Language Teacher Training Approaches in Japan:

What Are the Issues?

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Introduction: Is there a problem?

In November of 2013 at a high school in Kanagawa prefecture, 19 students sit for an English test. The test is a mid-term test in a course called Writing, yet the students have not done any writing compositions in class, nor is there any writing on the test, despite MEXT guidelines calling for more emphasis on language production and a call for more communicative activities (MEXT, 2011c). Instead, during the 45 minutes of the test, the students attempt to answer a series of grammar-focused multiple choice test items. It is plainly a grammar test, and a difficult one at that. Later, the results reflect this. The basic class students manage an average of only 25%; another group, the advanced class, fares not really much better with an average of 46%. This scenario is not fiction, nor is it not all that uncommon, based on anecdotal evidence. At the same time, this event begs several questions. Why are grammar questions used for a writing class instead of writing questions? Why does the course itself not focus at all on developing English writing skills? Why is there such a focus on discrete grammar points on both the test and in teaching when it is so widely accepted in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) that this approach is only of nominal effectiveness? (Swan, 2006). Why are the four teachers in charge of this course ignoring both MEXT directives, and established SLA theory? On the surface, it seems to make no sense.

In 2011, MEXT revised the Course of Study, instructing teachers to teach lessons with more emphasis on integration of the four skills and greater use of the target language (L2) in class, particularly with a communicative focus (2011c). MEXT representatives have explicitly instructed teachers that "the purpose of studying English is not to build translation skills or knowledge of grammar, but rather to develop the ability to communicate in the L2" (Kogo, 2013, my translation). A related part of the same Course of Study document recommends greater use of the L2 in classes. It has been generally understood as a directive to "teach English in English," and teachers are aware that it is now both national and prefectural policy that they should conduct most, if not all, of their lessons using the L2 as the language of instruction (Yoshida, 2012). And yet an internal survey in the same prefecture mentioned above found that only a small percentage of teachers were actually following these directives. Again, what are we

to make of this? Both government policy and established language teaching pedagogy suggest one thing, and yet many teachers do another.

Clearly, at least some new Course of Study mandates are not reaching classrooms as intended. The situation described above makes it tempting to just blame classroom teachers, but for policy to be adopted effectively there need to be clear, acceptable goals and clear, actional pathways toward those goals. From a teacher training and development perspective, however, it is self-evident that policy cannot be enacted if teachers do not understand the goals, do not know how to implement them, are incapable of implementing them, or choose to ignore them. This paper will take a critical look at the present in-service high school language teacher training system in an attempt to identify why it is failing to prevent the above scenario from being a common occurrence, and identify some possible directions for improvement.

A Complicated Cultural Landscape

English exists in Japanese society as a perceived need, though not always one that generally requires any degree of fluency in most peoples' current lives. However, against a backdrop of growing globalization, English proficiency represents very real opportunities; and globalization means more opportunities arise with more proficiency (Seargeant, 2011). This has put increasing pressure on educational systems to change, but this also causes conflict, pitting opposing opinions and sometimes established norms against new needs. The resulting policy and the often insufficient measures taken to implement it often contain contradictory elements, as policy makers with different opinions and agendas try with varying degrees of success to balance the needs and fears of foreign language learning (Hashimoto, 2009). For that reason, Japan has demonstrated a seemingly "love-hate" relationship with English over the years, or as Kachru puts it, "Japan has been one of the first countries to articulate positions about the acceptance of English and an identity with it, and about the rejection of the language and proposing a distance with it" (1997, pg. 68). This wide range in attitudes reflects both a struggle against the imperial ambitions of Europeans/American and at other times a struggle for imperialism in which English, and its teaching, have been put to work for the purpose of advancing state ambitions or suppressed in an attempt to preserve Japanese uniqueness (Shimizu 2010, Fujimoto-Adamson, 2006). It is, by any account, a cultural landscape with various and often contradictory messages, and long-term goals for English language education exist in the public mind only in a vague form. Of more immediate policy concern is the fact that

different levels of high school have their learners on different learning trajectories. Some are focused on passing reading and grammar-heavy exams, while others have only unspecific academic goals.

Japanese teachers of English in public high schools are both a product of this cultural landscape—having gone through as successful students and then received training in the system—and a part of its present manifestation, and as such were both deeply influenced by it and invested in it (Johnson, 2009). Attitudes toward greater use of English in the classroom and greater use of communicative language teaching (CBT) reflect some of the conflict that exists between experience and new requirements or between MEXT goals and school goals. Many teachers have a positive opinion of CBT, for example, but do not make use of it in their classes (Nishino, 2008). And teachers often find their goals and those of their students are not the same, with students more interested in acquiring communicative proficiency while teachers are more concerned with meta-knowledge about the language (Matsuda, 2011) and giving more of their student charges the knowledge and skills they need to meet the entrance requirements of higher level universities, which often means passing reading/grammar/vocabulary tests. Complicating this, the last few decades have seen tremendous changes in technologies and economies that have greatly expedited the flow of information, communication, people, and capital within and between nations. This has created more access and more exposure to English: more access to different varieties of English, more access to new ways and genres of using the language, more access to new types of written discourse, more access to spoken forms, and more meaningful opportunities to use English, rather than just study it as a discipline unto itself.

In many ways, the cultural context in which teachers find themselves working is changing and unclear, and the experience teachers have leaves them rather poorly prepared to deal with it. Thinking about this cultural context, the challenge for policy makers is this: how can national policy regarding English education be made clearer, aligning goals at all levels with meaningful outcome needs, and at the same time assuaging the fears of negative influences on the native culture and established practitioner teachers?

Insufficient Pre-Service Teacher Training

In terms of content knowledge of L2 language and culture (including functional language proficiency skills) and pedagogy/assessment knowledge, there are questions as to whether the current system is producing the type of teacher that MEXT needs in order to meet its present

Course of Study goals, if we consider the requisite knowledge/skill level to be roughly that of an MATESOL program graduate (see Maggioli, 2013 for a detailed list). As stated above, current teachers are a product of the system in which they studied. In order to succeed in that system and become teachers, they excelled at discrete grammar knowledge, meta-knowledge about the language, vocabulary recognition, and translation. On the other hand, many never experienced communicative language teaching as students; for most teachers and particularly for those who have not spent time abroad, speaking is an underdeveloped skill. And their pre-service teacher training also likely did not prepare them enough for the way of teaching suggested in the new Course of Study. Compared to many other countries, the number of required courses and the amount of pre-service training in Japan are remarkably low (Wang et al., 2003). There are almost no graduate teachers college programs, and for example, English literature majors who take only a couple of supplementary courses at university—with only a few hours on second language acquisition theory, and very little (if any) TESOL training—and complete a three-week practical placement training session can and do become licensed teachers. This practical placement training duration is considerably below the average of 17.4 weeks for the other countries surveyed in the Wang et al.(2003) ETS report: Netherlands, England, Australia, United States, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Korea.

In addition, not all teachers have sufficient English language proficiency (as measured by standard proficiency tests). According to a 2012 MEXT survey, only 52.3% of high school teachers (self-) report that they have attained any one of the following levels on commonly-available standard proficiency tests: TOEFL iBT 80 points or higher; TOEIC 730 points or higher; and/or Eiken-STEP Pre-first grade or higher. 74.6% of teachers reported having taken one or more of these tests, meaning that at least 22% of teachers did not reach these minimal levels of proficiency. The remaining teachers did not take any of the tests, but undoubtedly many of them would not be able to attain these levels. As long as the teachers' role is simply to explain the language in the textbook, they probably have enough subject matter expertise to suffice (with a little preparation). But they are likely to feel less than comfortable with CLT and giving feedback on student-produced language, particularly as they are required to do so as part of relatively unfamiliar CLT activities, and are likely not confident at all about their own English language skills, particularly speaking skills. To reiterate, many teachers have limited experience with learning English in English or with CLT, limited training, and perhaps as much as a quarter of teachers have language skills that may limit their ability to adhere to the new Course of Study guidelines.

In-service Training: Approaches and Issues

A hope without sufficient standards

   In-service training for English language teachers would seem to be an obvious way to address some of the problems that hamper the implementation of the goals of the new Course of Study at individual schools. Unfortunately, however, in Japan as with the rest of the world, in-service training rarely lives up to its name (Lemov, Woolway, & Yezzi, 2012). There are several reasons for this, but one most certainly is the lack of a consensus about how language teacher training should be (Maggioli, 2012), coupled with a general disregard for checking for transfer into the classroom (Lemov, 2013). Lemov lists other problems: training is often organizationally disconnected from individual school cultures; it is usually "one and done" (insufficient and not followed up), it marginalizes the role of practicing teachers, and it values thinking over doing. The teacher license renewal system in Japan is an illustrative example. This system requires teachers to undergo 30 hours of instruction over a two-year period prior to the expiration of their current license (which is valid for ten years). What happens is that teachers take courses from local universities that match their interests or schedule, without any consultation, coaching, or guidance. Universities decide which courses to offer, and there is often no base requirement. Contents and course offerings are completely left up to the universities and the choices of individual teachers. The government does not have a concrete standard regarding qualities or capabilities for teachers, or clear content guidelines for universities, or recommended standards for successful completion, other than the fixed number of hours (Nakayama, Takagi, & Imamura, 2011).

Types of training

   Much the same situation prevails with other forms of in-service training. Maggioli (2012) identifies four traditions in teacher training: 1) Look and Learn (lecturer or model teacher), 2) Read and Learn (books or research reports), 3) Think and Learn (reflection or action research), and 4) Participate and Learn (sociocultural collective problem-solving). Of these, the first has been the dominant form deployed in Japan. Common training sessions include lectures on theory or pedagogy by university professors or super teachers to groups of teachers, or DVDs of model teacher lessons which are passed around to schools to be viewed. Many teachers regularly read books and journals about teaching, of which there are many, but this form of training is mostly left up to individual teachers. Reflective teaching is a tool often used, though full action research is relatively rare, given the requirement of large chunks of time to instruct

how to do it and then actually conduct an intervention and analyze the data. Collective problem-solving, organized mentoring, or even lesson study (Yoshida, 2002) sessions are relatively uncommon and usually do not form any part of organized, formal, in-service high school language teacher training, even though such training sessions are rated as effective when they are undertaken (Collins & Nakamura, 2007).

Training for language proficiency

One other target of training programs in Japan is the L2 language proficiency of teachers (as opposed to declarative knowledge about the language). Many teachers are not proficient users of English themselves, either in or beyond the classroom. This is no doubt common in EFL settings everywhere in the world, but providing good input for learners, using English to activate and build schema, interacting with them communicatively, and providing feedback on the language they produce are important skills if a teacher is to actively try to implement the new Course of Study. Improvements in general language content knowledge and skills may indirectly (through confidence-building) or directly lead to better teaching in the classroom (encouraging teachers to use the L2 more in class). As the goal is to have teachers use the L2 more in class, particularly as part of CLT, it makes sense to focus training on some very specific language skills, rather than aim for general language proficiency, assuming that teachers have agreed to the necessity of the approach and the specific skills can be identified. General language proficiency is a much more challenging goal. If it is going to improve, it'll happen through a concerted effort by the individual teacher who weaves language use and learning into his or her daily life for lengthy periods of time. For short training interventions, the best we can do is introduce language learning practice resources and hope participants will find them worth using on their own.

Much training goes unused

No matter what the type of training, it seems that many training sessions offered by local or prefectural education centers are under-attended, and teachers claim that they have few chances to participate because of school duties, or being too occupied with the day to day struggles of dealing with unmotivated students (Sekita & Takamura, 2009). Often it is only because of the efforts of especially motivated and energetic teachers who actively seek out opportunities for learning and training, that professional development is advanced (Sekita, 2010). This situation, coupled with a mismatch of teacher proficiency and skills for the type of teaching the new Course of Study requires and an either unclear or not-really-accepted set of goals for English

education (particularly regarding exam preparation), and poor teacher collegiality regarding professional development, result in a set of conditions that lower the hope that in-service training can bring the new Course of Study ideals into classrooms.

The challenge and process of training

Research into the effectiveness of ESL in-service language teacher training likewise does not offer hope for a magic bullet (Maggioli, 2012). It does, however, suggest that some approaches can be successful. Two prerequisites for success, however, are an organized program and considerable amounts of time. But why is it so hard to conduct effective training? One identified obstacle is that it is difficult to modify the notions about teaching that are already fixed in teachers (Childs, 2011). Indeed new pedagogy can even be neutralized by pre-existing notions (Sanchez, 2011). It takes a considerable amount of understanding and time for teachers to reconcile their pre-existing knowledge, often gained through experience as a learner and teacher (what Vygotsky (1963) called *spontaneous* knowledge), with research-informed theory and pedagogy (or what Vygotsky called *scientific* concepts) (Sanchez, 2011). And this process of transformation is best done in classrooms with access to students in order to stay grounded in reality, and for reasons of transfer (Kansanen, 2009). Teachers' knowledge is spread across several domains—behavioral, cognitive, social, and affective—and thus any type of training intervention must address all of these in order to reach maximum effectiveness (Childs, 2011; Verity, 2011). This last point needs to be unpacked and explained. Very often, teacher training is concerned with introducing a specific technique. The emphasis is on understanding the technique and the rationale behind it. The venue is usually a hall or training center classroom, far from the reality and concerns of the classroom. Each teacher participant is often from a different school, undergoing training separately from the people he or she usually works with. As such, it is largely a cognitive exercise, separate from the emotional and social context in which the teacher works. It usually involves listening to explanations or thinking about activities or procedures, a cognitive exercise. Of particular importance to this paper, it rarely gives participants the chance to practice skills themselves, receive feedback, or build automaticity. And for most training offerings, there is no system to follow up to see if the promoted activities have been tried or adopted by teachers in their classes. No attempt is usually made to prevent the problem of inert knowledge, where knowledge gleaned in training stops with the teacher and never gets transferred into the classroom (Whitehead, 1929).

Why transfer happens or not

Transfer (or often transfer of learning or transfer of training) is a term used in training to describe how the content of training sessions is brought into the workplace. It is crucially important in teacher training because improving what actually happens in the classroom is the biggest reason for doing training in the first place. As Larsen-Freeman puts it, "failure of transfer is a major problem, exacting individual and societal costs" (2013, pg. 107). Based on the target skill of the training, a distinction is generally made between near-transfer (for routine, step-by-step types of skills) and far-transfer (for soft, broad skills that require judgment or creativity) (Clark, 1999). One axiom of transfer in training is that it works best when there is more similarity between the training situation and the actual work situation. This is particularly true for near-transfer skills (such as giving a short lesson introduction with a presentation tool like Powerpoint). When the type of cognitive processing involved in the training task is more similar to that of the work setting, transfer becomes more likely (Morris, Bransford, & Franks, 1977). There also seems to be a memory connection. Transfer happens better with similarity because the retrieval conditions are similar, allowing smoother memory retrieval—the more fidelity, the better the transfer (Franks, Bidsey, Lien, & McNamara, 2000). Whether transfer happens or not is also based on the initial amount of learning. It almost goes without saying that cursory learning will not transfer well (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999).

But for transfer, there is more at work than just the time and context of training. Transfer is also facilitated by meta-cognitive skills, such as self-monitoring, and self-regulation (Soini, 1999, in Larsen-Freeman, 2013), and affective (emotional) factors (Helfenstein, 2005, in Larsen-Freeman, 2013). In addition, Pugh and Bergen (2006) showed that motivation is strongly connected to transfer. When the potential usefulness of something is clear, transfer happens better. Larsen-Freeman (2013) argues that the simple view of task type and context is deficient in that it underestimates the degree to which the individual interacts with the context, the content, and task, and the social and emotional connections the individual has with these. Transfer is not just a passive carrying over that happens when tasks and contexts are similar; rather it also reflects the transformation that happens to trainees or learners when they are cognitively, emotionally, and socially invested in the training, something that is leveraged by but not limited to similarity between the training and the workplace performance contexts.

It is also important to consider why transfer fails to happen, since the failure of transfer often means the failure of policy implementation, something that equates to wasted public funds and lost opportunities for students. Clark (1999) identifies several organizational and psychological

reasons in addition to the lack of similarity between the training and workplace discussed above. The biggest is a failure to match job-skill requirements to the employee skill needs. This seems obvious, but training is rarely customized for particular teachers; nor are teachers coached or advised on what training to take based on their individual needs. Another problem is when feedback and incentives in the workplace are not related to, or even counter to, the skills focused on in training. A good example of workplace concerns overriding CLT training happens in *shingakkou* (academically-focused high schools that place high priority on matriculating graduates into higher level universities). There success in education is measured only by how many students manage to pass reading/grammar vocabulary focused tests and get into certain levels of universities. Communication and language output are seen as distractions for this goal and often duly ignored. And finally, transfer cannot happen smoothly when key resources are not made available to the trainee when he or she in in the workplace. One example of this is presentation software. Without an easy to deploy computer and projector, presentation skills learned in training cannot make it into the classroom.

A practice-based approach

Assuming that target skills can be identified and reasonable simulations of tasks and contexts can be arranged, a next missing key maybe to design training so that it allows for sufficient practice (Lemov, Woolway, & Yezzi, 2012). In Lemov's definition, practice means repeated training with colleagues in exercises that encode core skills (2013). He recommends sessions where teachers work on these core skills repeatedly, trying them out, giving and getting on the spot feedback from peers and then immediately acting on that feedback, getting the skills right and then making them automatic. This type of training, originally developed in reaction to the lack of positive transfer observed after look and learn sessions at a network of charter schools in the U.S., is teacher-centered and is easily adaptable to any group of teachers at any level of school. Intensive practice, rare in high school in-service training, is actually very suitable for teachers because they are performance professionals, like athletes, surgeons, or musicians, all of whom accept practice as a regular part of their professions (Lemov, 2013). Intensive practice works immediately by building automaticity and confidence. By making these skills automatic, it also frees cognitive processing for other uses during classes. Additional benefits also flow from having regular, intensive practice sessions at schools. These sessions, with a focus on short, meaningful feedback loops and tangible results, help to create a culture of feedback and excellence at schools and build collegiality, as teachers encourage each other to improve toward common goals. Having the sessions in schools helps to keep training meaningful, with a focus on real classroom challenges. For language teachers in Japan, this type of training seems to offer

a possible (and affordable) way to improve on the current gap between the new Course of Study objectives and teacher skills. As it directly addresses the problem of teachers having too much declarative knowledge and not enough procedural skills, intensive training can help with both activity unfamiliarity and language limitations, establishing new "tools" for some teachers, and reducing performance anxiety (Beilock, 2007, Oudejans, 2008). This type of training seems promising, but there are caveats. The caveats are that target skills need to be identified and teachers need to agree to participate actively. Another is that this style of training is at present unfamiliar to most teachers; therefore, some learning how to learn will be necessary as a preliminary step. In addition, if we want to use this type of training to target skills necessary to implement the new Course of Study, it may be necessary to look beyond the school initially for expertise, since the skills required for this type of teaching are different from what teachers experienced as learners or were trained for in pre-service training. One of the appeals of this type of practice, however, is that it can be organized at schools by teachers for teachers, decentralizing the present training program and encouraging more training overall (Lemov, 2013).

Lesson study: an underused tool

Along with intensive practice for core or critical skills, another promising option for training is lesson study, a collaborative teacher training technique common at elementary schools and junior high schools in Japan but not high schools for some reason (Yoshida, 2002). For lesson study, groups of teachers come together to work on goal setting, classroom teaching as it attempts to achieve these goals, and reflection (Yoshida, 2002). As teacher education moves increasingly in the direction of sociocultural approaches (Johnson, 2009, Maggioli, 2012), lesson study training sessions at schools conducted by teachers themselves are an attractive technique for professional development. These teaching or micro-teaching sessions with real students, followed by feedback and then re-teaching, can help teachers keep their focus on pupil learning and their own role as facilitators of pupil learning, and help teachers navigate the complexity of the classroom and learning (Dudley, 2013). They also have great potential to build collegiality and a culture of feedback and excellence at schools. With a focus on both lesson planning and comprehensive lesson delivery, lesson study could be used especially effectively in tandem with intensive practice sessions to develop critical skills which are then combined in the context of lessons (Lemov, 2013).

Some Direction

At the Kanagawa Prefectural Institute of Language and Culture Studies, training is offered for high school teachers in Kanagawa. The flagship program, the Advanced program, makes use of model teachers, experts, lectures, action research, debate, and collaborative learning. It is a program lasting ten full days and spanning an entire school year. It is thus labor intensive and expensive. Along with our other training sessions, what we increasingly see is that structural problems (lack of time and coordination for training in schools), teacher L2 language proficiency, and lack of TESOL/SLA training are hampering the implementation of MEXT goals for the new Course of Study. Teachers may indeed be part of the problem, but they are also the only solution. Since a considerable amount of research, time, and effort have gone into creating the new Course of Study, it makes sense to also develop a system that can facilitate its implementation. And since a very large part of the cost outlays is for human resources, it makes sense to invest in their improvement. From the literature review above, it seems clear that securing teacher and public agreement of the goals of the new Course of Study is one thing that needs to be done. After that, training must be given a higher priority in schools. Teachers are simply not prepared to teach in the way the new Course of Study, for various reasons. These need to be addressed. At least one of them is L2 proficiency. Benchmarks for teacher L2 proficiency need to be established and compliance encouraged. Of greater and more pressing importance, however, the present system of poor collegiality needs to be addressed and more time made available for training within schools to build skills and a culture of learning, and across districts so that expertise can be shared better. The approaches covered above offer some interesting and cost effective options that could be put to work. But they will not work, I suspect, unless structural and cultural changes occur in schools.

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