
Early professional development of EFL teacher trainees in Japan: Challenges and Solutions

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Résumé

Initial teacher education (ITE) in Japan currently finds itself anchored in the confusion between the theory-practice dichotomy. On the one hand, higher education institutions (HEIs) are expected to transmit theoretical knowledge for their trainees, which should serve as their knowledge base for further professional development. On the other hand, schools are expected to provide practical teaching experience for their trainees, so that trainees can apply their theory to particular contexts. Nevertheless, student teachers may try to conform to a particular setting without the ability to capture the entire picture of pedagogy. Furthermore, political control may add more complexity to the theory-practice relationship, since plans initiated by the government often ignore the context of practices and participants' voices in these practices.

When society is rapidly changing, school teachers need to learn flexibility and autonomy in order to handle a myriad of issues, many of which the characteristics may vary accordingly. This study seeks to examine one example case of such a context-Japan. It first explores the current trends in the ITE system in Japan, and the challenges that ITE in Japan presently faces are also clarified for future improvement.

Due to its "principle of openness" (Ota, 2000), similar to many other regions in East Asia, such as Taiwan or South Korea (Asaoka & Ito, 2006; Chang, 2004), ITE is presently offered by education colleges, departments of education at universities, along with teacher training programs at more than 800 general universities. In order to become a secondary-school English teacher, student teachers need to attend an ITE program offered at the undergraduate-level at an HEI and acquire a teacher's qualification upon graduation. In lines with its open principles, the contents of ITE programs are at the discretion of each HEI, while this variability may cause inconsistency among student teachers' experiences in professional expertise development, which is one of the challenges that ITE in Japan confronts.

In order to further understand the entire picture of ITE in Japan, it is necessary to know more recent changes and challenges in English language teaching in Japan, such as the newly revised secondary-school curriculum including a new policy of teaching English in English. How these recent changes may have impact on overall teacher education in Japan will be discussed.

This study will finally suggest some possible suggestions for future improvements based on some case studies in ITE that the author conducted, which will provide an example in order for teacher trainees to narrow the gap between theory and practice. These case studies

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tentatively suggest that reflective practices with scaffolding tasks, explicit modelling and reflection are beneficial in developing teacher trainees' expertise and autonomy.

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