

Second language teacher education : supporting the professional development of Japanese teachers of English

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Second Language Teacher Education: Supporting the Professional Development of Japanese Teachers of English

Michael J. Torpey

Abstract

This paper describes the evolution over five years of an annual inservice workshop designed to develop teachers' confidence in their ability to teach English communicatively. The workshop has been conducted by Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS), under the auspices of the Chiba Prefectural Government, for Japanese teachers of English (JTEs) working in junior high schools and high schools. While this teacher-training workshop may be seen as illustrative of the broader picture whereby 'change' is being imposed by top down reform policies requiring teachers to teach English as a means of communication, the KUIS workshop – in accord with a social constructivist perspective – prioritises the teachers' own understandings as crucial to any growth or development, and acknowledge that any reform efforts must begin with the context and 'build upwards'. The focus of this paper is to reflect on the ways in which our efforts have facilitated the uptake of a more communicative language teaching approach. By drawing on multiple sources of qualitative and quantitative data from 1900+ participants over the years, I specify ways in which the workshop has developed before concluding with a number of recommendations to support the professional development of teachers in similarly situated EFL contexts.

"Teachers must recognise a need to change, as it cannot be successfully imposed by others." (James, 2001, p.9).

Introduction

In the past decade there has been a renewed interest in the need for Japanese to study foreign languages in order to thrive in an international age. Accompanying this awareness is an increased interest in the status of English as the global lingua franca and a focus on the quality of English language instruction in schools. Among the efforts initiated by the Ministry of Education (now called *Monbukagakusho*) to address the perceived lack of English proficiency among the general population have been: the proposed New Course of Study for junior high and senior high schools which shifts the focus of English courses to that of developing better communicative abilities in children (1998 & 1999); and the sweeping 5-year action plan in order to “Cultivate Japanese with English abilities” (2003).

Current and proposed reform measures include: implementing English language teaching in primary schools; making foreign language instruction mandatory in junior high schools and senior high schools; emphasising oral communication in junior and senior high schools; implementing experimental initiatives in ‘Super English Language High Schools’ (SELHi) whereby students are taught subjects in English; the ‘Teaching English through English’ policy; new teacher re-certification requirements; and the active promotion and support of training programmes for new and experienced teachers. With respect to the quality of teacher instruction, the action plan recommends that all JTES “undertake training in the five years from 2003 through 2007” to further develop both their English skills and language teaching skills with prefectural boards assuming responsibility for overseeing such training (MEXT, 2003; Honna & Takeshita, 2004).

Kanda University of International Studies has been providing one such teacher training opportunity – under the auspices of the Chiba Prefectural Board of Education – in the form of an annual intensive workshop on Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). An initial five-year plan was agreed upon in the spring of 2003 in which the workshops would be offered twice during the July-August summer holidays. It was envisaged that within this time frame the majority of JTE's in junior high and high school in Chiba Prefecture would have been given an opportunity to participate in the workshop. In the summer of 2003 we conducted the first workshop in two separate three-day sessions with almost 200 teachers. In subsequent years, the workshop was offered twice each summer and conducted over five consecutive days. By the end of the fifth year (2007) more than 1900 JTEs had participated.

Overview of the Workshop

The workshop was concerned with two interrelated aspects – language proficiency, and knowledge/understanding of communicative approaches to language teaching. The curriculum of the workshop was organised around six key themes related to CLT that were chosen with what we perceived to be the needs of our particular students in their given contexts.

The six themes comprise the following:

- *Theme 1: Teaching English through English* (which prioritised using English as a medium of instruction)
- *Theme 2: A Focus on Meaning and Information in Language* (which highlighted two important functions of language – conveying meaning and

exchanging information)

- *Theme 3: A Change in Classroom Organisation and Management* (which discusses the various possible roles of both teachers and students, and appropriate student groupings in the classroom)
- *Theme 4: Text-based and Task-based Activities* (which explored the distinction between these two types of activities and the need to balance them in a CLT approach)
- *Theme 5: A High Density of Interpersonal Interaction* (which promoted the idea that language/communication is a social phenomenon and interactive in nature)
- *Theme 6: Assessment in the Communicative Classroom* (which addressed one of the main challenges facing teachers when using the CLT approach).

Each theme follows a three-part cycle of input, discussion and reflection on the input, and output in the form of a task or report.

The workshop was designed to enable participants to progress through the curriculum as learners in a communicative instructional system. As such, the JTEs are required to take on the role of being active learners of English, to use English communicatively, to be involved in various classroom groupings, and to learn from a myriad of delivery modes such as teacher lecture, video, audio, and written text (*details about the workshop – participants, teacher-trainers, schedule, logistics, goals, thematic curriculum and instructional system – are available in Torpey, 2005 and Torpey, 2007*).

Research

Focus

In accord with a social constructivist perspective that prioritises the teachers' own understandings and reflections as crucial to any growth/development, we particularly wanted to explore the participants' reflections of the workshop. This focus is in line with the supposition that teachers need "to have successful encounters with alternative instructional practices and alternative images of teachers" in order to change their beliefs (Johnson 1994, in Murphey & Sato, 2006, p.12).

Being mindful of the challenges and internal struggles that teachers may experience when confronted with practices not consistent with the mainstream, we also wished to explore the extent to which the teachers felt they had the agency to 'remake' themselves given the institutional, historical and cultural contexts in which they were situated (Richards & Singh, 2006). We were aware that studies of government initiatives in teacher training and professional development introduced from the mid-1980s onwards have failed to show significant change in Japanese teaching practice (Shimahara, 2002); primarily because of their failure to build on local conditions and traditions (Smith & Imura, 2004).

As a result, our particular focus has been on investigating the extent to which this workshop encourages change in teacher practices with its approach of "beginning with the context and building upwards" (ibid, p.46.). Other aspects we explore include the extent to which participants felt the workshop experience was sensitive to, and respectful of, their own local teaching contexts; and whether they

were able to extend their personal perspectives and classroom practices as related to CLT.

Sources of Data

We have drawn on multiple sources of qualitative and quantitative data over the five years. While there have been refinements and additions to the means used, the major instruments that have been utilised are: *daily journals* in which participants recorded their reflections on the themes and the microteaching component; *focus group discussions* in which participants' shared their perceptions of the workshop and discussed their own teaching situations with their peers; *video recordings of microteaching lessons* and accompanying lesson plans and handouts; *pre and post questionnaires* aimed at measuring changes in levels of confidence in English proficiency and/or CLT related methodology; and end of workshop *surveys* consisting of approximately forty closed items and three open-ended questions. In the following section some findings derived from data obtained from these sources will be presented.

Findings and Implications

Participants

The first two tables depict some basic demographic features of the participants for the years 2004-2007. Figure 1 shows the participants' affiliation (junior high school, high school or 'other') and gives a breakdown of their gender.

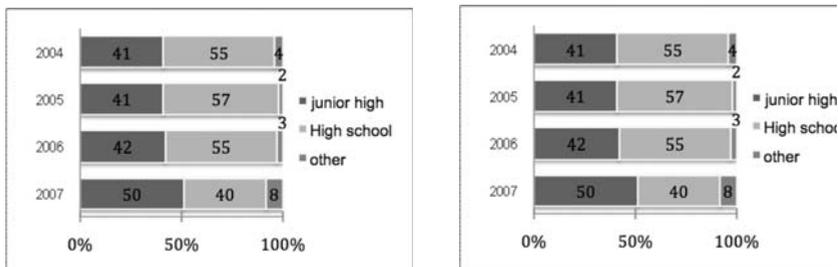


Fig. 1: (a) Affiliation & (b) Gender of Participants

As the above shows, there has been a fairly even balance of male and female teachers and the number of high school teachers slightly outnumber those from junior high school. A minority of participants (2-8%) were from ‘other’ schools, for example: vocational schools or schools for the physically/mentally challenged. As the next figure illustrates the majority of these participants were very experienced teachers.

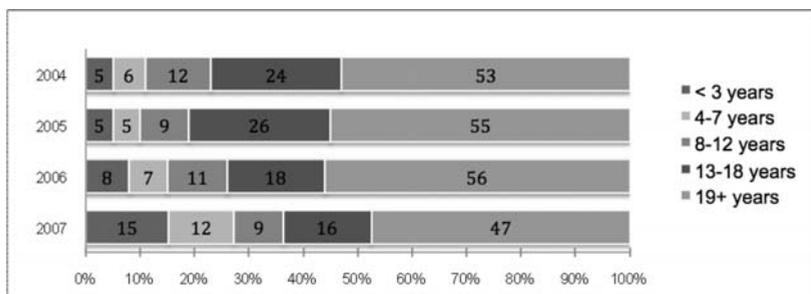


Fig. 2: Teaching Experience of Participants

As shown above, the majority of students have had extensive teaching experience. For example: in 2004 - 77% of the students had 13 years or more of teaching experience, with 53% of them having taught for more than 19 years; in 2005 - 81% of the participants had 13 years or more of teaching experience, with 55% of them having taught for more than 19 years; in 2006 - 74% of the participants had 13 years or more of teaching experience, with 56% of them having taught for more than 19 years. In 2007, while there is an increase in younger teachers with 15% having taught for 3 years or less, a significant number (63%) still had 13 years or more of teaching experience.

This experience amounts to a considerable wealth of knowledge – beliefs, values, and assumptions about the profession – that participants bring with them to the course. Thus, there is a need to acknowledge, validate, and draw on this experience throughout the workshop. This necessitates providing numerous and varied opportunities for participants to explore new phenomenon/situations together so that they may re-consider their views on language teaching and learning. Again, it is teachers themselves who must recognise the need to change “as it cannot be successfully imposed by others” (James, 2001, p. 9).

Themes

As mentioned earlier, the KUIS workshop incorporates six themes that reflect key tenets of CLT adapted to better suit the Japanese educational context. In general, all of the themes received favorable ratings by the workshop participants from 2003-2007. However, Theme 4 – on Text-based and Task-based Activities – received the highest rating every summer. Figure 3 shows the data regarding this theme.

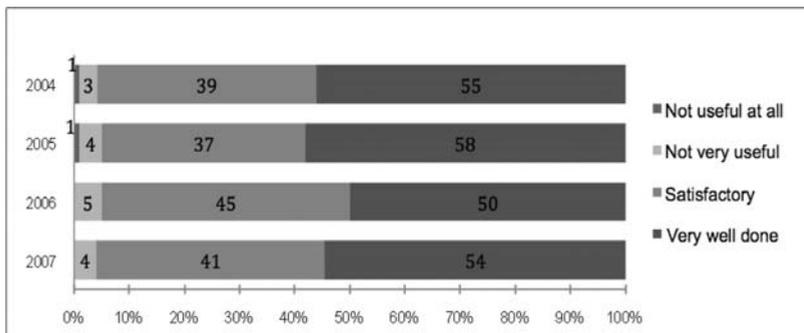


Figure 3: Participants' Perception of Theme 4

Theme 4 encourages JTEs to think clearly about the main objectives of common language learning activities and to use the activities appropriately in their classrooms. Prior to the start of Theme 4, the JTEs are asked to write down what types of activities they tend to use with their students and why. Then, the theme instructors introduce the terms Text-based Activity and Task-based Activity, which are defined in a very particular way for the purposes of this workshop (see Appendix A).

As can be seen from Appendix A, Text-based activities help students *understand* how English is constructed and Task-based activities help students learn to use English. After the JTEs study the table (as per Appendix A, which is included in the workshop manual), the instructors point out the importance of balancing both types of activities in a modern CLT classroom. This explanation has been surprising to a number of JTEs who believed that CLT meant an exclusive focus on communication at the expense of form, and thereby incompatible with the grammar-filled, entrance exam-focused nature of English learning in Japan.

Smith & Imura (2004, p.42) attribute many of the misunderstandings of CLT to “assertions that it concerns only oral and aural skills.” Sakui similarly notes (2004, p.159) that the JTEs that she interviewed in her study believed little attention is paid to linguistic forms in CLT.

After the initial explanations, JTEs work through materials (instructions and activities), taken from Ministry-approved Japanese English textbooks, classifying them as *Text-based* or *Task-based* and then discuss their reasons with a partner. To consolidate JTEs’ understanding of the two types of activities, the instructors then present three tables: one table lists examples of Text-based activities, one lists examples of *Task-based* activities, and the third table lists activities that combines both *Text-based* AND *Task-based* elements. The purpose for presenting the three tables in this way is to show that any number of activities can be created and adapted by language teachers to serve a specific learning objective for any level of students.

The last component of Theme 4 requires the JTEs to work in a group of 3-4 colleagues to devise one 15-20 minute lesson plan. For this task, the groups take a look at a unit taken from a junior high/high school textbook, extract the main point they wish to teach, and then write down the procedures for an appropriate language activity. One rule is that the JTES must use either a *Task-based* or combination activity. It is thought that by not allowing the JTEs to rely on a purely *Text-based* activity, which they tend to use in their own classrooms, they would have to extend their teaching repertoire. After the preparation time ends, the groups are reconstituted so that each member of a group explains their activity to the

members of other groups. In this way, ideas are shared among peers, and individual knowledge is reconstructed.

As previously mentioned, the JTEs have consistently given this theme the highest rating of the six themes in the KUIS workshop. The following are some comments gleaned from daily journal entries:

In my lessons I create a nervous atmosphere for students. Students can't study as freely as I studied today. Today we can say anything, even if it is wrong.

I do text-based activities in my class. I always have 'correct' answers and when my students make mistakes in answering I always discourage them. They are afraid of me and they are very nervous in studying English with me. Today I discovered another way -that is task-based activities. From now on I'll use this type as I would like them to have confidence in studying English.

I haven't done so many task-based activities for the reason that they may be difficult for my students, but I know it is wrong. Unless we use such creative work we won't make their learning improve. That was a great discovery.

Usually I don't use task-based activities a lot, most of my students are not interested in studying English, so it's difficult to control 40 unmotivated students using task-based activities ... but it would be nice for students to show their feelings using their own words. Communication may be much more important than accuracy for my students.

From the comments it appears that Theme 4 did succeed in encouraging the workshop participants to re-consider their own teaching style and open up to different possibilities. In fact, a number of the JTEs wrote that they gained practical examples of activities to build on their current practices, and would try new things once they returned to their own classroom contexts. Some JTEs,

however, felt their professionalism to be somewhat degraded by this mandatory workshop, as in the following comment:

The teacher says both activities are useful and the balance is important, which I think is true. But Chiba Board of Education seems to press task-based skills on us. Such compulsory pressure makes me hate them.

The above serves to remind us that the JTEs, with their diverse background and experience, have their own ideas of what it means to be at the KUIS workshop. Unfortunately, the top-down directives of the local educational authorities resulted in some JTEs coming to the workshop with a resentful attitude, the residue of which lingered even as the workshop strove to both validate and augment the teaching practices of the JTEs.

Microteaching

Besides Theme 4, another component of the KUIS workshop was evaluated very highly by the participants. This component, the Microteaching, is the final project whereby all JTEs work in groups of 3-4 to design a lesson plan based on an English textbook unit of their own choosing, and demonstrate 30 minutes of it in front of their classmates; the classmates would both observe the teaching demonstration and act as either junior high or high school “students”. The Microteaching component is seen as the quintessential mechanism for: 1) allowing participants to demonstrate their understanding of some basic tenets of CLT as presented in the workshop, and 2) encouraging peers to show each other various ways to incorporate activities into the classroom. Figure 4 shows what the participants thought about the Microteaching:

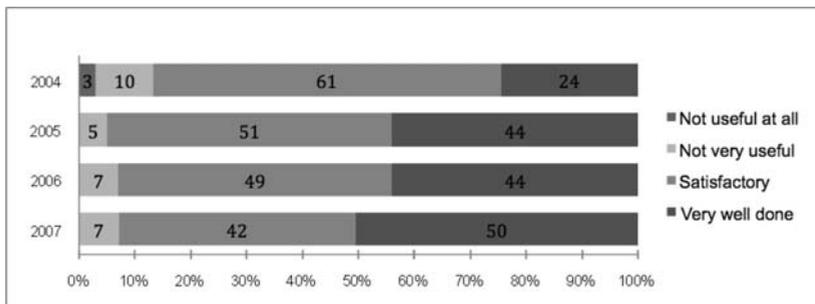


Figure 4: Perceptions of Microteaching

Even though the participants reported that the Microteaching was the most nerve-wracking aspect of the workshop, the majority of the JTEs nonetheless viewed the Microteaching as “satisfactory” or “very well done”. The following comments provide some insight:

I was relieved to finish this microteaching. It was very impressive ... I rarely thought of how the class will be student-centred or how it will be task-based. It was good to learn these techniques. It gives me some hints to make my usual class more communicative and interactive.

I could understand how to do CLT very well and I could realize the importance and necessity of teaching English through English by this microteaching session. I've got interest in CLT and various kinds of communicative activities, so I'd like to try them to my students.

It was a very good experience for me to prepare for the microteaching with the teachers from other high schools. We need to cooperate together to make a lesson. This process was very useful.

I talked much in my group for preparation for microteaching. I knew the interesting way I'd not known before. Other teachers have their original way of teaching. So I could share them.

It was a good chance for me to attend the class as a student. I can understand how the students feel. I can have many good teaching plans and idea. I will try some of the good activities in my school.

I enjoyed being a student today. I can get many good ideas that attract students. At school teachers are very busy and have little time to prepare for the lessons. But I know I always must try to make an interesting lesson.

From these comments, JTE's appreciated the cooperative learning format of the project and having the chance to get to know their group members. They also enjoyed experiencing the class from a student's perspective. In addition, the JTEs enjoyed watching their colleagues' demonstrations and gained new perspectives and skills. This peer-to-peer teaching has much greater impact on the professionalism of the JTEs – and empowers them more – than having the instructors present the workshop content/materials.

Goals

One of the goals of the workshop was to improve JTEs' knowledge and understanding of CLT and their language proficiency. The figure below shows the participants' perceptions of themselves.

This data suggests that the workshop has been effective in increasing knowledge/understanding of CLT; each year the majority of participants (92% - 97%) reported improvement. Concerning language proficiency, participants were asked

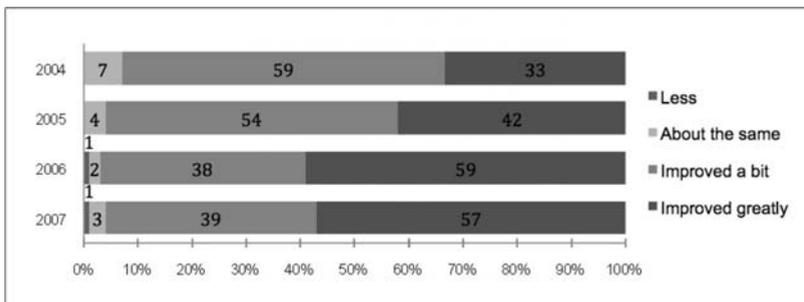


Figure 5: Change in Knowledge/Understanding of CLT

to reflect on any perceived changes in: 1) their skill in using English to communicate; and 2) their confidence in their ability to teach English communicatively. As Figure 6 illustrates, the majority of JTEs (61-70%) reported that their skill in using English to communicate ‘improved a bit’, with a smaller percentage (5-12%) reporting more significant advances.

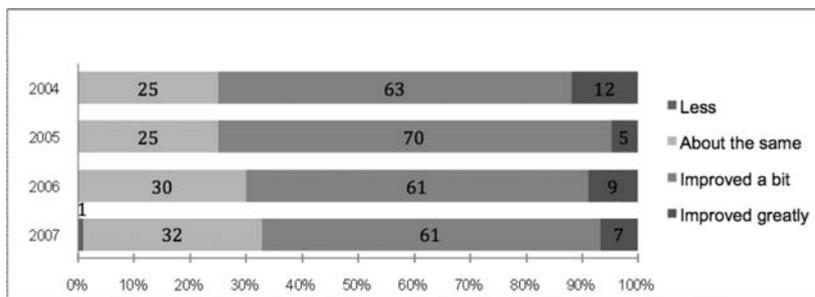


Figure 6: Change in Skill in Using English to Communicate

While it is unrealistic to expect participants to make significant gains in language proficiency in only 5 days the majority did feel they had improved (up to a third reported no discernible change). The next figure depicts similar results when participants were asked to consider their confidence in their ability to teach English communicatively.

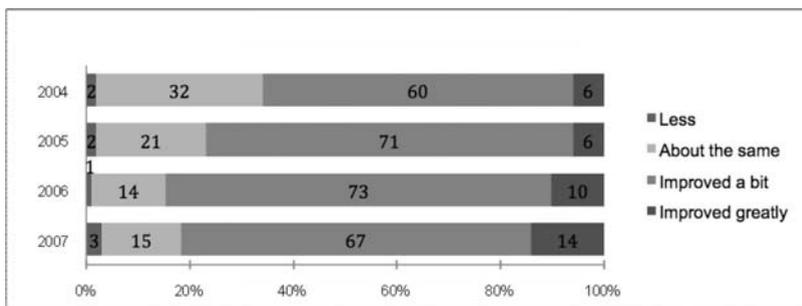


Figure 7: Change in Confidence in Ability to Teach English Communicatively

Although a JTE’s confidence in his/her ‘ability to teach English communicatively’ results from a complex mix of factors – for example language proficiency and teaching methodology – it is encouraging to note that through the years an increasing number of participants (66-83%) felt they had become either a ‘little’ or ‘greatly’ more confident.

In order to qualify this self-report data, particularly in terms of looking at and defining the particular areas where participants believe they had ‘improved’ or increased confidence, a *pre and post questionnaire* was administered in 2005 and

2006. In these questionnaires participants reported increases in their levels of confidence in various domains, with the following the most significant: giving a report in English to their colleagues, participating in group discussions in English with their colleagues, using English to encourage students, appropriately arranging classroom layout to suit a variety of activities, developing communicative activities focusing on exchanging information, modifying materials to make them more interactive, and using a variety of communicative activities in class.

Besides the stated goals of the KUIS workshop, an unwritten one was to provide the conditions to encourage JTEs to reflect on their own teaching practices. Figure 8 shows the results of a survey question asking participants whether they would make any subsequent changes in their classroom approach.

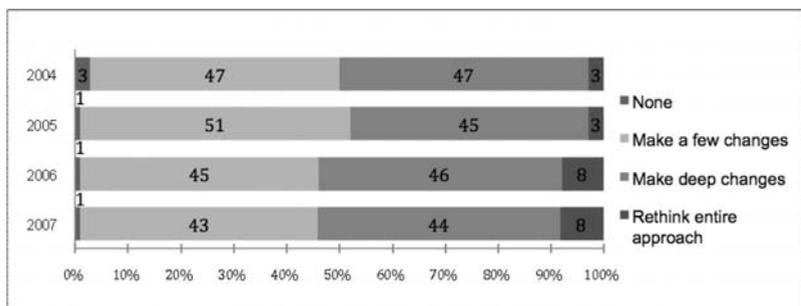


Figure 8: Impact of the Workshop on Teaching

Most of the participants said that they would make changes based on what they learned in the workshop, with a minority stating they would rethink 'their entire approach'. This implies the workshop has had some influence on teacher beliefs.

In order to get a sense of the extent to which the workshop influenced actual teaching practices, a small number of participants (30) were emailed an anonymous online survey in December of 2006 and 2007, four months after completing the workshop. This survey contained multiple choice and open-ended items. A few teachers were somewhat apologetic in reporting that little had changed. For example one JTE said:

I regret to say that I continue to teach English in the same way in spite of the workshop.

Others hinted at small changes:

Unfortunately I didn't change my teaching style much, but if I do some CLT activities, they [students] seem to be more motivated.

Some JTEs spoke of very practical changes, such as using new seating arrangements, while others commented on getting their students to use English much more:

I teach in English as much as I can, and have students use as much English as they can.

I try to make my students express their own idea in English and for that I try to let them speak and write much more.

I have since tried thinking new ways of letting my students enjoy English, at least use more English during the class.

To further stimulate change and experimentation, the workshop needs to be re-structured in future years to include some type of 'action research' project whereby participants are highly encouraged to trial something from the workshop

in their own classrooms and then report back to their peers at a later date.

5. Recommendations

The workshop has evolved in numerous ways over the past five years, with changes informed largely by the extensive participant feedback. In addition the team of workshop instructors have refined the thematic content and its delivery based on their own experiences teaching the workshop. As well, members of the Chiba Board of Education have contributed ideas to the ongoing development of the programme.

The table below presents some of our general recommendations for teacher training workshops, along with practical examples of what we have implemented/modified in our programme.

TABLE 1 Recommendations and Examples

<u>Recommendation</u>	<u>Example</u>
• <i>increase the amount of class time, hands on time for small groups</i>	• <i>less time spent on opening addresses and keynote speeches</i>
• <i>use assessment tasks congruent with workshop goals</i>	• <i>the board stopped using TOEFL as a post workshop measure of proficiency</i>
• <i>prepare and send the workshop manual to participants beforehand</i>	• <i>detailed manual sent 4-6 weeks before commencement of the workshop</i>
• <i>put value on giving participants time to get to know each other</i>	• <i>extensive orientation sessions with time for JTEs to meet their peers and discuss their respective teaching backgrounds</i>
• <i>place more emphasis on practice, and less on theory</i>	• <i>Theme 1 shifted from too much rationale for 'teaching English thru English' to practical examples of classroom language for teachers and students</i>
• <i>reduce and refine content; simplify language, give practical examples</i>	• <i>Theme 6 was significantly re-worked to present clear examples of simple communicative assessment tasks in easy to understand language</i>
• <i>include a microteaching component and provide clear directions and support</i>	• <i>a model lesson and online lesson plan template were added to the workshop manual, within- class time for preparation built in</i>
• <i>build on participants' knowledge, beliefs, and experience</i>	• <i>text-based activities, which many JTEs use in their classrooms, were acknowledged as a valuable springboard to other activities</i>
• <i>provide opportunities for participants to explore and discuss their teaching & workshop experiences with each other</i>	• <i>periodic guided reflections were introduced whereby students in small groups discussed the thematic unit/activities they had just completed</i>
• <i>address the challenges the participants face as JTEs</i>	• <i>the discord between preparing students for the entrance examination system and adopting a CLT approach was discussed</i>
• <i>link the content and activities of the workshop to wider policy changes</i>	• <i>Theme 6 explores assessment in the communicative classroom and refers to the recent changes in public entrance examinations which include of a listening component</i>
• <i>implement an 'action research' component whereby JTEs are encouraged to trial something from the workshop in their own classes</i>	• <i>we plan to change the timeline of the workshop from 5 consecutive days in summer to 4 consecutive days only, with a fifth day scheduled for later in the year so that JTE's can report back to their peers on their action research experience</i>
• <i>consider follow up measures and further training, and look at the provision of support networks in the wider school community</i>	• <i>Kanda University has created additional voluntary seminars on CLT and is looking into the establishment of an online support network for JTEs in Chiba</i>

The above represent aspects of the ongoing development, implementation and refinement of our workshop. The extent to which these elements are of concern to others engaged in supporting the professional development of language teachers in other EFL contexts will depend on the specific needs of the teachers operating within their particular contexts.

Conclusion

At the outset of this workshop, we were mindful of the challenges inherent in supporting the professional development of JTEs who were required by the national government to undertake inservice training. As one participant bluntly put it:

Making this compulsory killed my enthusiasm. Why did you have to demoralize teachers? I think the planners of this training program should think seriously about what the fundamentals of education are.

Being aware that participants may perceive the workshop as an imposition, compelled us to try to provide meaningful opportunities for JTEs to reflect on their teaching beliefs and practices, so that they may come realise for themselves the potential benefits of change. To this end we strove to first acknowledge and validate the wealth of teaching experience JTEs brought to the workshop. Second we sought to build upon and augment their knowledge and understanding of communicative approaches to language teaching by having them experience/try out a variety of both well-known and lesser-known approaches and activities. Third we encouraged them to reflect with their peers on the appropriateness of such approaches/activities within their own classrooms. As discussed earlier in this paper, and as the following comments imply, despite the mandatory nature of the

programme we have had some positive outcomes:

Before it started, I had only negative feelings towards it. After it was over, however, it was a wonderful five days if I describe it in a nutshell.

I hated it in the beginning, but now I think it was worthwhile. I have to admit that the Board of Education spent the money wisely this time for a change.

At the same time, as one JTE portends, the benefits of this workshop “*if it’s a one-off*” will result in “*water down the drain.*” That is, unless other supporting measures are put in place the potential for this workshop experience to contribute to the professional development of JTEs and to influence their practice will not be realized. Among the recommendations made earlier, two are paramount. First, an action research project ought to be an integral component of professional development programmes. After all, ‘risk taking’ or ‘reality testing’ whereby teachers “try out new things in a classroom is the mechanism that seems to change teachers more than anything else” (Murphey & Sato, 2006, p. 15). Second, follow up measures, such as further training opportunities and support networks particularly at the local and prefectural level, should be developed to accommodate both self-initiated and institutional professional development needs and interests.

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Appendix A: Theme 4 - Distinction Between Text-Based Activities and Task-Based Activities

TEXT-BASED ACTIVITIES	TASK-BASED ACTIVITIES
Focus on form (pronunciation, spelling specific grammar patterns, vocabulary, etc.) = how to construct the language	Focus on meaning (what is being communicated and whether it makes sense to the listener/s) = how to use the language
Aim is to build accuracy	Aim is to build fluency and self-expression
There is/are a correct answer(s); answer(s) can be checked and judged to be correct or not; everyone aims to get the same answer(s)	A variety of responses are possible/valid; mistakes in production are ok; making mistakes is considered a natural part of the process of experimenting with how to use the language
Example of a <u>text</u> -based question: When was the Beijing Olympics? (Answer = in 2004)	Example of a <u>task</u> -based question: What is the most interesting sport in the Olympics? (Answers will vary depending on the person)