

Developing Community of Practice of ALTs and School Teachers: Design and Management of *Monthly Online Edu Café* 2020.1~2021.12

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I . Introduction

As teacher educators, we heard from both ALTs (Assistant Language Teacher), HRTs (Home Room Teacher), and JTEs (Japanese Teacher of English) on a regular basis, and felt that there was a strong need to create a platform for dialogue between ALTs and Japanese school teachers given that there were not enough opportunities for them to discuss with their colleagues about the ability to develop professionally in the schools where they work and outside of their school. In the monthly Edu café community of practice, a group of ALTs, schoolteachers, and educators gather to share and reflect their daily teaching practices in foreign language education, including challenges and ideas for teaching. In doing so, a professional learning community is cultivated. At first, the group was limited to the elementary school level, but teachers from junior high schools and high schools also wanted to participate, so now the group has been expanded to include foreign language educators from all levels of Education.

Furthermore, the following three reasons detail why the community is not limited to English

Education. First, we would like to argue that English should not be the only foreign language in school education. It has been demonstrated that multiple foreign languages can be compared with Japanese, and that cultivating awareness of language has a synergistic effect on the development of meta-language and the improvement of mother tongue and foreign language skills (Otsu, 1982, 1989; Akita et al., 2014; Wang, 2017, 2019, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2020d). Second, there are schools that are already practicing foreign languages other than English, for instance, Chinese and French. We expanded the community to include all areas of foreign language Education so that teachers from those schools could also participate. Third, there are ALTs whose mother tongue is not English and ALTs who can speak languages other than English (Sophia University, 2018). It is expected that ALTs with experience in learning multiple languages will be used to implement foreign language education that incorporates the perspective of the plurilingualism approach.

The ALT system has been established for more than 30 years and has played a major role in the

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teaching of English in Japanese schools. According to the results of the 2020 National Survey on the Status of English Education, the number of ALTs in elementary schools was 13,326, in junior high schools 8,203, and in high schools 2,783, for a total of 19,729, an increase of 525 from the previous year (MEXT, 2020). In terms of the prevalence of ALTs, nearly 20,000 ALTs are teaching in the classroom throughout elementary, junior high, and high schools, indicating that the ALT system is well established and influential in school Education. However, in many cases, ALTs' time in the classroom is limited to serving as models in demonstrations and as exchange partners. There is more room for ALTs to be integral to the school outside of the classroom to interact with students and assist in performance evaluations (Ibid.). In order to change the role of ALTs in this current situation, it is necessary to create opportunities for ALTs to enact teacher agency so that they can participate in the design of classes (Wang, 2020a, 2020b).

In schools, there are issues related to the positioning and role of ALTs. Otani (2010) points out that the lack of communication between ALTs and Japanese teachers has led to misunderstandings and mistrust. In her article, she mentions the importance of being aware of the fact that ALTs are a minority in the staff room and that they should practice international understanding from the staff room. Japanese teachers, in the midst of their daily work, have minimal contact with ALTs due to the added language hurdle, and teachers who are unaware of how ALTs are hired and what their training really entails have excessive expectations of ALTs' teaching abilities and feel a gap in their actual teaching skills. On the other hand, many ALTs feel isolated and

marginalized, not being fully informed about the school's educational policies and lesson plans, and not being recognized as a member of the school teaching and staff community. ALTs are often told "[You] don't need to come to school events" or "[You] don't need to participate in subject meetings". Otani (2010) even gives specific examples of the above and addresses the issues.

Therefore, we decided to start a group where ALTs and schoolteachers discuss Foreign Language Education (EFL) practices (hereinafter referred to as "monthly Edu café"), so that ALTs and Japanese school teachers can come together and talk about ideas, thoughts, and worries related to daily classroom practices, and share and discuss ideas.

II. Monthly Edu Café 2020.1-2021.12

1. Inspirations from Other Communities

We have had the opportunity to work with teachers in various school levels and have conducted practical research on Foreign Language Education. During those times, we did not have the idea of setting up any community. However, we have been listening to the voices of many teachers and thinking if there is anything we can do to help. Surprisingly, we have heard from people around us saying that there is no place or time for Japanese teachers to talk with ALTs at schools, nor is there a place where both parties can discuss details of education or lessons. The establishment of the monthly Edu café was inspired by two other communities to create a platform where Japanese teachers and ALTs can get together and talk.

One community is the Communities of Practice for Action Research in Education (Co-PARE), whose core members are members from the

university level who have been exploring classroom research. Researchers and practitioners with different backgrounds visit classes and bring class observation records written from their different perspectives to talk about the classes. The study group was started to enhance the formation of young researchers' competence, but a new style of lesson study was derived from individual classroom research by moving up the mode of lesson study (Kimura and Kishino, 2019). A spiraling cycle of reflection has been proposed in which teachers continue to grow as professionals from their practice and bring about innovations in school education.

Another community is the “Yuru Café Meeting on Sex”, established by university students. The Yuru Café is a group of university students who freely talk and listen to each other's experiences and thoughts on gender and sexuality. In order to hold the event on campus, it received cooperation from the Center for the Promotion of Gender Equality, the Student Services Division, the General Student Counseling Office, and the Health Center. The “Yuru Café” executive committee, whose main members are university students, plan the organization, operation, and content of the event (Yauchi, 2020).

These communities open to many people outside of the university, rather than a one-on-one relationship like individual consultations. The monthly Edu café is not limited to those involved in work at the university level but is also open to all pre- and in-service teachers, ALTs, university students, researchers, and anyone with an interest in participating. The group was launched in Fukui Prefecture and now has participants from Osaka, Kyoto, Aichi, Tokyo, Ibaraki, Niigata, Nagano, and many other areas.

2. Trying-out Period 2020.1-2020.5

In order to make it easy for people to participate, no advance registration is required. Each time a meeting is held, it is exciting to see how many people will attend and what their teaching backgrounds are.

On January 29th, 2020, eight people gathered for the very first meeting. After introducing themselves using the 5W1H method, we talked about our own efforts and concerns in teaching, and shared important points about foreign language education based on our own experiences. The following topics were discussed.

(1) How should immersion education be conducted? (2) How to deal with the difference in English ability between children? (3) What would the ideal elementary school English class look like? (4) Is it okay to just do fun activities without teaching grammar? (5) What to evaluate children's performance and how to measure it? (6) Should I use all-English? (7) How can I get the children to talk in the class?

(See Newsletter No.1 in the appendix.)

We asked each participant what they expected from this meeting and each participant had their own ideas. Mr. J. from Canada, who teaches a course in elementary English Education at a university, teaches students who want to become elementary English teachers, but he himself has no experience in elementary school, so he joined this meeting to learn more about elementary school education. Mr. K., majors in science education, who teaches elementary education courses, but has been asked to observe and advise classes in all

subjects from kindergarten to high school. With the introduction of English as a subject in elementary school, he is asked to give advice on how to create elementary school English classes. He attended this meeting to find out how it differs from junior high school English, and to learn about the trends and issues related to English Education. Ms. O., an elementary school teacher, is working at an elementary school for the first time after returning from maternity leave at her previous school, a junior high school, and she is now in charge of elementary school English. She wanted to know how English classes are conducted at other elementary schools. Mr. U., a fourth-year undergraduate student, plans to become an elementary school teacher the following year. He wanted to get ideas for activities that he could use in his classes. Ms. H., a former elementary school principal, had worked as an elementary school English teacher and at the prefectural government, and wanted to know what homeroom teachers and schoolteachers were struggling with. Mr. M., an ALT from Canada who teaches at several elementary schools, wanted to know how to create English lessons with homeroom teachers who are transferring from junior high school to elementary school for the first time, and to share ideas with other teachers. The other former ALT teacher, Mr. B., joined the meeting to discuss how to make children understand why they need to learn English and how to provide activities that match the children's developmental stage. The comments from the participants give us a glimpse of what the day was like.

Although the participants were from different backgrounds, it was reassuring to know that they all had a sense of

involvement in elementary school English. All the participants were good listener and I felt that they listened to what I had to say. As the discussion progressed from one topic to the next, it was exciting to think together and explore the "answers" to the issues that each of us had.

(See Newsletter No.1 in the appendix.)

The second meeting was scheduled for February 26th, but due to the spread of the pandemic, the meeting was cancelled. However, we were hoping to continue this meeting in some form. In lieu of an on-site meeting, we sent out materials via email: a poster on the Storytelling Project from ALT Mr. M., and materials from the open research class at the 16th National Conference on English Language Education in Elementary Schools in Yamanashi by Ms. Wang. We uploaded all materials to the drive and shared the content with everyone, which allows people to write comments on the files. Under the emergency protocol period, measures were taken to close schools. This caused confusion and anxiety at the school sites. To provide meaningful information to teachers, the OECD's checklist for Education's response to a coronavirus pandemic (provisional translation) was published in Newsletter No. 2 (referenced in the appendix materials). It became clear that it would be difficult to conduct this meeting face-to-face for a while, given the difficult situation.

On April 22th, 2020, five people gathered for the third meeting on Zoom for the first time. We welcomed the members who had never met before, introduced ourselves, and then talked about our respective practices and concerns, including the current school situation in the pandemic,

experiences of creating learning websites, teaching videos, and interacting with children during school closures. The following topics were discussed.

(1) What is English Education for children with special needs? (2) As a teacher, how should I take care of the children in my class who needs special care? (3) How can we continue children's learning when school is closed? (4) Isn't it a chance to make fun classes with the online teaching? 5) Collaboration among teachers is needed to develop content for remote classes. (6) English textbooks were introduced for the first time in elementary school, but there is concern that children are learning junior high school English earlier.

(See Newsletter No.2 in the appendix.)

ALT Mr. M. said it was a real shame that the school was closed, and the children were not coming to school. The teachers have been thinking a lot about active teaching and effective use of English, setting up various situations and creating materials for communication, but now they felt frustrated that they could not do their usual activities. Nonetheless, the following exchange between ALTs and children began at the school where he worked. It is inspiring and encouraging for us to hear from the participants who are trying to take positive actions for the children despite the difficult situation.

From April, English has become a subject for 5th and 6th graders in elementary schools, but everyone is

unsure of what kind of classes to teach. The way we used to teach in class has suddenly changed, but I hope that the homeroom teacher, the English teacher, the A.L.T., and the children will be able to speak English. I think it is important to speak and listen actively even in the current difficult situation.

The English teacher at my school suggested that we exchange e-mails between ALTs and children. Since we don't have a chance to meet at school, I created a situation where we can use natural English as much as possible. Let's try to make as many videos, audio clips, and English essays as possible, and spread them to the children we teach. I think it is good to promote communicative learning as much as possible so that the children can understand the importance of English.

(See Newsletter No.3 in the appendix.)

With the continuing school closures, six people gathered on May 27th, 2020, for the fourth meeting on Zoom. Not only elementary school teachers, but also junior high and high school teachers participated in the meeting, to share the status of online classes and come up with creative ideas for learning activities that can be done in the classroom before school resumes. The following topics were discussed.

(1) How to guarantee the quantity and quality of output, as input from class videos and online content increases? (2) Given the nature of English as a subject, should we continue to offer online classes that allow students to practice in pairs,

play audio videos over and over, and check their own pronunciation on recordings? 3) Teacher awareness in English at the elementary school level needs to be improved so that it does not become a precursor to junior high school English. (4) With the limitation of not being able to speak in close proximity, we need to think of ways to turn negatives into positives by using whiteboards and string phones. (5) A diary (text and voice) or a notebook for reflection is a possible mechanism to make children feel the growth of their English.

(See Newsletter No.3 in the appendix.)

Mr. R., a high school ALT, participated in this meeting for the first time. The meeting had been conducted in English until now, but after he started introducing himself in Japanese, we proceeded with the meeting in Japanese continuing from there in Japanese. When he heard a Japanese word for the first time, the Japanese teacher carefully taught it to him so that he could look it up immediately and understand its meaning. After the session, I asked him if he could write his impressions in English, and he sent me the following impressions in Japanese: “I am still not familiar with polite and honorific expressions in Japanese, but I would like to try to write my impressions of this session in Japanese”. He seems to have an awareness of the need to rethink the meaning of learning at school and to create new values. This meeting proved to be a valuable opportunity for ALTs to learn about Japanese in the field of education. I hope that they will continue to feel free to choose the language they speak, whether it is English, Japanese, or both.

One of the participants contributed the

following thoughts regarding online teaching.

There was a lot of talk about “How can we create a better atmosphere in the classroom with the restrictions on school life that have been modified to prevent the spread of the new coronavirus”? I tried to come up with an answer by myself, but I couldn't find an answer, and I kept getting stuck. This is probably because there is no one perfect answer. We ask students to come to school to study what they can't do at home, but I question why they should bother to come to school if their behavior is not that different from what they do at home due to the constraints of the altered school life. As it turns out, “Why not just keep the Zoom and video lessons from April?” But then a quote from one of my teachers popped into my head.

“If all else fails, anything is worth a try.”

For now, let's try everything and do what we can, even in this tough situation! And next time, I'd love to share it with more people.

(See Newsletter No.4 in the appendix.)

As mentioned above, from January to May 2020, we were able to hold a total of four Edu café meetings: one face-to-face, one virtual document sharing, and two online. The meetings were conducted in a free-talk style, with no specific theme presented by the participants, and all participants discussing topics brought up by the participants on the day. Based on the interviews with the participants, we will try to provide topics that can focus on different areas of discussion at each meeting, leading to the enrichment of the participants and the meetings themselves.

3. Try-Error Lesson Study Meetings: 2020.6-7

Having participants observe each other's classes is one of the original plans to develop the monthly Edu café meeting, but it is difficult to visit schools during the pandemic. Given our lesson study experiences and accumulated lesson videos, we decided to show some lesson videos over Zoom for a change to elicit group discussions.

(1) The first lesson video

For the first lesson video, we chose Ms. K.'s fourth-grade foreign language class, which the first author observed at an open research lesson in Moriguchi City, Osaka Prefecture. Elementary school teachers in the city voluntarily set up a study group and regularly show each other's classes. The class was the first lesson of *Let's Try! 2- Unit 7 "What do you want?"*, and the students listened to a simple expression for ordering in a foreign market, "three apples please", in various unfamiliar foreign languages. They were asked to write it down as they hear it, to learn that there are multiple and diverse languages in the world. This is one of the activities designed as a language awakening activity. The language awakening activity is a teaching method that was developed in Europe from the *Language Awareness* movement originating in England. The activities involve comparing, observing, and analyzing various languages, and thus have educational significance in preparing, supporting, and complementing specific language learning in the future (Oyama, 2016). The reason why we chose this class was that it would be helpful as a practical example of language activities that would incorporate the perspective of plurilingualism into elementary school English.

This video was the core of the fifth meeting,

which was conducted on June 24th, 2020. Thirteen people gathered on Zoom. Not only teachers from elementary and junior high schools in Fukui Prefecture, but also teachers from Osaka, Kyoto, Nara, and Aichi prefectures participated in the meeting. We shared a video of Ms. K.'s 4th grade foreign language open research class and had a discussion in groups of four to share opinions and ideas. At the end of the session, Ms. K., the teacher of the class, explained her intentions of the lesson, and answered questions and issues raised by the participants. The following topics were mainly discussed.

(1) How and to what extent should phonics be taught at the elementary school level? (2) Language awakening and word awareness activities that incorporate multiple languages lead not only to foreign language acquisition but also to the development of language skills based on the mother tongue. (3) English has 42 sounds in 26 letters, while hiragana's 50 sounds correspond to each letter. It is necessary to use phonics in a way that is suitable for Japanese people so that they can memorize sounds with correct pronunciation by devising a story in which the action of each letter becomes the sound of pronunciation.

(See Newsletter No.5 in the appendix.)

With the introduction of English as a subject in elementary schools, teachers in the field are tackling their daily practice, puzzled as to what they should do. With no perfect answer, they are moving forward through trial and error. However, since homeroom teachers are in charge, they

cannot easily go and watch other classes at the school or at other schools. This meeting was held online, and the participants talked about the advantages of being able to watch lessons video.

It is changing now. We are pioneers! Everything is new for me! We are trying to figure it out together with companions and coworkers, which I mean ALTs, HRTs and JLTs. Actually, we have no chance to watch other teacher's lessons and talk about teaching English in elementary school because of busy daily lives. So, this Zoom meeting provides a great chance for us, and really helpful for us! The online network also gives an amazing chance to join even from far away like Takahama town. Also, this meeting gives me the courage to move on.

(See Newsletter No.5 in the appendix.)

(2) Second lesson video

Since there was a request at the end of the last meeting to watch a Team-Teaching (TT) class, we chose a class of first-year junior high school students taught by Ms. M. from Fukui Prefecture as the second video. This class seems to be full of hints to solve the problems that many English teachers face on a daily basis, such as “students do not memorize words,” “students are reluctant to talk,” “students have negative attitude to English learning,” and “Team-Teaching is not working”. Therefore, we chose this class in the hope that it could stimulate discussions on how to design English classes.

On July 29th, 2020, 17 people gathered for the sixth meeting on Zoom. We shared a video of Ms. M. and ALT Ms. N.'s seventh grade TT class, and

then had a discussion in groups of four to share our opinions. In the final plenary session, the teacher, Ms. M., exchanged opinions on the intention of the class and the issues that came up in the group discussions. The following topics were mainly discussed.

(1) How can we set up a spiral cycle that will help students retain what they have learned in depth (crossfire and use of supplementary materials as obi activities); (2) How can we develop autonomous learners who can work on their own (introduction of Dictionary Time); (3) How to develop a positive attitude toward learning and a trusting relationship between teachers and students; (4) The roles of ALTs and JTEs and how they can work together; (5) What are the key points for building a community where students can learn from each other?

(See Newsletter No. 6 in the appendix.)

Ms. M., a researcher who is enrolled in a doctoral program in English Education at a university abroad, participated in this meeting for the first time. She saw diverse opinions and perspectives from the group members with different backgrounds, and along with the feeling of being connected to the rest of Japan despite being overseas She paid attention to the formation of learning relationships among the children during the class.

What I found most fascinating was the help-seeking behavior of the students, which ultimately facilitated collaborative learning. It must have taken a lot of time,

effort, and practice to establish such an environment where students feel comfortable enough to ask each other questions. Additionally, such behaviors suggest that M sensei had successfully constructed student-student relationships and student-teacher relationships.

(See Newsletter No.6 in the appendix.)

Two first-year Education students from universities in other prefectures also participated for the first time. One of them, Ms. T., participated in the meeting “with a rather light motive: I don't want to be a foreign language teacher or an elementary school teacher at the moment, but I am interested in educational methods in general, and I didn't have any plans for the day”. She wrote the following about what she learned from the in-service teachers through this meeting.

This time, we watched a lesson video and discussed about it. It was a class that was so good that I wondered if there was anything that could be improved in such an amazing class. However, in the discussions with other teachers, I was able to gain a lot of suggestions and discoveries based on different perspectives, ideas, knowledge, and experiences. In addition, I was very much inspired by the enthusiasm of the in-service teachers and those who are deeply studying educational practices to “improve foreign language teaching” through the mutual exchange of opinions.

(See Newsletter No.6 in the appendix.)

Another student, Mr. M., participated in this meeting due to fewer opportunities for learning

during the pandemic. Through this meeting, he was reminded of the importance of interaction between university teachers and students. Students don't have many opportunities to talk with university professors except in class. In the current situation where students are not able to have face-to-face discussions with university professors and have fewer opportunities to learn, the online monthly Edu café meeting is a great option for students. In addition, he felt that he was able to have deeper discussions with the university professors because of the online format, which is different from face-to-face discussions.

During the group discussions, each group consisted of one university student, one in-service teacher, one researcher, and one ALT. The diverse group formation allowed for lively group discussions. To our delight, one of the teachers invited us to come and see her class at any time to discuss her own lessons in the future.

(3) Post-lesson study meetings

After conducting the two lesson study meetings, we found that the participants did not seem to grasp the fundamental aim of lesson study, which is to reflect on one's own teaching practice and to cultivate school culture and collegiality. Open research lessons are considered professional learning opportunities for teachers to learn from each other, and to carry out and reconstruct the practice in collaboration with colleagues. The majority of the comments simply pointed out what was not good about the lesson. We were wondering whether to continue less study meetings or to come up with a different plan.

We expect this meeting to be a meeting where all participants become engaged in organizing and designing. The first author had been making

proposals and arrangements on her own, but we asked one of the participants if she would like to chair the next meeting. She agreed. This led the monthly Edu café meeting into its next phase, which is to give participants creative opportunities.

4. Participants Starting to Chair the Meeting: 2020.8-12

The first meeting after this transition, when a participant became the topic provider, was held in August. One of the participants, Ms. O. of Ritsumeikan University, decided to present the topic “CLIL language landscape project from elementary school to university”. Linguistic landscape is a concept in sociolinguistics used to study how language is visualized in multilingual societies (Oyama, 2016). The language of official markers indicates which languages are or are becoming important. The linguistic landscape conveys region, history, and language policy. Collecting signs, pictograms, and postings in a town as data for visual recording can develop the learner into an observer, and provide an opportunity to learn from the observations and questions that emerge. Specifically, after walking around town and collecting photographic data, students return to school to co-construct meaning while categorizing the data. She proposed a language landscape project learning flow in which children become explorers. The question of “knowledge”, “attitude”, and “skills” that can be acquired by searching for and observing the language of the signs were raised. In addition, the importance of the plurilingualism approach to Education was acknowledged.

The seventh meeting was held via Zoom on August 26th, 2020 and attracted 33 participants. In addition to members from different backgrounds,

such as in-service elementary, junior high, and high school teachers, former principals, former and current ALTs, university students, and university teachers, several ALTs from Tokyo, Ibaraki, Niigata, Kanagawa, Aichi, and Nagano also participated for the first time. The planned content and case studies were introduced, and the participants discussed in small groups to share their opinions and ideas. The following topics were mainly discussed.

- 1) *What are Linguistic Landscapes? What do they convey? What kind of educational significance do they have?*
- 2) *What is the flow of project learning using linguistic landscapes?*
- 3) *What is the relationship between the development of multiple language and culture skills and the qualitative abilities (knowledge, skills, and attitudes) through the multiple language approach to Education?*

(See Newsletter No.7 in the appendix.)

This time, we shared the information about the event to a social networking group for ALTs in Japan, and we received inquiries from ALTs from many areas about participating. One of them wanted to attend because he thought it was a seminar for prospective ALTs to become ALTs in Japan in the future. We explained the purpose of this meeting to them. We also shared the information on the CLIL SNS group, and several in-service teachers and university teachers joined the meeting for the first time. As a result, the number of participants increased significantly from the previous meeting. Because of the increase in the number of ALTs with limited Japanese skills, the meeting was conducted

bilingually, in English and Japanese. In the group activities, the participants were given the freedom to choose their preferred language and were encouraged to make an effort to summarize in short in the other language. The following comments were received from elementary school teachers in the Kanto area who participated in the workshop for the first time, including diverse viewpoints that participants respected each other, the freedom of language, and ideas to return to their own classroom practices.

All the participants were enthusiastic, and despite the short time, the discussion was deep and expansive. This is the kind of discussion I always want to have! I think, despite the variety of viewpoints and ideas, the atmosphere of mutual respect among the participants was very comfortable and reassuring.

The meeting was held in both Japanese and English. Yes, the participants were allowed to choose the language in which they would speak. I appreciated the freedom and ease of being able to use either language.

I was very interested in the learning activities that used the theme "Language Landscape" as a material. Reviewing familiar signs and billboards from the perspective of "language," I found many insights in both foreign languages and Japanese. The pedagogical significance of "collecting data from visual records will turn learners into observers" has given me a great deal of support for my activities in the field.

At the school where I work, I would

definitely like to practice the familiar "search for linguistic landscapes" with children with the aim of becoming a "language detective. I learned a lot from today.

(See Newsletter No.7 in the appendix.)

In the past, participants have been able to get together spreading the word and inviting other teachers they know, but this time, several ALTs from outside the prefecture joined the meeting for the first time after reading the posts on SNS. One participating ALT preferred to be a "silent listener". The following message exchanges showed that this was an inadequate form of participation because they were afraid to express their own opinions.

It was OK but for CLIL specifically, I was not totally blown away by the facts and samples presented. CLIL is very broad and covers a lot of topics. But the rest was more or less OK.

(Wang: Would you like to write your critical comments for the newsletter? I am sure you have something to share.)

Ah no. I would rather be a just an audience member. I understand that the CLIL presented is targeted for the teachers in Japan specifically so, I can't really impose on that.

(Wang: But you could write about your own CLIL experiences and your thoughts on it.)

Unfortunately, I don't have the liberty of time to [do] that but I would rather be just a silent audience.

I asked her if she would like to write a short comment for the newsletter because she was unable to speak in the group, but she replied that she didn't have time to write and that she would just participate as a quiet listener. It may take some time to build a relationship of trust among the participants, but when there are many ALTs from all over Japan with different backgrounds participating in this meeting, there will be people who will come to this meeting with the attitude that they will only listen while someone else gives a presentation. In order for all participants to be involved in the planning and management of this meeting, we need to consider the seven principles and developmental stages of a community of practice (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002).

There were 21 participants who joined the 8th monthly Wednesday Cafe Meeting on September 30th via Zoom. They are in-service teachers/ALTs/former principals from all school levels, student-teachers, experts/advisors for district administration and university teachers, who are divided into small groups with diverse background members. Mr. D. an active member from Kyoto Notre Dame University, chaired the meeting by providing a topic “Reconsidering Team Teaching: Thinking about the Roles of JTE/HRT/ALT”. He pointed out that there are no topics related to TT in English Teacher Education courses in Japan, nor is the role of ALT clarified in the national curriculum. A lesson video was shared to stimulate discussions on meanings and challenges of TT in real classrooms.

There were 22 participants who joined the 9th monthly Wednesday Cafe Meeting on October 28th via Zoom. Mr. M., an active participant of Wednesday Edu café from the University of Fukui Fuzoku School, chaired the meeting by providing

the topic, “How to Make Fun and Realistic English Lessons”. He shared five tips from his 12-year teaching experiences as an ALT. An open research lesson video was shown to stimulate discussions on designing realistic English activities in classrooms.

There were 23 participants who joined the 10th monthly Wednesday Cafe Meeting on November 25th via zoom. Ms. H., an active participant of the Wednesday Edu café and also a former principal, chaired the meeting by providing the topic, “What You Need to Know About Teaching English in Elementary Schools”. She proposed activity-based lessons over study-mode to avoid students disliking English by giving specific examples of lesson designs. At the end, she gave advice on how to enhance teachers' professional development.

There were 18 participants joined the 11th monthly Wednesday Cafe Meeting for ALT, HRT & JTE on December 23rd via Zoom. To celebrate this special 1st-year anniversary of the Wednesday Edu Café, we had some fun by playing games and had a yearly review by chatting in four different groups each led by former chairs as facilitators.

5. Second Year: Harnessing Outside Interest: 2021.1~2021.6

The new year began with a successful turnout of participants. Twenty-seven individuals, many of whom were new participants to the monthly meetings, joined the meeting facilitated by Ms. K. from Satsuki Gakuen (Osaka). The main topic of the discussion centered around the question, “Why learn a foreign language?”. First, Ms. K. considered students' answers to this question which she shared with the group. The participants of the Monthly Ed Café were quite impressed by the impression made on the students. By knowing

the answer to this, teachers can adequately understand what is necessary to design lessons that match the interests and development of the students. For example, if a student says, “there is a world out there that we don’t know about”, knowing that it is necessary to bring the world into the classroom may be important to the students’ learning. Ms. K. then continued by sharing students’ comments on having learned a foreign language at elementary school. The discussion itself featured practical lesson activities from the 3rd grade to the 9th grade, highlighting the various elements of English learning across the years. While Ms. K. conducted her talk in Japanese, Mr. D. from Kyoto Notre Dame University assisted by translating the content in real-time. This was helpful to the bilingual as well as English speakers at the meeting (See Newsletter No.12 in the appendix).

In February, Mr. N., an ALT from Nagano prefecture hosted a talk titled 「The GIGA School Project and Foreign Language Education in Japan’s Schools」. The talk discussed the importance of technology among the digital generation and an introduction to the ways in which ICT can be used in elementary schools. Mr. N. is a co-admin of an active online ALT community, ALTTO.

Various case studies were introduced using various online tools, including Google Forms and Jamboard. Participants were able to try their hand at creating some resources using the tools and share them with the group, proving a practical benefit for teachers hoping to include ICT in their classrooms (See Newsletter No.13 in the appendix).

We continued to see a steady interest in participation in the monthly meetings, with 26

participants in March. This month, Ms. K. from the University of Fukui Fuzoku Compulsory School led a discussion on English expression by self-reflection, drawing upon her own teaching practice. Ms. K. is a junior high school JTE and research leader for the school she works at. She shared her school-based open research lesson and unit design journey of her 8th grade English and homeroom class. As a regular member of the monthly meetings, Mr. M., who was working at Fuzoku at the time of the research lesson, was also able to input his thoughts and perspectives from the point of view of the ALT. He recalls sending Ms. K. a message saying, “If you need help, I will be there to give you comments if necessary. I’m really looking forward to it.”

One of Ms. K.’s objectives was to receive much feedback and insights from fellow JTE colleagues, and the monthly meeting seemed to provide a safe, but also intellectual and critical environment in which to do so (See Newsletter No.14 in the appendix).

The April monthly meeting was chaired by Mr. K., an in-service junior high school JTE and graduate student from the University of Fukui. His discussion focused on the future of English Education and what we can learn from Finland, based on a book review about how English is taught in that country. He shared his curiosity about the proficiency of the English language among Fins despite the language divergence between Finnish and English. Through various questions, Mr. K. tried to get to the root of how Japanese students can better achieve fluency in English, considering teacher influence on students, professional and educational environment, opportunities for teamwork, textbook usage and finally the policies of the Ministry. These are very

timely considerations given that the textbook for grade 5 and 6 elementary school students had recently changed the year before along with new changes to the junior high school textbook from April 2020.

New participants were particularly drawn to the unique topic, many stating they were interested in learning about the Education system in Finland along with other countries (See Newsletter No.15 in the appendix).

In May, a total of 39 participants joined the monthly meeting which was chaired by Mr. N., a teacher supervisor and teacher from the Kanagawa Prefectural Board of Education. In his talk, titled, “AI Translation Incorporating Foreign Language Education and Japanese Education”, Mr. N. shared classroom practices using machine translation and proposed the question of why/how to learn a foreign language with the use of machine translation for group discussions. This talk was of particular interest to some teachers whose schools recently acquired various technology tools, including iPads, as part of the GIGA School Project, explained in the February meeting. Mr. N. proposed two questions, 1. How well can we use machine translations and is it comparable to that of human translation? and 2. Does machine translation reduce children’s motivation to learn foreign languages? These are particularly important questions to consider as we enter a new stage in the access of technology in the classroom, tools that many students are already familiar with in their daily lives (See Newsletter No.16 in the appendix).

Consistently from the start of the new year, each meeting had been chaired by a Japanese teacher. Breaking that trend, the June meeting was chaired by an ALT, Mr. W., working as an ALT at Obama

Daini Junior High School in Fukui. Mr. W. shared his breadth of experience with the participants of the monthly meeting, many of whom are curious to “exchange opinions between ALT and JTE”, “Learn about the best practices in language teaching and learning”, “sharing and supporting to make working as an ALT better” and “get a lot of different perspectives from both ALTs and JTEs”. Similar to most meetings, both ALTs and Japanese teachers participated, and so engagement and contribution with this topic was high. Mr. W.’s discussion focused on motivation, what brings people to continue learning a language and how team teaching can assist in motivating students to deepen their involvement in their own language acquisition (See Newsletter No.17 in the appendix).

6. Choosing Stimulating Topics: 2021.7-2021.11

The second half of the year began with a meeting chaired by Mr. F. from Chuo University, who provided a talk on the topic “Magic of Jishobiki in Foreign Language Education”. This was a practical-based workshop, introducing the usage of Jishobiki as a language learning strategy. Participants were then able to try out the method in small groups followed by a discussion. The uniqueness of this method was felt by the participants who joined this session. Japanese teachers and ALTs alike were able to experience how students themselves may perceive this activity in the classroom (See Newsletter No.18 in the appendix).

Mr. N., an ALT based in Niigata and founder of the online training platform ALTTO, led the August monthly meeting. The main purpose of the discussion was to bring to the forefront the uniqueness of language learning in Japan and to

consider critical issues related to the realities of teaching in the classroom for both JTEs and ALTs with a focus on team teaching. His hope is to see all teachers advocating empathy and compassion through language in the classroom in an effort to bring understanding across cultures and between individuals. The discussion questions were stimulating and allowed participating members to engage with one another in their breakout rooms. For example, the question, “When you consider co-workers from their cultural and experiential perspectives, in what ways do you understand them more?”, provided an opportunity for deep discussion (See Newsletter No.19 in the appendix).

The September monthly meeting was chaired by Mr. T., a professional facilitator who raised the question, “Why can’t I speak English?”. Through his own experience of relearning English after 35 years, his talk brought to the forefront individual concerns about speaking ability as it relates to English Education curriculum in Japan, learning methods and language learning approach theories.

Mr. T. shared his approach of passing the EIKEN Grade 1 written test in detail, and then talked about his struggles with the speaking portion of the test. The discussion proved successful, with participants making concrete suggestions regarding language learning goals, finding partners for practical speaking opportunities (output, over simply input) and using strategies that assist in confidence building. It will be interesting to follow up with Tominaga-sensei to see his progress and whether or not he will be able to effectively put into practice the suggestions from the group members and ultimately pass the speaking portion of the test (See Newsletter No.20 in the appendix).

To complement Mr. K.’s April discussion about English language learning in Finland, the October session focused on EFL Education in two different countries, this time Cambodia and Malaysia. MEXT teacher trainees, currently studying in Japan, shared their experience of teaching English in the public school system in their home countries. Trained as language teachers, Mr. K., Ms. S. and Ms. B. each discussed fundamental concerns regarding language teaching, covering topics such as vocabulary building, as well as raising motivation among students who feel disconnected from the needs of learning English.

Their insight as teachers who themselves are language learners was of particular interest to the participants of the monthly meeting who are eager to learn about the best practices in language learning, gain new knowledge and skills, while also hearing various perspectives and approaches related to EFL in general (See Newsletter No.21 in the appendix).

The November session was chaired by Ms. O. from Ritsumeikan University. This discussion was theoretically-based, focusing on plurilingualism as it shapes the individual. Participants created a visual linguistic autobiography, mapping out their language skills journey, which they shared with other group members.

Participants then shared stories of their past experiences, highlighting the diversity that exists among the members, with particular differences noted between the experiences among ALTs, some of whom have a wealth of language experience and others not as much. Participant M spoke about how her upbringing influenced her own perceptions of language against her friends and peers through her realization of otherness. She also shared one particularly memorable experience in

Japan which highlighted the value she places on the ability to communicate with individuals across language.

While all members have their own unique experiences that contributes to their identity, they can connect through the integral part that language makes in their lives as language teachers. By considering their own learning experience with language, participants can better understand their linguistic repertoires. By knowing this, participants can show empathy for their students and realize their influence on students' own language learning (See Newsletter No.21 in the appendix).

III. Knowing Participants' Needs

1. Participants

As an online community of practice, the monthly Edu café is open to all English teachers, which includes JTEs, ALTs, pre-service teachers and also university researchers. The participants consist of two types: 1. Those who are regular members and attend monthly meetings regularly, and 2. New participants. Of the regular participants there are a relatively few number of foreign language teachers, mostly ALTs, and a significantly greater number of Japanese participants, from various fields.

While the number of participating ALTs is relatively low compared to the number of interested Japanese teachers, at least a few ALTs attend each meeting. This allows the group to provide a much-needed voice to the needs of the ALTs. As long as ALTs are part of the English Education system in Japan, students and teachers of all kind will no doubt interact with ALTs over the course of their studies and careers. While it is

known that ALTs lack professional development in their careers, one of the activities of the monthly Edu café is to continue encouraging ALTs to engage and interact with their Japanese teaching peers through these meetings. Both ALTs and their Japanese teaching partners lack the time required to adequately foster meaningful relationships, discuss educational philosophies or teaching practices. By offering participants opportunities for casual interaction, one of the hopes is to create a better working environment for both the ALTs and Japanese teachers of English.

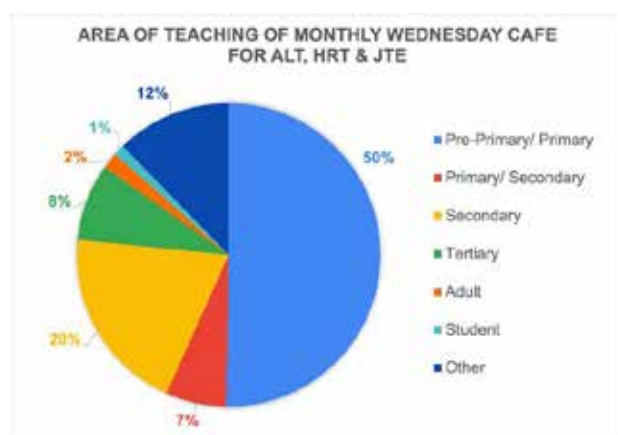
One of the advantages of the monthly Edu café is the opportunity for participants to lead a discussion or chair a meeting. This opportunity is open to all members, which can be a great opportunity for ALTs in particular. ALTs can share their observations with others and give meaning to their work by taking ownership of their teaching. Another great tool for ALTs as participants during the monthly meetings is the use of breakout rooms where ALTs can express their opinions and viewpoints in a safe and positive setting. Also, by making the meeting bilingual, ALTs can continue to expose themselves to Japanese language learning which can assist them in adapting to their work environment. It also allows ALTs from all kinds of language ability to participate, especially those who may not feel confident in their Japanese language skills or feel they cannot speak their mind. Besides, the meetings are casual and welcoming, but also practical, so even those ALTs who may not be trained in the theoretical aspects of Education can still participate. By continuing to engage with ALTs through the monthly Edu café, the conversation around English Education in Japan is deepening and strengthening.

2. Needs Analysis from Survey

Beginning in September 2020, we began asking new participants about their background to better understand the individuals themselves and the reasons why they feel strongly to join the monthly meetings. In addition to noting when they first joined the monthly meetings, participants were asked their contact information (e-mail), as well as the specifics of their teaching context, including the level of Education and how many years of experience they have teaching.

Through this survey, it became clear that many of the participants (50%), and the largest group, come from a pre-primary or primary teaching context. Pre-primary is defined by the OECD as, “the initial stage of organized instruction, designed primarily to introduce very young children to a school-type environment”. Primary Education is defined as, “Education [that] usually begins at ages five, six or seven and lasts for four to six years. Programmes at the primary level generally require no previous formal Education” (OECD, n.d.).

Figure 1: Area of Teaching of Monthly Wednesday Café for ALT, HRT & JTE

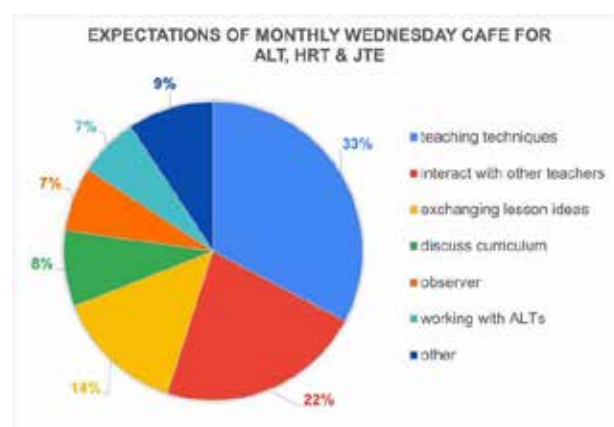


There was also a significant number of teachers who work in the secondary and tertiary

Education levels with less teaching specifically to adult individuals. Those individuals who are categorized as Other (12%) come from a variety of contexts, including teaching and non-teaching ones. Some individuals described their primary teaching environment as *eikaiwa*, English conversation schools, or private tutors. Other individuals stated that they were not teaching but were interested in contexts where English is used as a means of communication, for example translation and testing. It should also be noted that there are a number of participants who describe themselves as students, one of whom stated they want to know about teaching English, confirming that some students may be interested in a future career in teaching or using English.

Individuals were also asked to describe their expectations or suggestions for the meeting/community. The answers were compiled and categorized using a keyword system. At first, we expected to create five categories, but in the end seven categories were created; discuss curriculum, exchanging lesson ideas, interact with other teachers, observer, teaching techniques, working with ALTs, and other.

Figure 2: Participants' Expectations of Monthly Wednesday Café for ALT, HRT & JTE



While there was a lot of variety in the answers of the individuals, learning about teaching techniques (33%) was the most popular, followed by interacting with others (22%). Interacting with

other teachers and working with ALTs were separated due to the significant number of individuals who were interested in specifically learning how to improve their teaching rapport with ALTs. Individuals' whose reasons for attending the monthly meetings lay outside the six categories were grouped as Other (9%). Some of these individuals described interest in learning about or working in Japan, translation, interest in the speaker themselves, or otherwise no specific reason for joining.

3. Future Prospects

MEXT (2020) conducted a survey on the implementation of English Education in public elementary and junior high schools nationwide in fiscal 2019. The percentage of third-year high school students who obtained Level 2 or higher of the EIKEN was 58.4% (up 2.4 points from the previous year), the highest among prefectures for three consecutive years. The percentage of junior and senior high school English teachers in Fukui Prefecture who have passed Level 1 or higher of the EIKEN also ranked first in Japan. Fukui Prefecture has already introduced English Education for third graders and above in all elementary schools in the prefecture in April 2018. It can be said that these advanced efforts have led to a high level of English learning results in Fukui Prefecture under teachers with some of the highest levels of English proficiency nationally.

In 1986, Fukui Prefecture became the first prefecture in Japan to assign ALTs to all prefectural high schools, and the following year, one ALT was assigned to each private high school. In 2018, all 75 junior high schools in the prefecture would have one ALT, and Year 1 and 2 would have 1.5 hours per week, while Year 3 would have 1

hour per week of team teaching. In private high schools, each school has become an appointing body since FY2018, and one ALT has been assigned to each of the six schools. In the meantime, after completing the five-year contract of the JET Programme, the prefecture hires its own ALTs as experienced and talented personnel (Fukui Prefectural Office of Education, Compulsory Education Division, 2019). In Fukui Prefecture, at least one ALT is currently assigned to each junior and senior high school. In some large schools, two ALTs are assigned. As a result, the number of ALTs and the number of talented ALTs has increased.

Since 2016, Fukui Prefecture has been conducting a special selection process for Education experts in the public-school teacher recruitment examination. Those who do not have a teaching license will be awarded a special license at the time of employment after passing a special license examination conducted by the Fukui Prefectural Board of Education. In the "Special Selection of Education Experts", there are quotas for English Education (junior and senior high school English) for which native English speakers can apply. In this way, it can be said that Fukui Prefecture is putting a great deal of effort into English Education.

Finally, we would like to reflect the online monthly Edu café meetings and think about the issues it faces. The number of participants from other prefectures posting on SNS is increasing. However, there are only a few participants from Fukui Prefecture. It could be due to work reform or participation in the community they already belong to, but we need to think about how we can make this a meeting that teachers and ALTs in Fukui Prefecture will also want to attend in

supporting its accomplishments in English Education. It is also worth exploring the possibility of collaborating with existing influential communities. There is a hope that this community, which was established in Fukui Prefecture, will develop its activities with a community of teachers rooted in the local community. In Fukui Prefecture, there is a high level of interest and enthusiasm for English Education, but it is necessary to plan content that meets the needs of teachers and to devise effective promotional content and activities.

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Appendix

Bilingual Online Monthly Edu Café ALT to nihonjin kyoin ni yoru gaikokugokyoiku jissen o katariau kai [Bilingual Online Monthly Edu Café ALT and Japanese Teachers Discussing Foreign Language Education Practices]. Newsletter No. 1~23. Retrieved from https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/16yRHw0GtzUaJCmbmCKRuIC7j-Var_49J?usp=sharing

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