

Teaching and Learning English in Japanese Classrooms

Teaching and Learning English in Japanese Classrooms:

Teachers' Perspectives

Edited by

Darren Elliott

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CHAPTER ONE

PRACTITIONER RESEARCH IN A JAPANESE UNIVERSITY CONTEXT: FACILITATING TEACHER DEVELOPMENT

DARREN ELLIOTT

Introduction

The chapters in this book are based on presentations made at the first three Nanzan Language Education Seminars, an annual event which has been taking place at a private Catholic university in central Japan since 2017. In this introductory chapter I would like to discuss the motivations behind initiation of the seminar, and subsequently the book; namely, to support working language teachers in conducting and sharing research. I will discuss the reasons why teachers should investigate their own practice, and some of the obstacles they face in doing so (in particular, in the Japanese university context). All readers are welcome, of course, but the book is targeted at two particular groups.

Firstly, I hope that classroom teachers will be able to try out some of the teaching activities and methods described in this book. The indirect message we also want to convey, though, is that all classroom practitioners should investigate ‘puzzles’ which arise as they teach. If asked, I believe that most (if not all) of the authors would tell us that writing and publishing their chapter was less important than attempting to solve their personal puzzles, and developing themselves as teachers. If you are reading this, and you want to better understand something about your own practice, then we would urge you to do so.

The second group of readers I would like to address is those in teacher education, educational leadership, or educational management. We hope

that this book will offer an example of how classroom teachers can be empowered to manage their own professional development. If you, as a reader, are in a position to influence the implementation of formal or informal teacher development opportunities at your institution, I hope this chapter will give you food for thought.

I am one of the programme coordinators of the language centre at a private university in central Japan, and more than seventy instructors teach for the centre, both part-time and full-time, providing required and elective general English classes for students from all departments and faculties. Each of our students is unique in their language learning history, proficiency level, and language learning goals. For this reason, although we do have a coordinated curriculum, we do not require teachers to teach to a shared syllabus, use particular textbooks, or set specific assessments. Instead, each class has a list of target criteria, or ‘can-do statements’, to guide teachers in their planning. The coordinators’ role is to support instructors to work towards those targets and enable them to fulfil their own potential within that framework, which in turn will allow the learners to do the same. As such, an important leadership priority is the facilitation of professional development, which is often referred to as faculty development in the Japanese university context.

In Japan, Faculty Development (FD) in universities is mandated by the Ministry of Education (Suzuki 2013; Roloff Rothman 2020) yet what constitutes FD is not clearly defined. This means that the ways in which ‘development’ is interpreted by and implemented by institutions, and the underlying purposes of such FD programmes, may not always meet the needs of classroom practitioners. In comparison to pre-service instructors formalised training or development sessions are of less use to in-service teachers, many of whom have years of experience and a post-graduate education. So, what can we do to facilitate ongoing professional development? I assert that teachers themselves should be in control of that process, and that is the main principle on which this book has been edited. Most of chapters in this volume report on practitioner research, prompted by a teacher-researcher’s need to investigate pedagogical questions arising in the course of their own work in the language classroom.

With that in mind, I would like to consider the following three questions:

1. Why should teachers do research?
2. What constitutes research?
3. How can practitioner research be facilitated?

Why should teachers do research?

Broadly speaking, answers to this question focus on either intrinsic or extrinsic factors. In his analysis of job advertisements for positions at Japanese universities, McCrostie (2010) found that most institutions require applicants to have at least three academic publications, and for tenured positions, it may be expected that those publications are in peer-reviewed, international journals. Increasingly even part-time instructors will find it hard to pick up classes without at least a couple of publications (Butler 2019). In this volume, Muller and Gallagher (Chapter 14) discuss precarity and the employment of university language instructors in Japan in greater detail, but suffice to say in the Japanese university system there is external pressure to research and publish, even if the position one is applying for is not a research position. In comparison with those for Anglophone institutions, advertisements for positions in Japanese universities tend to be vague about responsibilities, duties, and the correlation between application requirements and the actual position (Muller & Skeates 2022). In practice, all language instructors, regardless of their personal interest, prior experience, or training in academic research methods, may feel obligated to engage in research solely to continue working in their chosen profession. Conversely, even senior professors may be required to teach general education classes, so finding ways to synthesise institutional expectations regarding research, classroom teaching expertise, and personal professional goals is important.

The personal research interests which teacher-researchers select may, at least in part, be driven by extrinsic factors too. Institutional cultures, influential colleagues, or the marketability (or lack thereof) of a particular research area or methodology when job-hunting can all guide researchers in their choices of what to investigate (and how), consciously or otherwise. However, without a sustained sense of curiosity about teaching and learning processes, classroom practitioners are unlikely to develop as teachers or maintain a healthy and satisfying career path. As Huberman (1993)

describes in his large-scale, longitudinal study of Swiss secondary school teachers, a teacher's life can be separated into phases – from “Survival / Discovery” at entry level, towards “Stabilisation”, “Experimentation / Activism”, “Serenity / Relational Distance / Conservatism”, and finally “Disengagement”. Teachers may spend more or less time in each phase, and experience more of the positive or negative features attributed to each phase. While circumstances beyond the control of the teacher may affect the career trajectories they take, teachers themselves have a great deal of agency in their self-satisfaction over the course of a career. Huberman suggests that all teachers end up disengaged, but it is largely up to them whether that disengagement is “serene” or “bitter” (1993, 13). The key difference, Huberman claims, is “pedagogical tinkering”.

“Teachers ... who invested consistently in classroom-level experiments ... what they called tinkering with new materials, different pupil groupings, small changes in grading systems... were more likely to be satisfied in their careers than most others.” (Huberman 1989, 50)

This is ‘research’ for self-actualisation, but it is not only the teacher-researcher who benefits from practitioner research. Macaro (2003) suggests that practitioner research is likely to have greater “ecological validity”, with the interpretation of data enhanced through insider knowledge. A stronger body of practitioner research may also help prevent the imposition of inappropriate practice related policies on L2 classrooms, “...which are usually generated by an elite group's desire to impose uniformity on a complex system for the purposes of professional control” (Macaro 2003, 43).

I would suggest that research which springs from a desire to improve one's own classroom practice can be more accessible and more valuable to fellow teachers. Traditionally, research is conducted *on* teachers and learners *by* researchers, in what has been described as “a parasitic enterprise conducted by people interested only in their own agenda” (Allwright & Hanks 2009, 113). The intended beneficiaries of such research are the researchers themselves, and the wider academic community, not the people (teachers and students) who actually participate in studies. An alternative is what Allwright & Hanks (2009) refer to as “Exploratory Practice” – a participatory and inclusive model of research conducted by teachers and

students together, grappling with “puzzles” that present themselves during the teaching and learning process. The chapters in this book describe projects which take this mutual development approach, benefiting not only the reader, but the lives of the teachers and learners who investigated the puzzle.

What constitutes research?

Inclusive practitioner research can be emancipatory, but in reality, certain methods of conducting and reporting research are still awarded greater academic capital (Bourdieu 1979) than others. Kemmis lists five types of what he calls “inadequate action research” (2006, 460-461), disregarding research which aims to improve techniques or efficiency of practice without situating itself in the wider economic, cultural and historical context. Broadly speaking, a higher level of criticality in social science research is to be welcomed, but not if it means excluding small, personal investigations. In a call for paradigmatic tolerance, Smeyers argues that educational theory relies on philosophical, interpretive, quantitative and causal research methodologies and that “none of them can justifiably claim superiority over the other” (Smeyers 2001, 491) but Hendren et al., referring to mixed methods research, talk of the varying “cash value” of research methodologies, noting that researchers “... must address historical barriers to (mixed methods research’s) widespread use, including the dominance of quantitative methods in social science and debates about the commensurability of the philosophical underpinnings of quantitative and qualitative methods.” (Hendren et al. 2018, 904). Thus, in practical terms, gatekeeping by employers means that prospective teacher-researchers are often pushed towards research methodologies which carry greater academic capital (i.e., quantitative, positivist) regardless of their congruency with either the epistemological / ontological perspective of the teacher-researcher or their suitability for the study in hand. If teacher-researchers are discouraged or excluded from academic investigation, we will be left with the status-quo, in which professional researchers conduct studies *on* teachers and learners, not *with* or *for* them, and teachers don’t investigate their own practice at all.

Conducting research as a classroom teacher presents one set of challenges, but reporting that research presents another. In Japan, in-house

journals published by university departments, known as *kiyo*, make up a significant proportion of academic publishing in the social sciences (Kamada 2007). It is unusual for these journals to be refereed or peer-reviewed, and it is only relatively recently that these journals have begun to appear online for a wider audience; previously, dissemination was limited to small print runs for circulation within the host institution. The underlying purpose of the *kiyo* system, suggests Kamada, is to offer an outlet for established faculty members to publish their work without external review. This in turn reinforces loyalty to academic institutions over academic loyalty to disciplines, and maintains seniority-based hierarchical structures (Kamada 2007, 378). The *kiyo* system is not necessarily designed for teacher-researchers attempting to establish themselves in academia, however. Instructors on the periphery (part-time or contract instructors, those in language centres rather than faculties or departments) may be blocked from publishing in such journals. At the same time, if junior faculty are able (or encouraged) to submit to *kiyo*, they have to recognise that such publications are not widely disseminated or valued outside the host institution.

There are many opportunities for publication beyond the *kiyo*, of course, but conventions of academic discourse can restrict teacher-researchers in fully giving voice to their work. There is a developing body of literature exploring the disruption of established research norms, from Elliott's work with sequential art (2015, 2016), to DeHart's poetry (2021) and Nelson's dramatizations of interview data (2013). However, it is important to recognise that the ability to engage in experimental forms of reporting often comes from a position of privilege, whether that be the security of a tenured position, existing stock of social / academic capital, or membership of an in-group. Academics from marginalised groups have to make pragmatic choices; any experiment in conducting or reporting research beyond established norms could impede career progression. There are those who successfully negotiate these challenges, however. Quayle (2007) writes of his struggles as a Ghanaian-American graduate student attempting to square his home cultural values with those of the academic community in the US in creating a narrative voice in his research, and Park (2017) inserts her autobiographical and discursive self into her research on privilege, marginalisation, and East Asian women teachers of English. The Japan-

based Learner Development Journal is an example of a publication set up to balance high academic standards with more inclusive and personal practitioner-led writing, in an attempt to “break the third-party paradigm” of traditional genres (Ashwell et al. 2021).

The authors in this book were encouraged to insert themselves into their texts, as reflexive actors within the research process. It should be recognised that a strong authorial voice does not automatically point to a lack of rigour. A one-size-fits-all model of what constitutes good research is limiting, and needs to be addressed.

How can practitioner research be facilitated?

This leaves the final question, which I will rephrase to ask – What are the obstacles to practitioner research, and how can they be removed? In summary, I contend that language teachers engage in research within the Japanese university context in order to maintain and develop their own careers, but that the right kinds of research may also help improve the teaching and learning experience for themselves and their students, and help the teacher to sustain long-term job satisfaction. As for what constitutes ‘the right kind of research’, I would suggest that we broaden our definition beyond the positivist scientism of purely quantitative studies to include practitioner-centred, personal and anecdotal work. That is not to say that academic rigour should be abandoned, rather that there must be coherence between problem and method; data-driven, quantitative research absolutely has a place in social science research, but applied inappropriately “fails to understand the multiplicity and complexity of the life world of individuals” (Scott & Usher 2011, 29). A more nuanced understanding of the relationships between research and practice (or praxis) from members of hiring committees would certainly be a step forward.

For the ‘full-time part-time’ language teacher at Japanese universities, who puts together a weekly schedule of classes across a number of schools, there is little time or energy left for personal research. Such teachers may teach at a different university every day, or even within the same day, dashing from place to place to teach as many as twenty separate courses. Teachers who have the security of a full-time contract position at one institution may at least have some office space and a small research budget,

and a slightly lighter teaching schedule, but are often required to teach around ten classes per week. To some degree, both part-time and full-time teachers suffer from isolation. Part-time teachers may work at the same institution for years without ever meeting their peers. Full-time and part-time staff may pass briefly in the university corridors, but not know one another's names. I myself taught part-time classes at one university without ever meeting the tenured professor who was supervising those courses. This is a kind of "Balkanisation" (Hargreaves 1994), in which different categories of teacher are separated by physical space, self-identification, and even policy. Separate physical spaces reduce opportunities for social contact, which in turn decreases the likelihood of shared ideas. This means that spaces (both literal and metaphorical) must be created to allow contact. Centralising certain functional spaces for all staff – break rooms, copy and printing facilities – is one simple way to achieve this naturally.

Navigating research ethics is another challenge faced by language teacher-researchers, particularly in Japanese university settings. The Japanese Ministry of Education has required that universities in Japan set up codes of ethical conduct, programmes to ensure understanding of fundamental research ethics, and procedures to investigate and act upon research misconduct since 2006 (see Macfarlane & Saitoh 2006 for further information). However, in practice, oversight of research ethics can be limited and implemented less rigorously than at a typical university in the US or Europe. This is particularly true of smaller, private universities specialising in liberal arts, which may consider themselves teaching universities rather than research institutions. Even those institutions with a formalised and rigorous framework in place may not extend the same level of support (especially not financial support) to part-time instructors. The conundrum, yet again, is that those that need the most help are least likely to get it. Generous, fixed research budgets, and the opportunities to apply for still further grants, fund overseas travel, equipment and books for full-time permanent staff – such privileges are rarely extended to contract or part-time instructors. Although structural and cultural factors make this difficult to address, I would like to see more democratic access to research grants to enable all classroom practitioners to engage in professional development.

Finally, I would suggest that certain kinds of mentorship can be valuable in supporting classroom practitioners in their own research journeys. However, rather than the hierarchically-structured knowledge transfer model often seen in formalised, expert-novice mentoring programmes, Cochran-Smith and Paris (1995) advocate for a collaborative knowledge construction relationship, in which the mentor and mentee roles are somewhat blurred. This is more suited to situations in which classroom practitioners have as much, if not more, classroom expertise than those in management and leadership roles. In such contexts, the role of the mentor is not to impart teaching knowledge, but to support the mentee in their development as a teacher-researcher. This may be through discussion to formulate shared ways of knowing (Cochran-Smith & Paris 1995), or through practical support navigating the university bureaucracy, locating avenues for research and publication, and introducing the mentee to potential collaborators. Other possibilities are mutual mentoring partnerships (Mercer & Gregersen 2020) and critical friendships (Farrell 2007), semi-formal arrangements between classroom practitioners which allow for collaborative projects, reflective practice and the sharing of fresh perspectives. Such relationships can only be formed and sustained in supportive and non-threatening environments, of course.

Conclusion

Despite the many obstacles to practitioner research in Japanese universities outlined in this opening chapter, the chapters you are about to read show that not only is it possible for teachers to conduct their own research, but it is possible for them to do it very well. We hope that this collection will inspire you, the reader, to engage in an investigation of your own teaching practice, and to consider how you or your institution might create a better environment for practitioner-led research.

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CHAPTER TWO

LEARNING BY TEACHING METHOD IN EFL/ESL CLASSROOMS

ANA MARIA FLORES

Introduction

Traditional educational practices include attending classes, purchasing textbooks, listening to lectures, and collaborating with peers or classmates through group or pair work. For the most part, these learning methods help achieve the objectives of a particular study. However, there is an approach that helps enhance the learning experience but is often underrated, and that is, having the learners teach the skills they have learned well enough for others to learn them. In this paper, I would like to describe this practice, commonly known as “Learning by Teaching” or LdL, and my own experiences in utilising it with English language learners at a Japanese university.

Peer-tutoring, interchangeably called peer learning, is a well-established teaching practice that can be dated back to the ancient Greeks (Topping 1996). Different academic investigations and research over the years about the different formats of peer-tutoring have led to a more formal description of the practice. In the 1980s, Jean-Pol Martin, a French language teacher at German schools, developed a teaching-learning approach that aimed to enhance the students’ learning experience by encouraging them to teach other students (Martin, 1985). This approach is now known as Learning by Teaching (LdL – from the German *Lernen durch Lehren*), an approach that “sees the students in the role of the teacher” (Stollhans 2016, 161). A few philosophers have been quoted on the matter over the years: “To teach is to learn twice” (Joubert); “He who teaches, learns” (Comenius); or “Teaching is learning” (Seneca) (Duran 2016).

This paper will define peer learning and enumerate the benefits of online peer learning in EFL/ESL classrooms in an increasingly digital age. Furthermore, this paper will give descriptions of the tasks and activities that have been undertaken by EFL students to capitalise on the benefits of peer learning in an asynchronous online learning format.

Based on the data from the students' performance (completed tasks and activities), the practitioner has observed and confirmed that peer teaching and peer learning significantly contributes to language learning and acquisition. The practitioner will discuss the reasons the LdL Approach can be a ubiquitous instructional practice by educators in the ESL/EFL field.

Literature Review

There are many definitions and explanations of what peer learning is. Fundamentally, peer learning is a process in which learners, through sharing of knowledge and information of a particular study, support each other. In this approach, students teach other students the skills they have learned well enough (McKenna and French 2011). This approach enables students who are adept in a particular skill "to help other students from similar academic categories either on a one-to-one basis or in small groups by continuing classroom discussions, developing study skills, evaluating work, resolving specific problems, and encouraging independent learning," (Colvin, 2017). Leijten and Chan (2012) defined peer learning as "students' informational sharing of knowledge, ideas, and experiences, which are of equal standing due to their role as students, either older or younger with different cultural backgrounds, social class, and ethnicity." Similarly, Mustafa (2017) stated that this approach "involves exchanging ideas, knowledge, and expertise with each other. It is an approach where the learners are in the similar levels of social groupings, who are not professional teachers, helping each other learn and learn themselves by so doing." Colvin (2007) had emphasised the same stating that "peer learning involves those of the same societal group or social standing, educating one another when one peer has more expertise or knowledge." Keppell, et al (2006) in their description of peer learning as both informal and formal, and also mentioned that "in informal peer learning students discuss lectures, assignments, projects and exams in casual social settings." Similarly, Byl et al. (2016) asserted that "peer learning is a

social process, in which peer interactions are fundamental.” Lupu (2009) as quoted by Mustafa (2017) also referred to peer learning as an approach that “promotes and increases cognitive skills, knowledge and understanding.”

Based on the above-mentioned definitions of peer learning, its main characteristics include discussions, exchange of ideas, teamwork, and a teaching-learning process in a social form. ESL professionals and practitioners have continuously developed various instructional approaches to make language learning relevant to the learners’ lives and language development needs. In this regard, peer learning, as shown by several researchers, is found to be useful for this purpose. Colvin (2007) stated that “peer learning in higher education is being used with increasing frequency to aid in student learning, motivation, and empowerment.” It is an approach that is “developmental, cognitive, intellectual, cooperative, meaningful, productive and demanding,” (Mustafa 2017). Evans J. M. et al. (2013) similarly affirmed that “through peer tutoring, students can share useful information, effective problem-solving strategies, and even positive attitudes while learning as both tutors and students of one another.” According to Boud (2001) (cited in Leitjan and Chan, 2012), students in a peer learning situation define their own meaning and comprehension of what they need to learn as the students will be “involved in searching for, collecting, analysing, integrating, and communicating and applying information to complete an assignment or solve a problem.” Hence, peer learning improves self-efficacy levels (Brannagan et al. 2013). Lietjan and Chan (2012) (cited in Roberts 2008) further added that, “peer learning can lead to development of communication, self-directed learning skills, critical and creative thinking and problem-solving and increased understanding of skills and self-image.” Thus, in the peer learning approach the students “are engaged intellectually, emotionally, and socially in constructive conversation and learn by talking and questioning each other’s views and reaching consensus or dissent” (Boud, 2001).

Research interest in improving students’ learning experiences by peer learning approaches through online platforms has existed for some time, but such interest has recently intensified as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Peer learning in face-to-face classrooms has been unexpectedly disrupted. As a result, traditional classrooms and face-to-face teaching and learning are now being redefined; and, knowledge on how to set learners up to learn

together and teach each other in an online environment has inevitably become part of teachers' professional development. The use of technology and online resources have become imperative for education, more widespread in educational institutions and have somehow attenuated the merits of learning with peers' approaches in the classrooms. Albeit even before the COVID-19 pandemic, language teachers have always sought online technologies for instructional methodologies and approaches that motivate students in the learning process (Revere and Kovach 2011). Brannagan et al. (2013) (as cited in Jacob D. et al., 2016) also stated the same that "educators always search for alternative teaching approaches to improve students' learning experiences in an increasingly digital age." Similarly, Jacob et al. (2016) stated that "peer online learning group acted as one further method to facilitate student learning experiences." Mark and Coniam (2008) (as cited in Nagaletchimee 2018) likewise asserted that "meaningful online interactions will not only equip learners with language skills but also provide learners with authentic learning context that traditional setting does not offer." Educationalists have always sought for alternative online learning methods that are as productive when executed in a face-to-face teaching and learning environment. As Nagalatchimee (2018) asserted, "online interactions seem be an important feature in the use of technology as it complements teacher fronted interactions by providing a context of practice." Jacob et al. (2016) also claimed that, "blending online peer learning with traditional face-to-face learning increases the variety of learning methods available to students to enhance their overall learning experience." With the increasing prevalence of digital instructional tools, ESL educationalists and practitioners these days can now easily adopt technologies while designing diverse pedagogies in English language learning.

Peer Learning Activities

Through decades of research in education, credible educators are aware that optimal learning in ESL classrooms occurs more when learners work with their peers to practise a particular set of language expressions and phrases, or when they are engaged in rich discussion about how a group task can be successfully accomplished. So, when students feel that they are

united toward a common learning goal optimal learning occurs, and most often not when educators primarily generate and transmit information. However, in online learning environments, the enthusiasm to complete tasks and the willingness to cooperate can easily disappear. This is exactly what educators came across in school year 2020 when they were suddenly forced to teach online. As educators were taken unawares by the worldwide lockdown brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, many initially resorted to merely transposing the usual classroom learning and teaching activities online. Then, students were expected to generate the same enthusiasm and cooperation as they would in the face-to-face classroom but only to find the opposite result. Many educators talked about students not willing to turn on their video cameras during real-time video-conference lectures; each day more and more students remained silent even when they were in the breakout rooms; and learners strongly demonstrated the lack of motivation to study and to work with other peers in the course. Educators realised from these reactions that with no shared physical context, the digital platform could act either as an alternative tool for learning or as a barrier to students working in positively interdependent ways. However, as the uncertainties caused by the COVID-19 pandemic continue, educators are now faced with the challenges of creating and developing instructional practices that sustain enthusiasm, invigorate motivation, and boost cooperation among the learners.

In this paper, I would like to share two peer learning approaches, an online debate and a short student online presentation, that have been observed to promote coordination, interdependence, and accountability. The preparations and instructions to accomplish the tasks were delivered and conducted through scheduled class videoconference (Zoom) meetings. These practices can work well in synchronous online teaching settings, and in blended format.

Online debate

Debates are one of the useful strategies for peer learning. A debate is a formal platform between two teams of usually three to five members, presenting their propositions and arguing a discussion statement commonly known as the resolution. Even in its traditional style, a debate encourages

flexibility, contemplation, and the development of interpersonal and collaborative skills. Shaw (2012) asserted that “debates stimulate critical thinking and can be highly effective way to actively engage students in research in the online classroom.” Therefore, the interactivity in debates fosters peer motivation and the development of peer learning communities. Also, well-chosen debate resolution supports students’ engagement particularly in sharing, teaching, and learning from peers. Hence, an organised online debate design is not only an activity that cultivates multiple skills and competencies, but it is also a productive tool that supports the peer learning approach.

The following is the outline of procedures for the online debate that the writer conducted with freshmen university students that belong to two different departments. The students worked with four to five members in each group. The preparation and final presentation of the debate were for three consecutive 90-minute classes.

1. Start-up Instructions (first set of 90 minutes in a scheduled class Zoom meetings)
 - a. Introduction debate: Definition of Basic Terms
 - i. Debate
 - ii. Resolution
 - iii. Affirmative Team
 - iv. Negative Team
 - v. Rebuttal
 - vi. Judges
 - vii. Opinions
 - viii. Reasons
 - b. Lecture about the common language and expressions used in a debate.
 - c. Students do mini debates in their own groups to practice generating reasons for their opinions. At this stage, the students are in the Zoom breakout rooms. The entire tasks take about 35 minutes.
 - i. Students in each group are put into pairs or groups of three.
 - ii. In pairs or groups of three, the learners do peer learning tasks that include sharing of collected information to support their