

Pre-service Training for English Language Teachers

Joy Williams

Courses offered in pre-service teacher education in many colleges and universities are very unsatisfactory, mainly consisting of English literature classes and "get courses." Also, training in how to teach English is inadequate....

Graduates who want to teach in public schools take teacher employment examinations prepared and administered by each prefectural board of education. However, those examinations do not evaluate the competence of individual applicants as English-teaching professionals. One should not expect many qualified and competent Japanese English teachers to be produced from such a poor teacher-education system.

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A serious concern for English language teachers in Japan is the poor English language competence of Japanese students, even though most have had at least six years of English language instruction. In a review of 1995 TOEFL score results, overall average scores showed that Japanese students scored lower than students from Singapore, the Philippines, China, Republic of Korea, Indonesia and Taiwan (Yoshida, 1997). There are numerous and complex reasons why Japanese students do not do well in these standardized tests designed to assess communicative and practical language competence. One area that needs to be examined is the pre-service training of teachers in the Japanese educational system.

Education naturally reflects the culture in which it is organized, and it is interesting to consider two points which

seem to characterize teacher training in Japan. One is that in the Japanese educational system, in-service training is far more important than pre-service training. Thus most new teachers hired at the secondary level are not graduates of teacher training universities but general universities, where the practical aspects of teaching are usually emphasized less. The second point is that most Japanese universities are not actively involved in either the pre-service or the in-service training of teachers. In Japanese society it is expected that universities will prepare people for employment, but real training necessary for specific jobs will be provided by employers. This process is also true for those in the teaching profession (Yonesaka, 1999).

Therefore it is not at all surprising that many teachers feel they have not been adequately trained in their university education programs. High school English teachers in Chiba prefecture were surveyed and most expressed dissatisfaction with the training they had received (Brown and Wada, 1998). English Literature majors were the least satisfied (8% satisfaction rate); after these were Linguistics majors (20%), and Education majors (40%). Teachers who had majored in TESL or TEFL expressed the highest satisfaction rate (85%). Unfortunately most of the teachers had majored in English literature (63.4%) while only 3.3% had majored in TESL and TEFL. In this survey teachers also indicated that because of their heavy work loads, they did not have many opportunities for in-service training. Although this study was limited to teachers in Chiba, the same condition probably exists in other prefectures as well.

Students who want to become teachers must fulfill many course requirements (the "get courses" mentioned by Mr. Ogasawara) and pass the extremely difficult, and competitive, Teacher Employment Selection Test, which, as Mr. Ogasawara noted, does not really measure a person's competence as a teacher. Because so much time is spent in fulfilling these requirements, most students do not get much pre-service training in language teaching methodology, teaching techniques,

or background in assessing language acquisition (Browne and Wada, 1998).

As a member of the English faculty at Keiwa College, I have been involved in visiting local junior high schools where our students were doing their teaching practicums. I, as a representative of our college, and other staff at the respective junior high schools, observe the student-teachers during their demonstration lessons which take place toward the end of the two-week teaching practicum period. The demonstration lessons are clearly stressful for the student-teacher. The various skills that are required when teaching—managing time, explaining target points clearly, keeping the students' attention, using materials effectively, not to mention trying to use "classroom English"—are not easy for novice teachers. While observing these student-teachers, it occurred to me that we, in our college-level English language classes, could offer valuable support and experience to these students if we invited them to be Teaching Assistants (TAs) in the college oral communication classes (which are called Listening classes at our college) before they went to do their practicums.

The two-week teaching practicum in Japan is very short by American standards. In some English language teacher-training programs in the US it is not unusual for the practicum to last six months or more. Also, practicums in Japan are so highly supervised that prospective English teachers don't really get classroom experience on an on-going, day-to-day basis (Yonesaka, 1999). Giving students the opportunity to be TAs while they are in university or college, might be useful as a part of their pre-service training. TAs would not only become comfortable with using classroom English, but would also learn strategies and techniques for motivating students in a more learner-centered approach to teaching. These methods are most effectively introduced in the kind of "hands on" experience that being a TA would provide.

The Keiwa College Program:

The TA program began about three years ago as part of the Education Courses for students who are training to be English language teachers. Each year there are about 20 fourth year students who are training to become teachers at junior and senior high schools. In their senior year before they go to their two-week teaching practicums, these students are given the opportunity to be TAs in the Listening I classes which are taught by non-Japanese teachers.

The program is explained to these students during their orientation at the start of their senior year. It is also introduced in the Education Course Handbook of Keiwa College. Participation as a TA is strictly voluntary, and initially only two or three students took part. In the past two years, however, participation has increased and between 10 to 16 students have become TAs each year. Participating students are asked to attend every class, in so far as it is possible, and because the Listening classes meet 3 times a week, this is a considerable time commitment. This requirement undoubtedly makes it difficult for some students to participate. However, regular attendance seemed important in order for this experience to be most beneficial for the participating TAs and least disruptive to the classes they would join.

The students interested in participating were asked to sign up for the specific Listening I section (there are eight sections) they wanted to join. The sign up sheets were turned in to me, and I then contacted the respective "mentor" teachers to make sure they agreed to have a TA. Efforts were made to divide the TAs fairly evenly among the classes so that there would not be too many in one section. There were usually one to three TAs in a class of about 25 students. TAs were subsequently contacted about their class assignments and were told to contact their "mentor" teacher to get further instructions regarding the text, receive relevant materials and discuss the respective classes and mutual expectations.

Students who signed up to be TAs were also asked to

respond to a pre-program questionnaire (Appendix I). The purpose of the questionnaire was to investigate student reactions to the use of the target language (English) in their own experiences as junior/senior high school students. I also hoped that the questions would help students anticipate the kind of spoken English they would need to use when they were doing their teaching practice. Student comments on the questionnaires will be discussed later.

After signing up, the TAs and their “mentor” teachers proceeded to work together without much intervention from me. As might be expected, the kinds of activities done by the TAs in their different Listening I classes varied a great deal, depending on the nature of the class itself, their “mentor” teacher’s teaching style, as well as on the motivation of the TA him/herself. The following is just a sampling of the ways that TAs participated.

1. Audit/Observe: Initially, in the first year of this program, the one or two students who were TAs were, for the most part, just auditors. They attended class regularly and took copious notes but did not participate so actively in class. After class they would sometimes meet briefly with the instructor to ask questions or get clarification about what had gone on in the class.

Although this kind of auditing can be extremely useful, some students, in a post-program questionnaire, expressed frustration at being just an “audience” and so in recent years instructors have tried to involve the TAs more actively in their classes. This active involvement naturally requires more planning and communication with the teachers involved and time restrictions in everyone’s schedule has sometimes made this difficult.

2. Demonstrate a dialogue: One fairly easy way for the TA to be actively involved is to be the teacher’s partner when a particular conversation is being introduced. Thus the teacher

and the TA can model the dialogue which is being introduced in the text. This demonstration by older students and the teacher motivates the lower level students by helping them realize that they do not need to be afraid or embarrassed when speaking up in class. Through this kind of demonstration with the teacher, the Level I students in the class can also be introduced to the “read, look up and speak” technique of dialogue practice and can be reminded about the importance of eye-contact when speaking to others.

3. Pair up with students. Since much of the class work in these Listening classes involves pair work— either working together on a listening comprehension exercise, or an “information gap” speaking task—the TA can be paired up with students in the class. It has often been helpful to pair the TA with students in the class who are having trouble keeping up, with students who are shy, or with those who are less motivated. By having a TA as their partner, these students can get extra help or encouragement as needed.

4. Circulate/advise teacher: Another strategy often used in these Listening/Speaking classes is to have TAs circulate around the room and initiate conversations with their classmates. This is done after a specific language task has been introduced and practiced as a whole class and the extended practice involves a “mixer” activity. Level I students, who are for the most part first year students, are shy and somewhat uncertain about circulating and talking with people they may not know. TAs, having already gone through the language program and being familiar with the process and the purpose of circulating, are very helpful at demonstrating how this activity is done.

As the TAs are circulating they can notice problem areas in vocabulary, grammar structures or pronunciation. They can also ascertain whether the task had been explained clearly by the instructor. TAs can communicate their observations to the

teacher, who can then explain the task more clearly, or go over vocabulary or structures as needed. The teacher is thus better able to meet the needs of the individual students in the class.

5. Help introduce vocabulary: TAs can also function as a kind of dictionary. All of the Listening classes are taught in English and teachers do not generally use Japanese in class. New vocabulary items are usually introduced by explaining the words in simple language, with examples, gestures and/or drawings on the chalk board. After giving an explanation, the teacher can ask a TA to provide the Japanese definition by asking, for instance, “How do you say ‘outgoing’ in Japanese?” The TA can then give the Japanese equivalent to help confirm the other students’ understanding of the English explanation.

6. Conduct a “mini-lesson:” After the TAs are familiar with the members of the class and the text, they can be offered the opportunity to teach a portion of the text themselves with the assistance of the “mentor” teacher. This is perhaps best done when the lesson is a review lesson and the TAs can develop games and activities around material already introduced.

When the TAs did this in my class, they were concerned that the other students would not respond or be interested in the game that they had devised to review vocabulary. Much to their surprise, the class was made livelier by the “new” teachers for the day and the students became actively involved in the vocabulary review game introduced by the TAs.

7. After class discussion: When time allowed, the TAs met briefly with the teacher after class to discuss what had been covered in that lesson and to go over material for the next lesson. The TAs frequently had useful observations about individual students and problems in class dynamics. Because the Listening classes are only sixty minutes in a ninety-minute class

period, there was usually time immediately after class to discuss the day's class with the "mentor" teacher.

The Questionnaires: Two questionnaires were given to the students who participated in the Teaching Assistant program; one given to students before they participated and the other after the period of being a TA and also after most of them had completed their teaching practicums in local schools. The purpose of the first questionnaire was to find out what the students' experiences had been in regard to their own English classes when they were junior/senior high school students. Other questions were related to the students' attitudes and expectations in relation to the teaching practicums which they were preparing for. The second questionnaire attempted to get student feedback in relation to the TA program and their practicum experiences. Student feedback has been an important component to the on-going development of the program.

The Pre-program Questionnaire (Appendix I)

Although approximately 42 students have participated in the program so far, only 27 have turned in the first questionnaire. Although the number of respondents was limited, their answers were remarkably similar and were enlightening. It is important to note that in these questionnaires students were permitted to mark more than one response for each question so there is some discrepancy in the number of marked answers in relation to the number of respondents.

In question 1 about students' perceived personal strengths in term of English skills, listening comprehension was mentioned by 12 students, reading and grammar were marked by 8 students each, writing was marked by 7, speaking was marked by 5, and translation was marked by 2. While speaking skills were not regarded a strength by most students, many had confidence in their listening comprehension skills. Most of these fourth year students have completed Level III Listening/Speaking classes

and so listening comprehension is the area where they feel they have made the most progress. These findings correlate with another study which was conducted on seniors after four years of instruction in the new curriculum at the college (Brown, 1999).

In question 2, regarding perceived weaknesses, speaking was marked by 17 students, listening comprehension was marked by 10, reading and grammar were marked by 7 each, writing by 6, and translation was marked by 4. In their comments, one student said, "I like to speak, but my brain works slowly, so I am weak at speaking." Another mentioned a lack of vocabulary for adequate expression and a worry about pronunciation.

In question 3, when asked whether they had experience with a Japanese teacher of English who used English in class, 12 answered yes and 15 answered no. Of those who answered yes, most said only 1 or 2 of their teachers had actively used English in class (question 4) and that the teacher or teachers had used English only about 20% of the time (question 5).

Student responses to question 6 indicated that nearly all of them had a favorable, positive view of Japanese teachers who used English in class. The following are some of their comments: "I felt that the teacher was vigorous and the class was more lively." "The teacher seemed to have better English than the teachers who did not use English in class." "It was difficult at first but at the end I think it really improved my listening comprehension ability." "It made me want to speak English too." "The class was more enjoyable and I was impressed by the teacher." "The teacher put a lot of effort into teaching." The only negative comment was "...it was not good because it was Japanese-English."

Questions 7 and 8 were related to their experiences with Assistant English Teachers (AET) in the JET program. Almost all had taken classes with a native speaker of English (only 4 answered they had not), but their experiences were limited to once or twice a month or even just once or twice a year. As

might be expected, the activities most mentioned with the AET were games, songs, pair work and hearing about the AET's country and customs. Two students mentioned that it was interesting to watch the regular classroom teacher interact and talk with the AET. All of the students seemed to have a very positive impression of the classes with the AET.

Regarding question 9, the activities that were enjoyed most in their English learning experience were oral communication, games, speaking with foreigners, music, group work, conversation strategies and hearing about different customs in other countries.

In question 10, student concerns regarding their practicums were related to their own lack of confidence in their speaking ability and in how to relate to students. Students mentioned the following: "I will become nervous in front of others so I won't know what I am saying myself." "Teaching listening/speaking is important, but I am not a good speaker." "When I feel tense I worry that I will not speak loudly or clearly enough." "I don't have enough vocabulary." "I worry that I will not be able to explain grammar clearly." "I would like to be able to speak English casually, but I can't."

In other comments related to the same question, they mentioned the following: "I want to help students enjoy English." "I worry that I will not be able to answer students' questions." "I don't know how to deal with students who don't understand." "What will be my role with the AET?" "Will students understand my English?" "How can I make contact with my students?"

Concerning question 11, all the TAs felt they would need to use various phrases of classroom English: for example "Please repeat" "Open the text to page 12," and other directions needed for conducting the class. Greeting the class, talking about the weather, being able to chat about other casual topics and praising students in English were also mentioned. One respondent mentioned the hope that when he/she communicated with the students it would not be one-sided, so it was important to know about the students themselves. Helping students with

practical conversation strategies was also mentioned. For example, teaching students to say “Could you speak more slowly?” or “Could you say that again?” or “I’m sorry. I don’t understand.”

The student responses in the questionnaire given before the program indicated that students felt that speaking English was an area of difficulty for them. Although the students seemed to admire the Japanese teachers of English who used English in class, relatively few of them had experience with teachers who had actually used much English. While the students expressed a strong interest in using English themselves when teaching, at the same time they expressed some anxiety and lack of confidence in their ability to do so.

The Post-program Questionnaire (Appendix II)

This second questionnaire was administered only in 1997 and 1999. Students who had been TAs were asked to respond after they had done their teaching practicums. The response rate for both years was rather low: in 1997 only five students responded and in 1999 only eight did so. Since the students who participate in teaching practicums have other course requirements and must also spend a great deal of time preparing for the Teacher Employment Selection Test, the low rate of response is not surprising— particularly since the questionnaires were in English. Although the response rate was low, for feedback purposes, the students’ comments were extremely useful in planning the program in following years.

In question 1 of in the 1997 questionnaire, only two students out of the five, felt that the TA experience had been helpful. The reasons given for it being helpful were that it had helped with “classroom English,” had given them teaching ideas, and improved their listening comprehension skills. Reasons given for why it had not been so helpful were that they had not been able to attend enough, they didn’t know what to do and they felt nervous.

One of the valuable suggestions made by students in this

questionnaire was that they wanted an opportunity to actually teach some of the Level I Listening classes rather than just observe—they didn't want to be "just an audience." Other comments were that the "mentor" teacher should communicate expectations more clearly to the TA so that the TA can participate more actively in each lesson. Another interesting comment was that students often lack the "ambition to study" and one of the TA's roles should be to encourage students to study.

Modifications in the TA program were made based on the students' suggestions in the earlier questionnaire, and the 1999 post-program questionnaire results indicate a much higher satisfaction rate. All eight respondents said the experience had been helpful in their practicum preparations. In question 2, which asked in what ways the TA experience had been helpful, all of the choices listed on the questionnaire were marked by students: "classroom English," confidence, and teaching ideas were marked by nearly all the respondents. Other comments were that the experience had helped them with gestures, they could discuss teaching ideas with the "mentor" teacher, and that joining the class was beneficial to them as a way to review after completion of Level III courses.

This year most TA students were given the opportunity to actually teach (question 4) and their reactions to this experience were as follows: "It helped to make the practicum experience easy." "I could feel confident." "I could give instructions in English, the students could understand me and I felt pleased." "It gave me practice in speaking with a loud voice." "I could get a lot of advice from my 'mentor' teacher."

Five out of the eight respondents said that they had been expected to use English in class during their practicums (question 10). In question 11, regarding comments from their supervising Japanese teachers of English, about English use in class, students mentioned the following suggestions. "If only English is used in class the students might be silent, so English and Japanese use should be mixed so that students can really understand." "Use

English a lot because students should listen to English a lot.”

Students also mentioned that during their practicums they worried about grammar and pronunciation, that it was difficult to explain things in English, that they couldn't say what they wanted to say “instantly,” and that speaking English in this kind of class situation felt very different than when speaking English with a foreigner. One student mentioned that the TAs should be more positive and take notes of useful phrases and ideas throughout the experience. Another mentioned that if TAs tell their respective “mentor” teachers about their purposes for participating, the experience would be more useful.

“Mentor” teachers: This TA program would not have been possible without the cooperation of the “mentor” teachers who were involved. These teachers took additional time in their already full schedules to supervise, advise and encourage the TAs who were in their classes. Their comments regarding this program are important to consider. For the most part they were very supportive and felt that having a TA in their classes had been an asset in many ways. One interesting observation was that when the TA was conducting the class, students seemed to pay more attention. Another observation was that the TAs could more readily empathize with the students in the class and could relate their own language-learning experiences to those of the students. The fact the TAs could pay attention to more quiet, shy students was also appreciated.

The “mentor” teachers also mentioned several problems with the program. Working with the TAs often consumed a lot of time; the TAs needed to have copies of the materials, needed training in small things, such as effective tape recorder and chalk board use, not to mention the on-going review of each lesson plan. The biggest problem for the mentor teachers was the sporadic attendance of some of the TAs. They could not always count on the TA to come to class, which sometimes made lesson planning awkward.

Overall, judging from my own observations and those of the other “mentor” teachers, having TAs in the class seemed to have a positive impact on Level I students. With TAs in the class, students could get more individual attention and encouragement; the TAs, in a sense, were influential role models. For the “mentor” teacher, having a TA meant that many class procedures could be more easily explained and demonstrated. In the future, however, it might be useful to get more concrete feedback from Level I students themselves, who have had TAs working with them. A questionnaire in Japanese would probably be the most effective way of getting these students’ reactions.

Conclusion: Although this TA program at the college was initially started with a focus on helping students with classroom English, the experience was a positive one in many unanticipated ways. Because the Listening classes have a fairly intensive, three times a week schedule, the TAs who attended regularly were able to hear many variations of how English is used in instruction. TAs could also be involved, for an extended period, in classes where the emphasis is on practical communication in English and which are taught, as much as possible, in a learner-centered approach. Hopefully this experience can have a lasting impact on the fortunate few who actually get teaching positions at junior and senior high schools in Japan.

For those of us who worked with the TAs, it was rewarding to watch their confidence grow and see the positive influence they could have on the lower level students. After being with Level I students, some of the TAs were surprised to realize how much their own English skills had improved since the time that they were in Level I. If they had not had contact with new Level I students, the contrast would not have been evident to them. For many, this realization was a tremendous boost to their confidence.

For the small number of students who have successfully

jumped through all the necessary “hoops” and are able to secure a teaching position, there are still many challenges to face. They must deal with the widely publicized problems of student apathy, bullying, school avoidance and classroom breakdown; they must adhere to Ministry of Education approved curriculums which tend to treat English as test subject. Classes are usually too large for effective language teaching, and teachers’ time is too often consumed with exhausting non-teaching duties.

Changes, however, are slowly taking place. In 1998, the Ministry of Education stated that the new goals for English language teaching should place emphasis on practical, communicative skills. Also, the decline in the youth population is making it much easier for students to enter high schools and universities. Consequently, entrance exams into these institutions may no longer have to consist of absurdly difficult English problems as a means of selecting “qualified” students and, hopefully, tests which measure more communicative skills can be implemented. Additionally, the Ministry of Education has proposed that English language education begin in elementary schools in the year 2002. It is hoped that at this level, the communicative skills of listening and speaking will be the primary focus of instruction. In this emerging environment perhaps there will be a greater role for teachers who are comfortable using English themselves, and who appreciate the importance of learner-centered instruction. It is hoped that teachers who have had experience as Teaching Assistants will be among this group.

Appendix I

QUESTIONNAIRE (pre-program)

Directions: Please answer the following questions. Some questions require only a check mark. Other questions require short answers, and you may answer in English or in Japanese.

1. What are your “strong points” in English language?

_____ reading	_____ speaking
_____ writing	_____ grammar
_____ listening comprehension	_____ translation

Other comments? _____

2. What are your “weak points” in English language?

_____ reading	_____ speaking
_____ writing	_____ grammar
_____ listening comprehension	_____ translation

Other comments? _____

3. When you were a student in junior and senior high school, did any of your Japanese teachers of English use English actively in class?

_____ yes _____ no _____ I don't remember.

4. If you answered “yes” for number 3, how many teachers, in your junior and senior high school days, used English in class? (One? Two? Four?)

5. How much English did they use in class? (20% of the time? 50% of the time? 90% of the time? etc.)

6. What was your impression of teachers who used English in class?

7. When you were a junior and senior high school student, did you have an AET, or a native speaker, in your English class sometimes?

8. If yes, what kind of activities did that person do in English class?

9. As a student of English (in junior and senior high, and university) what kinds of activities in your English classes were the most enjoyable and/or useful to you?

* For questions 10 and 11 please write your comments on the back of the page.

10. What “worries” or concerns do you have about doing Practice Teaching?

11. As a teacher of English in junior or senior high school, what kind of “classroom English” do you imagine that you will need?

Appendix II

QUESTIONNAIRE (post-program)

TO: Students who participated as Teaching Assistants (TA) in the Listening classes.

FROM: Joy Williams

Please answer the following questions —you may write in English or Japanese. Your comments will help us make this program better for future students.

1. Do you think auditing and being a TA in Listening classes at Keiwa this year was helpful as a way to prepare for your practice teaching?

Very helpful _____

Helpful _____

So, so _____

Not helpful _____

2. If auditing was helpful, in what way was it helpful?

It helped me improve my speaking abilities _____

I could learn and review "classroom English" _____

It gave me confidence _____

It gave me teaching ideas _____

It improved my listening comprehension _____

It helped me with grammar _____

Other (please explain)

3. If it was not helpful, why was it not helpful? Please explain.

4. Did you have a chance to actually teach a lesson, or lessons, in the Listening classes at this college?

Yes _____

No _____

5. If you answered "Yes" for number 4, please write your impressions of this teaching experience.

6. If you answered "No" for number 4, do you wish you could have taught a lesson in the Listening classes?

Yes _____ No _____

7. Because of your schedule, was it difficult to attend the Listening classes, which meet 3 times a week ?

Yes _____ A little _____

No _____

Please explain.

8. Do you think it would be better to begin auditing a Listening class in your third year of college (rather than your 4th year)? (Maybe going to a class only one time a week, for a whole year, rather than 3 times a week)

Yes _____

No _____

Don't know _____

9. Would you like to continue auditing the Listening classes during the second term this year, after summer vacation?

Yes _____

No _____

Maybe _____

10. When you were doing practice teaching at the junior/senior high schools, were you expected to use English in class?

Yes _____

No _____

Other _____

11. Did your supervising teacher at your respective schools have any comments/suggestions about using English in class?

Yes No

If you circled "Yes" please explain.

12. Were there any specific things that you had trouble expressing in English while you were doing your practice teaching? Please give examples.

13. Other comments and suggestions? (Please write on the back of this page.)

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