intensive instruction for the latter, whose students would sit for university entrance exams, and more speaking and listening for the former. However, sometimes all the JTEs were mixed together. Also, in practice, it has not always been possible to achieve 100% JTE in-service attendance because of scheduling conflicts and teacher reluctance. Scheduling is the overriding reason, reflecting restrictions on when in-service seminars can be offered: avoiding school vacation periods when teachers are not too busy preparing for the beginning of the new academic year, so from the last week in July through the last week in August probably being the best time.

Teacher reluctance reflects the mindset of some teachers who feel that having worked so hard to earn their teachers’ licenses and then successfully passed the difficult selection process (in 2006 only about 10% of licensed teachers secured positions), their period of study was over. One chief organizer of a prefectural in-service training seminar told me that if they make the sessions voluntary, the teachers who are least in need of retraining will eagerly sign up, but the teachers who need to renew and broaden their classroom approaches will rarely sign up. Another prefectural organizer apologized for the falling level of teacher motivation last summer, for the fourth of that prefecture’s mandatory five-year program (this trend was even more pronounced in the summer of 2007).

In all fairness however, JTEs do much more than teach bored teenagers English and have precious little time off to be with their families. Especially younger teachers are expected to coach sports teams or moderate extra-curricular activities, requiring many hours of extra work. Budgetary cutbacks place a further burden on each school to provide the same level of service with fewer resources and teachers. Also, Japanese society has undergone major changes regarding the idea of hard work as a prerequisite for achievement. Today, increasing numbers of parents seem to expect teachers to magically transform their youngsters into social “winners” by undoing all the bad habits the children have learned at home and from society at large. Teacher stress-related illnesses have increased dramatically of late, so reluctance to sacrificing a week or two of well-earned holiday time to attend BOE in-service training is quite understandable.

Most summer JTE training sessions were held at large education facilities to which teachers commute for the week or two of the in-service. Although this allows teachers to maintain normal relations with their families, it dilutes the intensity of the experience. More importantly, by returning home the horizontal peer camaraderie – so valuable for the networking and stimulation leading to workable solutions to pressing education problems – has been lost. However, the general level of enthusiasm of the participants is good, as most teachers value the opportunity to become more professional by honing their language and teaching skills from the other side of the desk. Participant attendance is always taken and organizing BOE members frequently monitor the classes.

Before the actual classes begin, the participating JTEs are sometimes asked to write about what they expect from the session. Often these write-ups are photocopied and sent to the trainers to give them an idea of participant expectations. The following 2005 examples (reproduced as originally written, i.e. with errors, but without the teacher names) represent an illuminating cross section of JTE concerns and expectations.

### ***1. What I am concerned about in class.***

- “I would like to make more communicative and effective homework.”
- “I would like to make my class very enjoyable for students to feel happy to be here and enjoy their school life.”
- “Some students talk and sleep in class without filling in handouts, they just copy other’s handouts to submit. In group work, the students who are good at English work mostly, while the students who are poor at English hardly study.”
- “I always try to make my class fun and memorable. As long as the class is enjoyable, students won’t hate English itself.”
- “How to treat those who are not good at English and who don’t have strong will to study English...”

### ***2. What I expect from this seminar.***

- “I would like to listen to other English teachers’ opinions and share our ideas to make interesting classes.”
- “Since the ALT program was introduced, we Japanese English teachers have been facing a lot of problems relating to teaching English and working with native speakers. I think most of them

would be solved if all the Japanese English teachers could command English like native speakers. But I am the very person who have little confidence.”

- “I think this is a great opportunity for me to learn from a student’s point of view. I would like to find out what is easier for learners and what would be difficult to learn.”
- “We English teacher have to brush up our English ability. Unfortunately, we don’t have the chance to study English in our busy lives.”

Over the last four years, I have taught various lessons to upgrade the participants’ English skills, exploring ways to teach communicatively, stimulating teachers to think of their students’ use of the English language in the future, and – most importantly – inspiring them to be the best they can be in their classrooms. One of my core interactive lessons is *Teaching Secondary Students to Make Simple English Presentations*. “Of the several types of practical communicative English skills, oral presentations are the most feared, but... the ability to effectively and persuasively explain ideas orally is crucial.” (Miller, 2002, page 7)

In it, I explain how to teach students to make presentations using the following three subsections: (1) body: stance and gestures, eye-contact; (2) voice: volume and speed, pausing and word flow, pronunciation and intonation; and (3) content: introduction, reasoning and examples, grammar and effective logic, and conclusion. Then I give a model speech. All this takes about 20 to 30 minutes. For the classroom, I recommend beginning with self-introductions, but as all the participants are professional teachers, I have them talk about English education in their schools for two or three minutes.

First, the participants are given ten minutes to prepare (small, 5 by 10 cm, notes are allowed) their presentations; then they are called to the front at random. From the second speaker, before each speaker begins he or she has to point out three things that the previous speaker did well. As each teacher speaks, I evaluate him or her using the following form, which is then passed to the teacher immediately after he or she finishes.

Oral Presentation Evaluation Form		Name _____			
Body	Stance and gestures	0	1	2	3
	Eye contact	0	1	2	3
Voice	Volume and speed	0	1	2	3
	Pausing and flow	0	1	2	3
	Pronunciation & intonation	0	1	2	3
Content	Introduction	0	1	2	3
	Reasoning and examples	0	1	2	3
	Grammar & effective logic	0	1	2	3
	Conclusion	0	1	2	3

J. Miller’s comments:

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Comments are usually 75% praise and 25% about needed improvements. After all the participants

have spoken, I usually spend some time re-teaching voice projection, pronunciation, rhythm, logical development, and articulation.

For the second session, I often conduct a “Discussion Workshop” beginning with conversations between pairs of participants. After familiarizing the teachers with the basic dynamics of discussion, various linking strategies (i. e. rejoinders, clarification, soliciting details, recounting experiences), and modeling – myself taking both parts of a conversation, the participants are given time to prepare. Then, randomly, the pairs present their prepared discussion (with minimal use of notes) and the next pair offers some specific positive criticism. However, before the next pair present, I join the first pair and we expand the discussion to include an unscripted third partner requiring the participants to expand beyond their initial prepared dialog, thus making the exchange more unpredictably natural. Time permitting, three-person prepared discussions (later joined by the teacher trainer) are then practiced.

My third session is usually a lecture, with interactive drill elements, entitled “Comparing and Preparing for the Major Standardized English Exams.” The five tests examined are the high-stakes national *Daigaku Nyushi Center* (大学入試センター) test, especially the new English listening section; all four levels of the National Commercial High School Association’s *Eigo kentei shiken* (全国商業高等学校協会英語検定試験); all seven levels of the Society for the Testing of English Proficiency’s venerable *Eiken* (日本英語検定協会主催実用英語技能検定試験「英検」) exam, especially the interview tests; the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), especially The Next Generation TOEFL; and both the listening and reading sections of the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC). Drawing on my 28 years of experience as an *Eiken* examiner, as well as *Eigo kentei* test editor, and two years as a test writer at the *Daigaku Nyushi Center*, I try to explain about the tests from the inside.

To score well, a detailed understanding of how these tests are structured and are likely to change is essential. As I wrote in the September, 2004 Japan Association for Practical English *Practical English Studies* (日本実用英語学会論叢) No. 11,

“the test constructs, materials, and response formats of all five of these tests are heavily weighted toward measuring the passive (receptive) skills of reading and listening. Only *Eiken*, above the 4<sup>th</sup> Grade level, and the 2005 Next Generation TOEFL attempt to assess speaking proficiency. And, only the *Eiken* 1<sup>st</sup> and Pre-1<sup>st</sup> Grade tests, as well as the current and the Next Generation TOEFL tests evaluate writing skills.... Also the various tests will increasingly influence each other.... (The) ambitious integration of skill activities and partial departure from the standard multiple choice question-heavy format in next year’s Next Generation TOEFL could profoundly affect other tests: especially TOEIC.” (Miller, 2004, pages 40 and 41)

I was, therefore, not at all surprised to learn of the 2006 TOEIC test changes, followed by the separate TOEIC Speaking and Writing Tests which debuted in Japan on January 21, 2007: much along the lines of my prediction two and a half years earlier.

These five standardized tests are doubly important for JTEs; they must prepare their students to

take the first two exams for matriculation to university and assess their own improving English proficiency with the last three. Recently, MEXT and local BOE have strongly encouraged teachers to qualify at higher *Eiken*, TOEFL, and TOEIC levels. So, after explaining how the exams differ, I demonstrate a number of approaches for them to more quickly and more accurately grasp what is being asked and how best to answer. Most test-takers, both secondary school students and JTEs, find the listening and interview sections most demanding. However, with practice and a paradigm shift dramatic results are possible. For example, in the hands-on drill section included in my presentation a JTE 2006 participant said, “By scanning the answer choices first and focusing on the first few words of the recorded question I was able to score 90% correct.”

For the new *Nyushi Center* English listening 25-question, 30-minute achievement test, I use DVD clips from the *Mimi-EIGO-Mimi* 12-part, half-hour TV program that aired from the fall of 2005 until just before the first *Center* English listening exam in January of 2006. In the programs, a Hakuoh University colleague and I analyze the six types of listening questions and explain appropriate strategies to better understand the spoken English, as well as decode the question’s intent, before selecting the correct answer. Although, not all high school graduating students take the high-stakes *Center* test, many teachers have commented that these listening paradigm shifts are also very useful in improving overall listening comprehension and accurate, rapid responses.

Although I have presented to JTEs on a number of other subjects (e.g. team-teaching, debate or using film clips in the English classroom), I always conclude with an interactive lecture entitled “Why 2007 is the best year to teach and learn English in Japan.” I begin with a brief review of Japan’s post-war history of English education in relation to evolving concepts of second language acquisition. Then, I challenge the participants to consider the rapid spread of English around the planet as humanity’s first “global language” using the English (March 7<sup>th</sup>) and Japanese (April 6<sup>th</sup>) editions of *Newsweek’s* 2005 “Who Owns English? Non-Native Speakers Are Transforming the Global Language,” stressing the following two central aspects.

(First,) “Within a decade, 2 billion people will be studying English and about half the world – some 3 billion people – will speak it...” (Second,) “Linguistically speaking, it’s a whole new world. Non-native speakers of English now outnumber native speakers 3 to 1, according to English-language expert David Crystal... ‘There’s never before been a language that’s been spoken by more people as a second than a first.’” (*Newsweek*, March 7, 2005, pages 41 and 42)

I emphasize that it is only eight years before 2015 (when *Newsweek’s* projected decade will be up, and half of the world will use English) and that the 3 to 1 EFL to ENL ratio is also changing as the number of non-native speakers of English continues to expand exponentially, while the total number of native speakers remains fairly static.

As an example of the growth of English, I use video and printed materials to show: how English has become essential in current Japanese business circles, how Japan and the world are internationalizing, how English is being successfully taught in China and South Korea (and the ramifications for Japan’s competitiveness), how Japanese society is becoming more pluralistic as a result of immigration (coupled with falling birth rates) leading to English becoming a more necessary *lingua franca* for

Japan in the future.

For the conclusion of each of my teacher training sessions, I always ask that the lights be dimmed and that the participants close their eyes and remember the face of their favorite English teacher (“remember his voice.... remember how you felt going to her class.... remember how exciting English learning was in his or her classroom”), then – after the participants have opened their eyes and the lights have been turned up – I tell the participants that each of them have *become* that teacher who inspired them to be an English teacher. I then explain that I have been coming to this prefecture to train English teachers, and I will continue to do so. And, that I always close with this same visualization exercise. So, at some future teacher training seminar, when I ask the participants to close their eyes and to remember the face of the English teacher who inspired them to become a teacher, “It will be your face and your voice that some teacher remembers: thus, you are creating the next generation of English teachers!” Reiterating my opening mantra that *the teacher is the single most important educational resource in the classroom*, I ask the teachers to go back into their classrooms remembering why they wanted to become English teachers and inspire their students.

Once, two teachers came up to me after the session was over and the younger teacher introduced the older participant as the person who had inspired him to become a teacher. Although they seemed a little embarrassed by the obviously strong emotions they were feeling, they both thanked me for my conclusion. Four times, once in Tokushima and three times in Okinawa, several participants have wept during the conclusion. If these powerful emotions can be channeled back into the classrooms, if the participants can remember why they chose the teaching vocation (being a taxi driver, businesswoman, or prime minister is just a *job*, but being a doctor, priest, or teacher is a *vocation*), if the participants realize that they are proud and happy to be English teachers: then the students, and Japan, will be the ultimate beneficiaries.

Last summer (2006) in Tochigi, on my second day, well before the dramatic conclusion, a teacher handed me the following (unchanged, except for the name being omitted) letter.

“Mr. Miller,

I was very moved by your lecture yesterday. But I was sad. I could understand your English 70%~80%. So from yesterday evening I listened and listened to English CD. This morning I was listening English CD till 9:15 in my car. I was late for your lecture. I am very sorry. But, now I can catch your English very clearly. My ears revived!?

It’s difficult to tell or explain my own thinking in English. I like writing better than speaking. Because my speaking is poor. I’d like to express my ideas much more. So I’m going to train by myself.

One more thing, I like your evaluation. It saves me.

Lastly I appreciate your sincerity, enthusiasm, something creative. I enjoyed your lecture very much, from the bottom my heart.”

(teacher’s name and date)

Fortunately, I was able to respond in writing (copy below) the following day.



Dear \_\_\_\_\_-sensei,

Thank you for writing me such a moving and sincere letter. You are a truly wonderful teacher and your students are very fortunate. I was quite impressed by your letter and your personality, for two main reasons.

First of all, because you felt so strongly that your English skills were only good enough for you to catch 70~80% of what I was saying. And, more importantly, that you did something about it! (You didn't just stop at the "feeling sad" level.)

Furthermore, as a direct result of your efforts – you were able to "revive" your ears. This is exactly what we hoped would happen at the Tochigi seminar. Thank you!!

I have attached a copy of my April, 2006 "*Why learning English is like playing sports*" article which you exemplify so perfectly!

Warmly,

Jeff Miller

### Questions Regarding In-service Training for ALTs

Clearly, both MEXT and local BOE deserve commendation for their considerable efforts to provide increasingly substantive in-service training to junior and senior high JTEs around the country. ALT in-service training, however, is markedly different. Most ALT sessions are only one or two days long and feature speakers lecturing hundreds of regional ALTs together before breaking up into smaller group workshops.

Unlike JTEs, ALTs are an extremely diverse group and being quite young (many having just graduated from university), most seem to have extraordinary reserves of energy and creativity. Few are certified teachers and most have little knowledge of second language acquisition or applied linguistics. Furthermore, their reasons for joining the Japan Education and Training (JET) Programme, now in its 20<sup>th</sup> year of operation, are almost as varied as their backgrounds: some are eager to embrace the challenge of living in a different culture before moving on with their lives, others see JET as the perfect opportunity to immerse themselves in Japan, and some see this as a convenient way to pay back their university loans. Most work hard, diligently study Japanese, and do their best for their teenage students, but there are some exceptions.

All of these reasons make ALT in-service sessions much more difficult to conduct effectively, when compared to those for more focused, homogeneous JTEs. Leading ALT concerns include: clarifying the roles of the JTE and the ALT in the classroom, improving team-teaching methodology, student discipline, ways to inspire students to learn English, BOE policies regarding ALTs, difficulties of living in Japan, etc. Their frustrations are as heartfelt as their enthusiasm is unbounded, and it is not easy to effectively meet their legitimate concerns in a large-group, 120-minute lecture.

Of the approximately 1000 ALTs I have presented to, the best received sessions were those in which I was able to achieve the following three goals. First, by psychologically bringing the ALTs and JTEs closer together by focusing on the shared task of educating bored adolescents and thereby getting them beyond the "them vs. us" mentality. Secondly, by stressing how unique the ALT experience is and how much cultural growth each Assistant Language Teacher has already undergone. And lastly, a successful ALT in-service training session should have a significantly lighter approach and use much

more humor than the stiffer (studious) JTE sessions.

Unlike JTE in-service training seminars where the participants expect to concentrate on their language and teaching skills, ALTs value the opportunities to share their experiences with other ALTs. As a result, multiple small-group workshops – mostly organized and run by fellow ALTs (for which participants sign up for in advance, thus mentally ‘investing’ in making the exchange more meaningful), may better meet ALT needs than large one-size-fits-all keynote lectures. My effective JTE visualization conclusion does not resonate with ALTs as few have been inspired to make teaching English in Japanese secondary schools their vocation. However, if the attending foreign teachers come to feel at the end of the training that the cumulative impact of the nearly 9,000 ALTs currently working across Japan (and the many others, before them) has greatly contributed to replacing the stereotypical, hesitant Japanese students’ “English allergy” with budding curiosity and confidence, then the in-service session has been successful.

### **The Current University-based In-service Training System**

Beginning in 2006-7, three universities (Miyagi University of Education, Tokai University, and Kansai University) joined by three more (Nagoya University of Foreign Languages, Kansai Gakuin University, and Kagoshima University) the following year – after successfully meeting MEXT’s criteria – have been providing in-service training for JTEs. Like the different SELHs across Japan, these training programs too vary considerably: in length, intensity, and focus (with some quite similar to the Tsukuba model, others with great flexibility, and at least one that is entirely taught in English).

In the afternoon of this year’s MEXT English Forum (「英語が使える日本人」の育成のためのフォーラム 2007) on March 3rd, all six universities presented in a double session, from 1:50 until 5:10, about their respective programs. For example, Miyagi University of Education stresses: “developing English teaching skills (including analysis and evaluation), mastery of advanced specialized knowledge, and cultivating English usage ability.” (Miyagi University of Education, 2006, page 2, my translation) In another example, Tokai University emphasizes: “learning through activities and practical communication projects, applying the results of training in the classroom, and full self-evaluation.” (MEXT 2007 English Forum, page 226, my translation)

However, the six universities also had much in common. All of them bemoaned the conflicts between the teachers’ professional duties and the rigors of the training making absences frequent and their programs difficult to complete. Several schools are exploring high-tech ways to overcome this problem by, for example, streaming lectures to teachers online. Such innovative, but still comparatively interactive, training content delivery methods will alleviate some of the pressure on busy teachers’ schedules.

### **Elementary School English Teacher Training**

Prior to MEXT Minister Bunmei Ibuki’s appointment in September of 2006 under incoming Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, it was widely believed that English would be taught as a required subject in elementary schools from 2008. This divisive issue has pitted conservative nationalists, afraid that children would not learn Japanese properly, against pragmatic internationalists, fearful of future Japan’s weakened ability to compete globally with China and Korea. But, even the earlier draft plan was a

compromise, proposing that English be taught in only grades five and six by homeroom teachers with ALTs, and English grades not be included in the students' cumulative averages.

However, with MEXT's subsequent about-face, English will not soon become a required course in primary schools and the funds that had been budgeted for elementary school teacher English training have been reallocated (but may change again). The question is quite sensitive, as seen in Minister Ibuki's December 11, 2006 address (in fluent English) at the Foreign Correspondents' Club when he totally avoided talking about MEXT English policy, preferring to reminisce about the glories of Thatcher and Reagan conservatism. When questioned by a member of press about his changes to English education, Minister Ibuki replied that "English is important and that Japanese students seem to be poor at oral communication skills, but that they must first learn Japanese to have a Japanese passport."

Be that as it may, today, over 95% of Japanese elementary schools currently offer English instruction, in some form or other as part of their General Studies courses (総合学習). Furthermore, the gap in the June, 2004 MEXT questionnaire between the "70.7% of elementary school parents who want their children to learn English and only 36.6% of elementary school teachers in favor of teaching English to their students," (MEXT questionnaire, 2004, page 5, my translation) indicates the deep concern of elementary school teachers who have not formally studied how to teach English.

To date, my only experience in training elementary school teachers has been at a local designated special school (教育特区の研究推進校) for English education, where I initially held a workshop in July of 2006 on communicative techniques that do not involve written words. Subsequently, I have returned to the school three more times with Hakuoh University exchange students to help the teachers internationalize all the students with various creative classroom activities (and also for their March graduation ceremony). The school, which teaches English from grade one, should be praised for its innovative curriculum that develops situation-based (e.g. shopping) conversational patterns over several grade levels and pays keen attention to making sure that the English classes are enjoyable.

Should MEXT decide to include English as a required subject in elementary schools someday, considerable time, effort, and money will be necessary to train homeroom teachers to work with ALTs for the plan to succeed. As primary school teachers have never studied how to teach English (and some dislike English) the needed training will be much more challenging than that for the 2003-2007 secondary JTEs. First, a cadre of teacher-trainers should be trained. Equally, if not more important, will be the creation of a unified English curriculum with clear goals for elementary, junior, and senior high schools.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations for Future English Teacher Training**

Based on my experience, especially between 2002 and 2007, I believe that the most efficient and cost effective way to improve the quality of student English learning is to provide repeated and focused in-service training to JTEs and ALTs at or near their schools. Were there no budget or time constraints, the Tsukuba training model (now revived by the six universities, on a limited scale) with participants staying together and networking for several weeks would be ideal. However, given today's harsh education reality, I feel that it is better to train many teachers to some extent than to train a few deeply. Prioritizing JTE numerical quantity over individual quality exposes far more stu-

dent learners to improved instruction and better mastery of English. Successful student output (i.e. the use of English as a communication tool) should be our goal.

To achieve this, some objective and impartial means to identify the secondary JTEs most in need of in-service (such as by keying teacher standardized English test scores to some measure of communicative teaching proficiency – possibly tied to teaching license renewal) is needed, without the required training becoming or perceived to be “a punishment.” Boosting the instructional and EFL skills of the weaker English teachers will have a profound effect on many underserved learners. A parallel, more selective program run by MEXT approved universities could be used to train the necessary leaders.

If English is to be systematically taught as a required course in elementary schools a gradual (for example, the beginning with grades five and six) approach will allow for homeroom teacher and ALT training. However, a clear unified English curriculum for primary and secondary schools is a vital prerequisite. Also, university programs that train students to become elementary school teachers need to match MEXT future guidelines.

For both secondary and elementary JTE training, it is important to tap directly into the emotional level of the teachers, reaffirming the value of their chosen vocation and helping them to remember the reasons they were inspired to become educators. If we can do this well, their enthusiasm for learning and English will spread to their students because *the teacher is the single most important educational resource in the classroom!*

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