

Learning Valuable Lessons from ‘Senseis’ and ‘Sempais’

ABSTRACT. This paper outlines a support structure for pre-service English teachers which is being implemented at a private Japanese university as part of a Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS) funded research project. Since 2022, several intensive workshops have been held to address pre-service English teachers’ specific needs and better prepare them for the realities of the teaching profession. Through the design and delivery of practical teaching workshops, the researchers are working to provide effective support. The paper focuses on a recent workshop which was led by two university professors and two novice English teachers. The workshop participants’ (n=16) oral and written feedback is discussed and suggestions are made as to how the support system for Japanese pre-service English teachers can be improved.

Keywords: Japan, pre-service, teacher training, workshops

1. *Introduction*

Teacher-training workshops can go a long way towards preparing pre-service teachers for what lies ahead and afford them the opportunity to interact with veteran and novice teachers, as well as experts on contemporary pedagogy. This research paper is the latest in a series of papers aimed at addressing the issue of how to support pre-service English teachers in Japan. ‘*Sensei*’ is the Japanese word for teacher and ‘*sempai*’ is someone of a senior status to whom younger people look up to and respect. As part of this research project, previous workshops have enlisted the help of experienced teachers and professors to deliver valuable sessions on practical pedagogy. The latest workshop, which is the subject of this paper, however, takes a new approach by involving two novice English teachers who had just completed their first year of teaching when the professional development event took place. Their sessions, interwoven with insights from two expert professors with junior and senior high school teaching experience, offered interesting and valuable insights into the realities of life as an English teacher in Japan. After a brief digest of the challenges which pre-service and in-service English teachers in Japan face, the authors provide a summary of five workshops which preceded the workshop

outlined in this paper. The design of the sixth workshop is then explained, followed by an overview of each of the four sessions which were given as part of the workshop. Feedback from the participants is discussed as is the construction of future workshops.

2. The Challenges for Pre-Service and In-Service English Teachers in Japan

The inadequacies of pre-service training for English teachers in Japan and the challenges they face have been outlined in previous papers as part of this ongoing research project (see Cripps et al., 2023, 2023a; 2023b; 2024; 2025). Arguably, the main challenges that pre-service English teachers in Japan face are: (a) the demands of the new Course of Study (CoS) drawn up by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT); (b) poor pre-service training at university; and (c) the lack of practical experience during their teaching practice. The workshops in our ongoing research project have been designed to address these challenges and offer practical solutions and advice to pre-service English teachers. As part of the initial data collection phase of this research project, 20 pre-service English teachers completed an online questionnaire that focused on teacher training in Japan (see Appendix A). Four main themes related to problems with the existing teaching license course emerged from the data: (a) the duration of the on-site teacher training experience (only two to three weeks); (b) not enough opportunities to conduct mock classes; (c) not enough guidance on how to construct effective teaching plans; and (d) a lack of focus on the teaching of practical skills (Cripps et al., 2023a).

In addition to the problems associated with the teaching license course, Japan is facing further issues related to teacher attrition and a shortage of teachers (NHK World News, 2024). Sakuma and Shimazaki (2021) in their case study of a Japanese prefecture highlight the shortage of teachers and its knock-on effects on in-service teachers. Increasingly, teachers in Japan are taking breaks from teaching due to mental health issues or leaving the profession altogether. For example, a government survey found that 7,119 public school teachers took mental health leave in 2023, and a record high (n=788) quit after less than a year in the profession (Kyodo News, 2025). Admittedly, the Japanese government is considering making changes to lower the attrition and occupational burnout rates, but these may be ineffective or come too late (The Japan Times, 2025). Farrell (2025) and others (e.g., Clandinin et al., 2015; Perryman & Calvert, 2020; Struyven & Vanthournout, 2014) remind us that

teacher attrition can be attributed to many factors. Arguably, the two main factors are inadequate preparation for first-year teachers and insufficient support for early-career educators (Farrell, 2025). Therefore, an effective support structure is vital if educational authorities want to encourage teachers to stay in the profession.

3. *Ethical Considerations*

Permission to conduct this research was given by Nanzan University's Committee for Research Screening and informed consent was obtained from the participants. Throughout this paper pseudonyms have been used to protect the identities of the questionnaire respondents and workshop participants.

4. *Workshops*

4.1 Workshops 1 to 5

Table 1 provides an overview of the five pre-service workshops which were held from June 2022 to June 2023 as part of this ongoing research project. The details of these workshops have been explicated in previous papers and as such only a summary will be provided below. After each workshop written and oral feedback was obtained from the participants and woven into the design and pedagogical fabric of future workshops. The first two workshops, which were held in 2022, focused on sessions tailored to meet the requests of Japanese pre-service English teachers. Workshops 1 and 2 covered six session topics namely:

- (a) creativity and information and communications technology (ICT) use,
- (b) critical thinking and writing,
- (c) helping false beginners to read and write,
- (d) strategies to support Japanese English language learners' 21st century skills,
- (e) how to reverse the trend: Japanese could speak English better, and (f) tips for getting your students to speak English.

Table 1*Content of Workshops 1 and 2*

No.	Date	Content
1	June 25, 2022	Creativity and ICT use Professor Toland – The International University of Kagoshima, Japan Critical thinking and writing Professor Uchida – Akita International University, Japan
2	November 19, 2022	Helping false beginners to read and write Professor Uchida – Akita International University, Japan Strategies to support Japanese English language learners' 21st century skills Professor Toland – The International University of Kagoshima, Japan How to reverse the trend: Japanese could speak English better Professor Matsumoto – Bond University, Australia Tips for getting your students to speak English Professor Cripps – Nanzan University, Japan

The focus of Workshops 3, 4, and 5 shifted to concentrate on the specific needs of pre-service teachers who were taking their teaching practicums as part of the teaching license course for English teachers. These workshops are highlighted in another paper (see Cripps et al., 2025). In these workshops, Professor Cripps provided the participants (n=7) with a sample class, examples of microteaching, and an open-ended Q & A session. He also facilitated a post-teacher practice debriefing via the reflective circle technique (Gardner et al., 2022), which allowed the participants to share their successes and challenges.

After completing their teaching practicums, the pre-service English teachers provided feedback through an online questionnaire. Question nine of the questionnaire asked: ‘Considering your practical teaching experience, what skills do you think you need to learn to improve your teaching? Please give examples.’ The pre-service English teachers were asked to share what skills they believe pre-service teachers should learn based on their teaching practicums. Table 3 summarises their comments.

Table 2

Content of Workshops 3, 4, and 5

No.	Date	Content
3	May 17, 2023	Sample class and micro-teaching Professor Cripps – Nanzan University, Japan
4	May 24, 2023	Finding solutions to pedagogical problems Professor Cripps – Nanzan University, Japan
5	June 21, 2023	Post-teaching practice reflection (online) Professor Cripps – Nanzan University, Japan

Table 3

Questionnaire Responses to Question No. 9

Necessary skills to improve teaching	
“How to make a good use of the group activity, How to make the instruction clearer and easier to understand for the students.” (Chika)	“I think that I did not use English so many times in the class, so I should learn about the way to use English for all students.” (Mari)
“I focused on how I should teach next too much, I was not able to give them feedback after we did the reading aloud practice. I think I should improve on giving them feedback.” (Fumiko)	“Eigo de dono yō ni seito ni wakari yasuku katsudō naiyō o setsumei suru ka.” [How can I explain the activities to my students in English in a way that they can understand?] (Erika)
“English basic grammar and vocabulary (sometimes I made mistake in the class), the skill to use material effectively.” (Kaho)	“How to give effective feedback without students become ashamed and hesitate to speak out in class.” (Riho)

4.2 *Designing Workshop 6*

The sixth workshop was held in May 2024. In addition to sessions spearheaded by university professors, it was hoped that by including sessions from their '*sempais*', the content would be more relatable and engaging for the workshop participants. After analysing the questionnaire responses from the participants of Workshops 1 to 5, the research team decided that Workshop 6 should not only provide sessions on practical skills by teaching experts (i.e., Professors Cripps and Toland) but also offer sessions from novice teachers. It was agreed that the overarching theme of Workshop 6 would be 'Ideas and advice for novice English teachers'. Two novice in-service English teachers (i.e., Mr. Taito Ikuse and Ms. Ai Shinagawa who are graduates of Professor Cripps' teaching seminar) were asked if they would share experiences from their first year of teaching English at junior and senior high schools. Both agreed to this request. Mr. Ikuse and Ms. Shinagawa graduated from Nanzan University in March 2023 and started teaching in April 2023. A brief overview of the biographies of the four workshop speakers is provided below.

Dr. Tony Cripps has been teaching in Japan since 1990 and is a Professor at Nanzan University (Department of British and American Studies and the Graduate Program of Linguistic Science). Over the course of his career, he has taught at elementary, junior, and senior high schools in Japan. For the last twenty years Tony has run numerous teacher-training workshops in Japan and overseas. Dr. Sean H. Toland is a Professor of English at The International University of Kagoshima (Department of Intercultural Studies) and has been an educator for over 25 years. He has taught English as an international language (EIL) in Japan and Korea at every level from elementary school to university and worked as a high school teacher in Canada's far north. Mr. Taito Ikuse was born and raised in Aichi. He went to the United States when he was five and stayed there for eight years before coming back to Japan. After moving back to Japan, Mr. Ikuse attended Nanzan Kokusai High School and went to Nanzan University. At Nanzan University, he studied English education in Dr. Tony Cripps's seminar until 2023. After graduating, he has been working at a junior and senior high school since April 2023. Ms. Ai Shinagawa was born and raised in Akita prefecture. She went to Nanzan University and studied English education in Dr. Tony Cripps's seminar until 2023. After graduating, she returned to Akita and has been working at a junior high school since April 2023.

The disparate backgrounds of the four speakers helped fashion a workshop which was based on many years of teaching experience and the experiences

of early career teachers. Workshop 6 was held on Saturday, May 18, 2024. It was attended by 16 participants with diverse teaching and academic experience: pre-service English teachers (n=8), in-service English teachers (n=2), post-graduate students (n=2) and university professors (n=4). The themes for Professor Cripps and Toland’s sessions were based on feedback from previous workshop participants.

Table 4

Overview of Workshop 6

No	Date	Details
6	May 18, 2024	<p>Effective Classroom Dynamics Professor Cripps – Nanzan University, Japan</p> <p>My First Year as an English teacher Mr. Ikuse – High School teacher, Japan</p> <p>Creating Interesting and Effective Activities Professor Toland – The International University of Kagoshima, Japan</p> <p>My First Year as an English teacher Ms. Shinagawa – High School teacher, Japan</p>

4.3 Session Summaries

4.3.1 Professor Cripps’ Session

The theme for Professor Cripps’ session was ‘Effective Classroom Dynamics’. This session explored how teachers and students interact in a classroom. Practical tips on how to create effective class dynamics were explained such as:

- (a) creating a positive group atmosphere;
- (b) getting students to actively use English in class by ensuring that speaking is not associated with any kind of social risk or threat; and
- (c) creating an environment where students feel safe and willing to use English. The participants were asked to discuss the characteristics of an effective classroom atmosphere, and tips were offered based on Professor Cripps’ experience woven together with those put forward by Mercer (2023).

Figure 1

Professor Cripps' Session



4.3.2 Mr. Ikuse's Session

Mr. Ikuse divided his session into five sections as follows: (a) a brief overview about me; (b) an overview of what current students are like; (c) a teacher's schedule; (d) my experience as a teacher (good and bad); and (e) advice. He used his session to focus on the realities of his teaching life. Mr. Ikuse shared examples of his typical schedule and duties. He asked the participants to discuss questions such as: What is your image of teaching English? and encouraged them to think about the reality of teaching English in Japan.

Figure 2

Mr. Ikuse’s Session



4.3.3 Professor Toland’s Session

The theme for Professor Toland’s session was ‘Creating interesting and effective language teaching activities’. He divided his session into five sections: (a) two lessons – my experiences; (b) what are 21st century skills?; (c) creating interesting English language teaching (ELT) materials; (d) eight practical and adaptable ideas; and (e) a Q & A slot. During his session, Professor Toland provided many examples of practical ELT materials and activities along with sample videos.

Figure 3

Professor Toland's Session



4.3.4 Ms. Shinagawa's Session

The title of Ms. Shinagawa's session was: Kyōshi toshite no 1-nen o furikaette: Chūgakusei ni eigo o oshieru yarigai to muzukashisa ni tsuite [Looking back on the year as a teacher: About the rewards and difficulties of teaching English to junior high school students]. She divided her session into four sections: (a) self-introduction; (2) there are a lot of things I want to do; (3) using textbooks and making materials; and (4) my current style of teaching. Ms. Shinagawa also included video samples of her teaching.

Figure 4

Ms. Shinagawa’s Session



The four sessions outlined above provided opportunities for the participants to develop their teaching skills, interact with other attendees, and reflect on their future career paths. The feedback shared at the end of the workshop is discussed in the section below.

4.4. Workshop 6: Feedback on the Individual Sessions

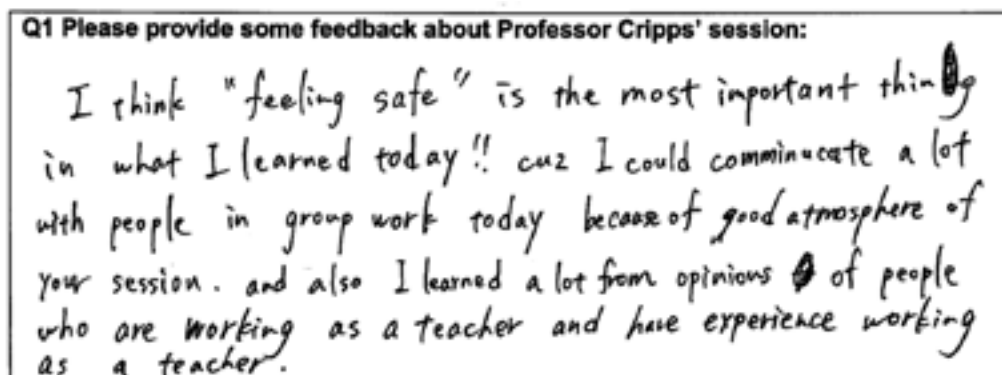
Following the format of preceding workshops, a feedback sheet was given to each attendee and they provided oral and written feedback at the end of Workshop 6 (see Appendix B). The participants were asked to share their opinions on each session and suggest topics for future workshops. They were also given the opportunity to share their thoughts on the workshop as a whole.

4.4.1 Professor Cripps' Session

The main takeaway from Professor Cripps' session for the participants was the importance of creating a comfortable classroom atmosphere (see Figure 5). The session utilised a lot of group work which the participants found effective and relaxing. Eri noted: *"Group work was good for me, I could listen to other people's opinion and discussing was fun. Professor Cripps said "Any language is OK," so he gave us safe atmosphere to say opinions."* The session also challenged the participants to think about the key ways of making classes fun and enjoyable and it also asked them to consider their own teaching styles. Hitomi shared her thoughts on this session: *"I could learn how to make classes enjoyable and interesting. I learnt that some keys to make English classes are watch students every day. And if I need something to change, I should change teaching styles."*

Figure 5

Feedback on Professor Cripps' Session



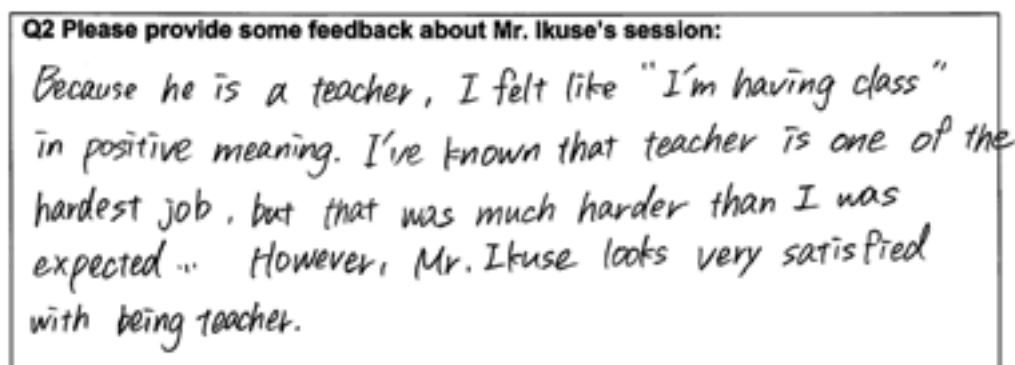
4.4.2 Mr. Ikuse's Session

Mr. Ikuse's session provided the participants with a realistic glimpse into the life of a novice English teacher, as Hitomi remarked: *"I could get an image of working at a high school! Especially how long teacher have to work a day, what I should learn before working... It was very informative!!"* Through his session, it was clear that Mr. Ikuse was very busy but that there were also many rewarding aspects to his job such as interacting with many people and

learning from them. Mr. Ikuse explained in detail exactly what a high school teacher does each day and how he creates his classes. This included showing the school's homepage that he maintains and samples of his worksheets which the participants found very useful as Chiaki revealed: *"I knew the real experience of a teacher who teaches English at high school. I could learn how a teacher prepares his class and his own ideas to create good English classes. While he is having busy days, he looks happy being an English teacher and doing his English classes."* From the post-workshop feedback it was evident that the realistic focus of Mr. Ikuse's session provided valuable insight into the life of an early carer teacher (see Figure 6).

Figure 6

Feedback from Rara on Mr. Ikuse's Session



The following feedback from Eri has been translated from Japanese into English. It acts as a representative exemplar of the impact of Mr. Ikuse's session: *"Through the group discussion not only was I able to change my mind, but I also understood the actual situation of teachers and this was very useful. I am currently job hunting and I thought that new employees would not be given big tasks in their first year of work (but I was mistaken). I was impressed when you said that you could talk with your students with no stress."*

4.4.3 Professor Toland's Session

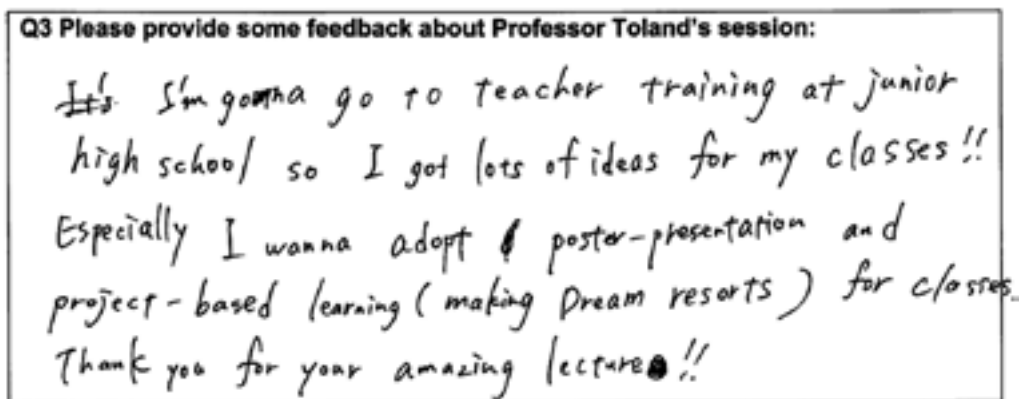
Participants of the workshop were appreciative of many aspects of Professor Toland's session. His focus on activities which encourage students to utilise Information Technology (IT) was supported by the participants. Hiromi wrote:

“I especially like the activity using IT! I think it’s a good way to get students attention, so I’d like to use some of his activities in the future.” Professor Toland also stressed the use of group work and this resonated with Ayaka: *“I loved his session very very much. I prefer creating or organizing in a group compared with solo activity, so the ideas were interesting.”*

The sheer range and number of activities presented by Professor Toland, in addition to their potential to raise students’ motivation, was the subject of several feedback comments. Many of the participants stated that they wanted to adopt (and adapt) the material that Professor Toland demonstrated for use in their classes. One of the participants, Yuki, was due to do their teaching practice at a junior high school shortly after the workshop. Their comments are presented in Figure 7.

Figure 7

Feedback on Professor Toland’s Session



4.4.4 Ms. Shinagawa’s Session

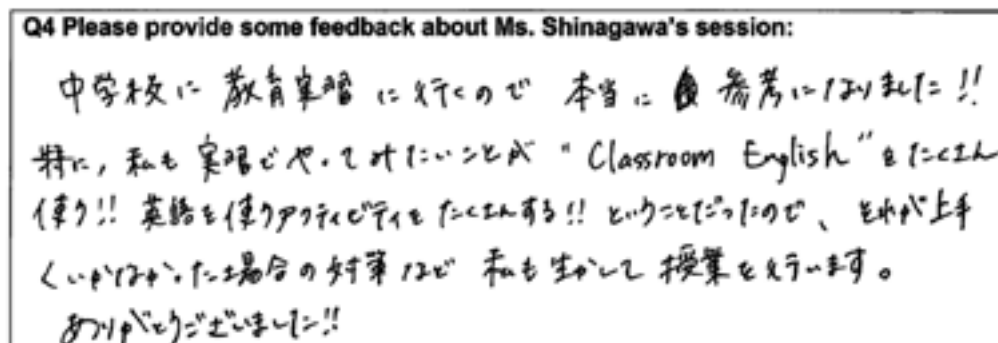
Ms. Shinagawa’s session was enthusiastically received. The workshop participants appreciated the fact that she had flown down from Akita prefecture to Aichi prefecture that day to attend the workshop (note: a distance of over 700 km). Through Ms. Shinagawa’s session, the participants could understand her enthusiasm and passion for teaching. As Chiaki explained: *“Through listening to her presentation, I thought teaching English is fun! Also, I think it’s important to think positively. I would like to conduct many attractive activities that were introduced in her session.”* The participants also appreciated Ms. Shina-

gawa's honesty when sharing about her growth as a teacher as Hannah wrote: *"The honest experiences of her teaching journey were very interesting."*

As part of her session, Ms. Shinagawa showed short video clips of her teaching. Ayaka commented on how the video showing junior high school students made the participants think about how things had changed since they were at school: *"I learned about the school life in junior high school. Many things are [sic] changed from what I had experience and it was interesting to see how students act by looking at the video."* Another participant, Hiromi, who had completed their teaching practice at a junior high school also enjoyed the session: *"Her session was very interesting. I learnt how to do a lesson, what to expect as a novice teacher, fun part of being a teacher!! I also did a teaching practice at a junior high school, so it was very fun to watch her video doing a game!!"* In addition, Yuki's written comments shown in Figure 8 outline how Ms. Shinagawa's session was of great practical benefit to the pre-service English teachers.

Figure 8

Feedback on Ms. Shinagawa's Session



The translated comments read: [*"I am going to do my teaching practice at junior high school so it was very useful!! Especially, I want to try and use a lot of "Classroom English"!! I will use a lot of activities which use English!! I will think about countermeasures just in case things don't go well. Thank you very much!!"*]

Ms. Shinagawa's session helped the participants understand the realities of teaching English in Japan. The following quote from Hiromi encapsulates the thoughts of many who attended the workshop: *"I thought she enjoys teaching, which leads to improving her skills. Her presentation was easy to understand,*

and it was helpful for me to understand what teachers have as their passion and what difficulties they face. Sharing such experiences is effective for listeners to know the reality of English teachers' life."

5. Suggestions for Future Workshops

As with the previous workshops, at the end of Workshop 6 the participants were invited to suggest themes and content for future workshops. Table 5 lists some of the participants' recommendations. These suggestions are not ranked in any particular order, nor have they been edited for clarity.

Table 5

Suggestions for Future Workshops

No.	Suggestions
1	How to approach students who have different needs and characteristics.
2	How to create 'great relationships' with students with disabilities.
3	How to communicate with students (especially when they are in trouble).
4	Model lessons for junior high school.
5	How to prepare classes (especially for high school level).
6	How to create a fun classroom atmosphere.
7	Effective teaching methods.
8	A workshop on the gap between what researchers in language education propose when teaching and learning languages, and the reality of language teaching among teachers at school.

Responses from the participants serve as testimony to the importance of teacher-training workshops. Having completed the analysis of the feedback, the researchers plan to offer sessions on model lessons and class preparation. In addition, we plan to devote at least half of an upcoming workshop to teaching students with diverse learning needs (e.g., attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism, dyslexia, dyspraxia). This will necessitate exploring educational psychology and the importance of understanding and helping neurodiverse students. We plan to enlist the expertise of scholars and practitioners with hands-on experience. We will continue to strive to support Japanese pre-service English teachers and provide practical workshops tailored to their specific needs.

It is clear from the representative feedback shown above that the participants not only enjoyed Workshop 6, but also found the content extremely useful. What remains to be seen is if they can incorporate some of the concepts, methodologies, ELT materials, and activities into their classrooms when they start teaching. There is a clear need to monitor and support the participants through classroom observations and interviews once they embark on their teaching careers. In addition, schools and school administrators need to recognise their roles in supporting novice teachers, especially during their first five years of teaching. Farrell (2025) recommends that “schools can and should encourage furthering mentorship ideas in these later early career years such as critical friendships, team teaching, peer coaching, and/or teaching reflection groups” (p. 184). Such support should be ongoing and not be perceived as a ‘one-off’ occurrence. In addition, reflective practice for early career English teachers is a further way that novice teachers can be supported.

6. Conclusion

It is often said that teachers teach how they were taught. While this statement is certainly up for debate, what is true is that we are influenced by how we are taught and those who teach us. Workshops have the potential to inspire and stimulate pre-service teachers to achieve their potential. Learning from the proverbial ‘sage on the stage’ or the ‘guide on the side’ is worthwhile but learning from one’s peers or seniors is both relatable and arguably more meaningful. Looking back on each incarnation of the pre-service workshops to date, a natural shift from learning from pedagogical experts to more peer involvement is evident.

Preparing pre-service English teachers for the challenges that they will face in the classroom and arming them with the practical skills that they need should be at the core of any teacher-training programme. Arguably, the main weakness in many teacher-training courses run by Japanese universities is the lack of focus on the provision of practical skills. Too much emphasis is placed on the teaching of laws, regulations, and educational history. A fundamental shift in how teacher training is conducted in Japan is needed if MEXT wants to improve the standard of teaching, increase teacher job satisfaction, and reduce the attrition rate of teachers. We believe that practical research projects can support pre-service English teachers and make a positive difference to their careers. All parties concerned (i.e., MEXT, local education administrators, teacher trainers) need to recognise that continual learning, growth, reflection,

and support are vital if teachers are to stay in our profession. This is especially relevant in the era of generative AI.

Learning from people who have experienced the joys and struggles of teaching can open windows of enlightenment in pre-service English teachers and serve to motivate them to improve their teaching skills. By painting a realistic picture of the realities of teaching in the first year Mr. Ikuse and Ms. Shinagawa offered an undiluted and honest glimpse into the daily life of an early career English teacher. The feedback from the participants in this workshop was unanimous in its praise for both teachers. Future workshops will aim to increase the involvement of novice teachers as well as experienced ones. The best lessons learnt are the ones that stay with us forever. Providing interesting and informative workshops will continue to be the goals of our research team.

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ETHICAL APPROVAL

Ethical clearance for this research project was given by Nanzan University's Committee for Research Screening in 2021.

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Appendix A

Post teaching practice questionnaire

Thank you for agreeing to complete this short questionnaire. It should take about 10-15 mins to complete. Your answers will be used to help understand pre-service English teachers' needs, to aid research, and to help design future workshops. Your answers will be treated with strict confidentiality and at no time will your identity be revealed. The questionnaire is anonymous. Once again, thank you for your help.

Dr Tony Cripps

1. Where did you do your teaching practice - Junior (JHS) and/or Senior High School (SHS)?

2. How long was your teaching practice in weeks?

3. How many times did you teach a class by yourself?

4. What do you think of the instruction you received while you were at your junior or senior high school? Please give examples.

5. How did you feel before/during/after teaching a class?

6. What aspects of your teaching went well? Please give examples.

7. What aspects of your teaching could you improve on? Please give examples.

8. Please give some advice to students who will do their teaching practice next year.

9. Considering your practical teaching experience, what skills do you think you need to learn to improve your teaching? Please give examples.

10. Thank you for your time. If you have any questions/comments please write them here:

cripps@nanzan-u.ac.jp

Appendix B

Feedback Sheet – Pre-service Mini-workshop

Thank you for agreeing to complete this feedback sheet. It should take about 10 minutes to complete. Your answers will be used to help design future workshops. Your answers will be treated with strict confidentiality and at no time will your identity be revealed. The feedback sheet is anonymous. Once again, thank you for your help.

Tony Cripps

Q1 Please provide some feedback about Professor Cripps' session:

Q2 Please provide some feedback about Mr. Ikuse's session:

Q3 Please provide some feedback about Professor Toland's session:

Q4 Please provide some feedback about Ms. Shinagawa's session:

Q5 What topics would you like to see included in future workshops?

If you have any comments about today's workshop please write them here:

Once again, thank you for your time!