

# Authentic Teaching Opportunities of English for Primary Students as a Community of Practice: *A Case of Pre-service Teacher Education at a Japanese University*

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## Abstract

This case study explored what pre-service teachers learned through authentic experiences of English teaching for primary students, drawing upon the concept of a Community of Practice. A total of 21 pre-service teachers engaged in the training project—including planning, preparing, and teaching lessons—and wrote reflection papers after thinking about their activities. The focal data was the pre-service teachers' written work, which was analyzed with a qualitative approach. Follow-up interviews were conducted for selected pre-service teachers. The findings indicated that the project contributed to allowing the pre-service teachers to develop knowledge and skills for primary English education. The study also confirmed that the training project promoted solidarity, especially between the old-timers and the newcomers. On the other hand, the typical Japanese school culture seemed to function as an obstacle to allowing the old-timers and the newcomers to become acquainted enough.

**Keywords:** pre-service teacher training, English language teaching, primary education, community of practice

## 1. Introduction

In Japan, English education at public primary schools is comparatively new. English education at primary schools officially commenced in 2002 as a part of international understanding. Since 2011, English language activity classes have been a compulsory domain for fifth and sixth graders. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Science and Technology (MEXT) released “English Education Reform Plan Corresponding to Globalization” in 2014 and has started to expand English education in public primary schools as one of the strategies in language-in-education policy. More specifically, the ministry has decided to provide English language activity classes for third and fourth graders and English language subject classes for fifth and six graders. This policy initiative will be completely implemented from 2020 with the revision of the Course of Study, which is a national curriculum in Japan.

However, supply of primary school teachers who are qualified to teach English has been a critical issue. Although the English activity classes are basically conducted by homeroom teachers at public primary schools, a number of them are not adequately qualified to teach English. In fact, only 4.9 percent of primary school teachers possess a teacher's certificate of English, and only 2.7 percent of them have achieved Grade Pre-1 in the EIKEN Test in Practical English Proficiency (TOFEL iBT80 or TOEIC730 equivalent) (MEXT, 2014a). Similarly, a number of primary school teachers, especially those who are middle-aged, did not learn English teaching methods or receive practical training for it in their pre-service teacher education. This is because teaching English at primary schools has only been compulsory for the past few years in the curriculum of pre-service teacher education to obtain teaching licenses for primary generalist teachers.

Furthermore, it is significant to consider how to nurture qualified primary teachers who hold adequate knowledge and skills for teaching English as a subject. Yoshida (2015) stated that it is essential to supply specialists who can teach English as a subject systematically. Teachers who teach English at primary schools, certainly, have to teach pronunciation, vocabulary, listening and speaking. In addition, for the subject reading and writing easy English

words and sentences will be incorporated in the revised primary curriculum. MEXT (2014b), in fact, proclaims that high-level English proficiency and teaching knowledge and skills should be acquired by pre-service primary school teachers for the reinforcement of English education in primary schools. Relatedly, many municipal boards of education have begun to offer written examinations or practical skill tests in the teacher employment process in order to employ homeroom teachers who can effectively conduct primary English education (MEXT, 2016). Thus, education departments of universities play a critical role in developing the workforce for English education at primary schools.

In order for pre-service teachers to enhance knowledge and skills for English teaching at the primary level, the author has developed a training project for teaching English to primary students in a Japanese university setting. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore how pre-service teachers perceive the teacher training opportunity and what they learn through the authentic teaching experience. As the conceptual framework, the author incorporates the theory of a Community of Practice (CoP), which is applicable to design pre-service teacher training programs.

## 2. Community of Practice and Pre-service Teacher Education

It has been recently recognized that teachers need to collaborate with peers in school, and teacher collaboration is closely associated with teachers' professional development (Ostovar-Nameghi & Sheikahmadi, 2016). Ostovar-Nameghi and Sheikahmadi (2016), additionally, stated that teacher collaboration not only improves their professional knowledge and experience but also enhances learners' learning and accomplishment. Relatedly, teacher collaboration would be improved through "peer coaching" (Dalton & Moyer, 1991). Ostovar-Nameghi and Sheikahmadi (2016) asserted that peer coaching enables teachers to share their knowledge, to give feedback to each other, and to support each other. In this way, it is considered that teacher collaboration skills could be improved by actual peer coaching opportunities in pre-service teaching education programs.

In order to foster development of collaborative skills through peer coaching, the current study focuses on the concept of a Community of Practice (CoP). The concept of a CoP was originally coined by Lave and Wenger (1991). With a sociocultural perspective, Lave and Wenger recognized learning not as personal cognitive processing but as participation in a CoP, which enables individuals to develop themselves while sharing a specific interest, aim and attention. Based upon their original concept, Wenger later simplified the definition of a CoP as "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (Wenger, 2006, p. 1).

A CoP consists of three critical components: "domain," "community" and "practice" (Wenger, McDermott, Snyder, & Wenger, 2002). In short, a domain means a shared domain of interests, a community refers to a place where people are tied by common interests and passion, and a practice is defined as an activity that is produced by interpersonal relationships of members in the community.

It is also important to note that a model of learning in a CoP can be acknowledged as "situated learning" (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In other words, learners obtain knowledge through authentic experience implicitly, but they are not taught knowledge explicitly. In the notion of "situated learning," knowledge is not a thing or set of explanations or assortment of realities and rules (Clancey, 1995). Stein (1998) correspondingly asserted that "situated learning" is a matter of constructing meaning from real activities. The first step of participation in the context of "situated learning" is recognized as Legitimate Peripheral Participation (LPP), and according to the degree of "situated learning," the members' involvement moves from LPP to full participation in a CoP (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

A number of studies clarify efficacy of a CoP to develop pre-service teachers' awareness, relevant knowledge and skills in the target domain for their future teaching career. For instance, Daniel et al. (2013) asserted that a CoP enables pre-service teachers to be aware of becoming professional. Chigona (2013) stated that it is useful for pre-service teachers to improve their teaching knowledge and skills in their expertise by participating in a CoP. Moreover, Cook and Buck (2014) identified that a CoP can contribute to maintaining the students' identities as future primary teachers. Focusing on English language teaching, Jimenez-Silva and Olson's (2012) study dealt with prospective English teachers in a CoP. In their study, pre-service teachers who had diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds worked with learners of English as a second language in a teacher-learner community in the US context, and the pre-service teachers developed their sense of teachers and English learners. Yildirm and Seker (2013), similarly, revealed that a CoP approach involving pre-service teachers of English language allowed them to nurture cooperative, problem-solving and reflective skills in addition to indispensable English language knowledge and skills. On the other hand, some of the participants in Yildirm and Seker's study had a negative attitude towards

collaborative work in the CoP approach when the members were not acquainted enough. The findings of the above studies ensure that the theory of a CoP is applicable to building a pre-service teacher training project for teaching English for primary students.

### **3. A Teacher Training Project for Teaching English for Children**

#### *3.1 Seminar Classes in Japanese Universities*

Most Japanese universities, regardless of faculty, offer seminar classes consisting of a small number of students who are interested in the professor's field of specialty. In the seminar classes, students actively engage in exploring their academic interests by discussion, research, and presentation. That is, a seminar class is considered a learner-centered learning opportunity that enables students to interact with each other and develop themselves academically. Therefore, teaching staff of seminar classes at a Japanese university play an important role in facilitating students' active engagement in their studies.

The author has belonged to a department of education at a private women's university, located in the western part of Japan. At the institution, he has taken charge of the seminar classes for third and fourth year pre-service teachers, specializing in teaching English to primary students. The author offers one seminar class for each grade on the weekly timetable in the department curriculum but the pre-service teachers can work together beyond the timeframe in the curriculum, utilizing their spare time.

In the 2016 academic year, 11 third year and 10 fourth year pre-service teachers participated in his seminar, and the majority of them intended to become primary school homeroom teachers after graduation. Enrolling in two-year seminar classes is compulsory for graduation but the selection of the classes in the education department is according to students' own choices. It is thus obvious that the students who choose the author's seminar classes have an interest in English education for children, which can be considered as a CoP. Concretely, the domain is primary English education, the community includes pre-service teachers in the seminar classes, and the practice is all relevant activities to teaching English to primary students.

#### *3.2 The Project*

In order to adopt "situated learning" in the seminar classes, the author established an English teaching training project in 2015, cooperating with two neighboring public primary schools. The pre-service teachers taught English to children over three times in the year, utilizing the university's facilities. Based upon their experiences in the previous year, the fourth year pre-service teachers (hereinafter called "the old-timers") and the third year ones (hereinafter called "the newcomers") decided to offer the teaching opportunities over 10 times (two lessons in one day) in 2016.

The pre-service teachers were divided into two groups, with one group taking charge of teaching lower primary students and the other having responsibility for upper primary ones. Both groups contained a mix of old-timers and newcomers. Each group provided one hour-long lesson at a time. The groups had meetings in order to make lesson plans and prepare teaching materials. They also communicated with each other in each group with an online communication tool, namely "LINE," as necessary. In each group, the pre-service teachers' roles were decided by the same method as the previous teaching project. That is, the old-timers made lesson plans and conducted lessons as main instructors and the newcomers produced teaching materials (e.g., picture cards and handouts) as requested by the old-timers and supported primary students' learning during the lesson. Explicitly, the old-timers fully took part in the CoP and the newcomers' participation was recognized as LPP. Concerning the last two lessons, the roles of the pre-service teachers reversed. The newcomers had responsibilities in planning and teaching, and the old-timers prepared teaching materials and assisted primary students. The reason for the role changes was to allow the newcomers to experience actual teaching, applying what they learned as LPP. After the end of a day's teaching, the pre-service teachers had a review meeting with all staff and took notes of what they discussed. Based upon the written notes and each student's own recall of the project, the pre-service teachers wrote a reflection paper at the end of the teaching training project. Specifically, the paper asked the pre-service teachers to review their experiences in terms of lesson preparation and in-class teaching or supporting activities. In addition, it asked them to review relationships with peers throughout the whole process of the project.

### **4. Research Design**

The present study utilizes a qualitative method to investigate the pre-service teachers' perceptions on the project from the standpoint of a CoP. The focal data was contents of the pre-service teachers' reflection papers. The author

informed the pre-service teachers that he would like to review their papers for the current study and asked for their consent. All of the participants ( $N = 21$ ) agreed and the author certified to them that their reflections would be anonymous.

In a qualitative study, analyzing qualitative data is an interpretive task, as Ezzy (2002) claimed. By the same token, qualitative data analysis is a process of making meaning (Esterberg, 2002), and hence, all of the pre-service teachers' written work as raw data was carefully read repeatedly and analyzed manually. In addition, follow-up interviews with selected pre-service teachers (three pre-service teachers in each year group) were conducted in order to support their reflection. Some parts of the pre-service teachers' comments were translated into English for citation and, for excerpting, pseudonyms were utilized with the purpose of protecting the pre-service teachers' anonymity.

## 5. Findings and Discussion

### 5.1 Old-timers' Learning

As the old-timers mainly had a responsibility to create teaching plans for the project, they identified the importance of efficient planning. As Scott and Ytreberg (1990) noted, careful planning is essential for good language teachers of children. Rika, for instance, stated that they incorporated a long-term perspective on planning lessons. Mikako similarly recognized the important connection between developing a long-term plan and setting an overall goal to be attained by primary students.

#### Excerpt 1

We first established a long-term plan for all of the lessons. This was because we, instructors, were able to consider what English skills can be developed and how we can support them. (Rika, reflection paper)

#### Excerpt 2

It is important to clarify what skills we enable children to acquire when we establish a long-term plan. (Mikako, reflection paper)

In the same way, most of the old-timers acknowledged the significance of connecting objectives and teaching contents in a lesson. Yuki claimed that:

#### Excerpt 3

I did not try to incorporate many contents in one lesson and I focused on target words and phrases, so that children were able to learn them efficiently in the lesson. (Yuki, reflection paper)

Furthermore, the old-timers tried to help children feel relaxed during the lessons. It is, in fact, critical for language teachers to allow children to feel comfortable in lessons because anxiety has a negative impact on foreign language learning and vice versa, which is supported by the Affective Filter hypothesis in second language acquisition (Krashen, 1982). Krashen (1982, p. 32) also asserted that effective language teachers can provide language input and help make it comprehensible in a low anxiety situation. Tomoko's attempt was effective as an encouraging strategy, which can diminish foreign language anxiety of the primary students.

#### Excerpt 4

When I saw a child with a worried look on his face, I said, "Are you OK?" or "Do you understand?" to him. I also actively praised children, saying "Great!" or "Good job!" and enabled them to become confident about speaking English. (Tomoko, reflection paper)

On the other hand, through the in-class teaching activities a few of the old-timers recognized that they needed to develop English skills for their future teaching at primary schools. In particular, improving pronunciation and cultivating vocabulary seem to be significant issues for them. Junko's feeling is a good example.

#### Excerpt 5

My problem in teaching English includes English pronunciation and vocabulary. While teaching English in the lessons, I did not have confidence in my English pronunciation and did not often speak English actively. When I

teach English at a primary school, I would like to focus on correct pronunciation and intonation. If primary teachers speak English fluently in class, their English will be a good model for students. This will allow students to enhance motivation for learning English. (Junko, reflection paper)

Pronunciation and vocabulary are indeed important for English teachers, especially when they teach primary students in the early learning stage. Thus, the teachers need to acquire precise English pronunciation in order to provide high-quality input to the students in primary English education. Additionally, qualified English teachers need to possess various words, especially including classroom English expressions. The author would assert that homeroom teachers should use classroom English with appropriate pronunciation, even though they are not required to conduct English lessons exclusively in English at public primary schools in Japan.

Overall, the teaching project enabled the old-timers to enhance their English teaching skills, especially at the primary level. Six old-timers including Mika, Mikako, Yuki and Junko are going to be employed as public primary school teachers after graduation and another will be accepted as a nursery teacher at an international school. Considering the theory of a CoP, the findings of the current study confirm that old-timers' full participation in the CoP contributed to fostering professionalism in the future teaching. Furthermore, this study supports the findings of Daniel et al. (2013) and Chigona (2013). Specifically, our results overlap Jimenez-Silva and Olson's study (2012) that a CoP as English teacher training can contribute to developing senses of English teachers and learners simultaneously.

### *5.2 Newcomers' Learning*

As noted above, the newcomers mainly engaged in supporting the old-timers in the lessons. That is to say, the newcomers' participation was considered as LPP and they observed the old-timers' performance in the lessons. Reviewing the newcomers' reflections, it can be identified that their LPP allowed them to develop knowledge especially about management of children. More specifically, they understood how to create good relationships with primary students and how to make those students feel comfortable in English lessons. For instance, Shiho noted that:

#### *Excerpt 6*

I learned a lot from fourth year students. One thing I learned is how to interact with children. In the first lesson, I did not know what I should do. But by observing fourth year students' performance, I came to understand how to interact with children and realized that communicating with children is the most important thing. (Shiho, reflection paper)

The author also acknowledges that almost all newcomers did not get to interact with primary students in his observation of the lessons; however, they gradually understood how to have a good relationship with the students during the lessons. As mentioned above, the newcomers had a responsibility to create a lesson and taught primary students as main instructors in the final two lessons. In other words, this opportunity enabled the newcomers to apply what they learned in LPP to their full participation segment in the CoP. Yoshiko's reflection is typical of this. However, it seemed difficult for them to actually teach English to primary students, unlike observing the lessons and supporting the old-timers' work. The newcomers seemed to change their perspective on teaching English.

#### *Excerpt 7*

I found a number of reflection points and issues by actually conducting the lesson that we (the newcomers) created. I knew the importance of preparation including planning before the lesson and cooperation with peers during the lesson. (Yoshiko, reflection paper)

Through the newcomers' reviews, it can be argued that change of roles from LPP to full participation in the CoP is not an easy task. Nevertheless, the newcomers' first experiences of teaching, namely full participation in the present CoP, certainly allowed them to have an outlook for the teaching project in the next year and led to a smooth role shift from the old-timers to the newcomers.

### *5.3 Peer Collaboration*

Yildirm and Seker (2013) asserted that a CoP contributes to nurturing a collaborative skill, and the current study supports their position. Through the teaching project, both the old-timers and the newcomers identified the importance of cooperation with peers in order to provide effective lessons. In particular, collaboration between the old-timers and the newcomers seemed accelerated while they worked together to pursue their given roles, because each of the members had a lot of time to discuss and exchange ideas to create lessons or materials. As Ostovar-Nameghi and Sheikahmadi (2016) claimed, peer collaboration in schools is indispensable for teachers to

develop themselves professionally. All of the old-timers appreciated the newcomers' work for making materials and supporting primary students in the lessons, and the newcomers appreciated the old-timers' giving useful advice for interacting with primary students, planning the lessons and conducting the lessons.

On the other hand, it seemed difficult to facilitate developing a close relationship between the old-timers and the newcomers. In this regard, one newcomer mentioned that time constraints of the school schedule caused a lack of communication between the old-timers and the newcomers (Mieko, follow-up interview). The curriculum of the education department is crowded and basically established according to students' year level. Concretely, the third year and fourth year students do not study together in class in the department curriculum. Thus, it was difficult to find time for the old-timers to meet the newcomers; as a result, they tended to communicate with each other only with the online tool, LINE.

Furthermore, although none of the pre-service teachers mentioned it in their reflection papers, the author speculates that a mental invisible gap between the old-timers and the newcomers existed through his observation of the pre-service teachers' activities in the project. In fact, there is a school culture that leads younger year students not to be frank enough to older year students in Japanese schools. One old-timer mentioned that that she felt comfortable with working with other members of fourth year students who are acquainted enough (Yuki, follow-up interview). Hence, the relationship between the old-timers and the newcomers tended to be weaker than those of the students in the same year group. This result relates to Yildirm and Seker's (2013) finding that degree of acquaintance with members affects their attitudes toward a CoP approach. In the current study, the author concludes that the newcomers, especially, were modest and deferential to the old-timers, which could be recognized as passive attitudes toward developing a close relationship with the old-timers.

## 6. Conclusion

The current study highlighted "situated learning" through authentic English teaching opportunities for primary students and the nexus between a CoP theory and practice in pre-service teacher education in a Japanese university setting. Although this study presents a limited set of empirical data, we confirmed that the teacher training project drawing upon the CoP theory contributed to enhancing pre-service teachers' knowledge and skills in teaching English for primary students. Moreover, the present CoP setting enabled the pre-service teachers to promote solidarity, especially between the old-timers and the newcomers. It is clear that the teaching project became an excellent opportunity for the pre-service teachers to understand and value that collaborative work is critical in teaching. Hence, the study concludes that the teacher training project allowed the pre-service teachers to become educationally responsible, knowledgeable, and passionate homeroom teachers who are qualified to teach English for the primary school classroom. However, the present study suggests that it would be important to consider the existence of educational culture, which may affect developing relationships with peers in the specific context when we apply the theory of a CoP.

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