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# Reflective Practice of a 3-year-long Professional Learning Community for ALTs and School Teachers

WANG, Linfeng

## 1. Introduction

Currently, more than 20,000 ALTs are team-teaching with JTEs (Japanese Teacher of English) or HRTs (Home Room Teacher) in the classrooms of elementary, junior high, and high schools (MEXT, 2022), which indicates that the ALT system is institutionalized in Japanese school education. However, the role of ALTs in schools is mainly limited to serving as examples during demonstrations and as exchange partners in English lessons. There is room for capable ALTs to contribute more towards a higher-quality education, by functioning as a professional resource at schools (Wang, 2021, 2022).

In terms of collaboration between ALTs and school teachers, Otani (2010) points out that the lack of communication has led to misunderstandings and mistrust due to language hurdles and working time restrictions. Most of the school teachers—who are unaware of how ALTs are hired and what their training really entails—tend to have unrealistic expectations around ALTs' teaching abilities, and as a result, experience a gap when witnessing their actual teaching skills. On the other hand, many ALTs feel isolated and marginalized, due to not being fully informed about the school's educational policies and lesson plans, and not being recognized nor respected as members of the school teaching and staff community. In addition, Reed (2015) also reports that some ALTs are team-teaching without having reached a common understanding with JTEs or HRTs about their duties and professional backgrounds. ALTs' duties and competencies vary according to their employment contracts and teaching experiences.

Although the ALT system was introduced more than 30 years ago, few studies have addressed the professional development of practicing ALTs, or the development of a systematic program that can support their continuous professional learning (Wang, 2020a, 2020b). To achieve mutual understanding, there is a need for a platform where both ALTs and school teachers can share their professional perspectives and learn from each other. Such a platform

might consist of professional learning systems and programs that allow for synergy between both ALTs and school teachers' agencies, in order to improve the quality of foreign language education.

This paper focuses on an online professional learning community directed at ALTs and school teachers, which is called *Monthly Edu Café*. During each monthly event, participants are asked to spend their time narrating and reflecting on their foreign language teaching practices. After an introduction to the first 3 years of the *Monthly Edu Café* meetings, this paper provides a review of the results and key insights gathered from the participants' questionnaires, which bring to the fore a number of present concerns and critical issues surrounding the professional learning of ALTs and school teachers. Finally, there is a brief discussion of factors associated with professional learning, with an eye towards recent trends and proposals for a professional learning program for ALTs and school teachers.

## 2. Key Concepts Underpinning the Design of *Monthly Edu Café*

With an eye to the need for a sustainable professional community that connects ALTs with school teachers, the author launched the *Monthly Edu Café* in January 2020, as a bilingual online meeting for ALTs and school teachers to discuss about foreign language teaching practices. During its 38 meetings, it has allowed for the participation of members from different backgrounds such as in-service teachers, ALTs, supervisors from the Board of Education, university students, and university teachers nationwide. The meetings are held online once a month as a forum for discussing thoughts and concerns, as well as sharing and discussing examples of actual classroom teaching by means of videos and other media. In addition to facilitating meetings, providing topics, and holding group discussions, a regular newsletter has been continuously published in both English and Japanese (see Appendix), which helps members to quickly catch up in case that they were not able to attend a particular event.

As a teacher educator, the author has been involved in theoretical and practical research on the construction and further development of professional learning communities; during which, she has supported the learning of three foreign ALT graduate students who have the potential to become full-time English teachers in Japanese schools. The results of the analysis of their reflective reports revealed that these ALTs' practical competence changed, as they reflected on their daily practice in a teacher education program (Wang, 2020b).

*Monthly Edu Café* is based on the paradigm that teachers "learn by doing" as reflective practitioners (Schön, 1983), which brings to the fore the importance of reflection in teachers'

professional learning. Instead of applying *a priori* scientific theories and concepts to real-world practical situations, Schön (1983, 1987) argued that professionals should seek to reflect on their own professional experiences, so as to continuously improve their teaching approaches and solve daily issues; from this perspective, reflection is practice-based and action-oriented. According to previous research, three key factors for developing reflective approaches in teaching environments are: (1) collaborative reflection; (2) monitoring of scaffolded dialogue; and (3) coaching (Valli, 1992; Hatton & Smith, 1995). Therefore, *Monthly Edu Café* invites ALTs and school teachers to narrate and reflect on their teaching practices, followed by breakout sessions, where a set of key topics and questions are proposed as a basis for small group discussions. In doing so, this enables participants to reflect in a collaborative manner, through scaffolded dialogue.

A number of schools have taken interest in the notion of teaching as “reflective practice” (Schön, 1991), and have started to adopt the idea of a “professional learning community” (PLC) within a “learning organization” (Senge, 1990) for the sake of improving learning outcomes (Myers & Myers, 1995). In previously published literature, it is argued that one way to initiate and sustain PLC (DuFour, 2004; Riley & Stoll, 2004) is by striving to cultivate a community of practice (CoP) (Wenger, 1998; Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002).

In accordance with these reasonings, a PLC comprised of voluntary participants—namely the *Monthly Edu Café*—was formed with the aim of facilitating ALTs and school teachers’ reflective practice, thus leading to meaningful transformations in their educational methods. In January of 2020, the *Monthly Edu Café* had its first meeting, with a total of eight participants. Currently, it has more than 300 registered members, and there have already been 38 consecutive monthly events at the time this paper was written. Table 1 shows a list of invited speakers and proposed topics for each event. Wang & Kuziw (2021) provides an overview of the management approach adopted at *Monthly Edu Café* and elaborates on the contents of meetings held from January, 2020 to December, 2021. At first, *Monthly Edu Café* was targeting the elementary school level, because foreign language education had been recently introduced in elementary schools in Japan, and most teachers were unsure about how to proceed. In the meantime, a number of teachers from junior high schools and high schools expressed their wish to participate, and therefore the group has gradually expanded to accommodate foreign language educators from all school levels, including both local and international educators who are interested in practice-based reflection and eager to talk with others.

*Monthly Edu Café* provides the opportunity for participants to lead a discussion or chair a meeting. This opportunity is open to all members, which can be a good opportunity for ALTs in particular. ALTs can share their observations with others and find meaning in their work by taking ownership of their teaching methods. Furthermore, the small group breakout sessions serve as a helpful tool for ALTs, where they can express their opinions and viewpoints in a safe and positive setting. Also, by making the meetings bilingual, ALTs can continue to expose themselves to Japanese language, and learn important terms or expressions which can assist them in adapting to their work environment. It also allows ALTs with varying degrees of language ability to participate, especially those who may not yet feel confident enough in their Japanese language skills, or feel they cannot speak their mind freely. The meetings are casual and welcoming, but also practical, so that even those ALTs who might not be trained in the theoretical aspects of education can still participate. Likewise, Japanese school teachers can also practice their English in the context of foreign language education. Through this continuous engagement with ALTs and school teachers in the *Monthly Edu Café*, the participants find that their level of conversation around English education in Japan is becoming deeper and stronger (Wang, 2020a).

**Table 1:** Three Years of *Monthly Edu Café*

|    | Dates      | Topics   | Chair Speaker   |
|----|------------|--|---|
| 1  | 2020/01/29 | Free talk about problems and challenges in daily teaching practices  | Open floor  |
| 2  | 2020/02/26 | Story-telling project  | Materials were distributed                                |
| 3  | 2020/04/22 | Free talk about problems and challenges in daily teaching practices  | Open floor  |
| 4  | 2020/05/27 | Teaching during the pandemic   | Open floor  |
| 5  | 2020/06/24 | Lesson study of a G4 foreign language activity in Osaka              | Elementary HRT  |
| 6  | 2020/07/29 | Lesson study of a G7 EFL lesson in Fukui                             | Junior high school JTE                                    |
| 7  | 2020/08/26 | CLIL linguistic landscape project                                    | University part-time lecturer                             |
| 8  | 2020/09/30 | Reconsidering team teaching: thinking about the roles of JTE/HRT/ALT | University lecturer (former ALT)                          |
| 9  | 2020/10/28 | How to make fun and realistic English lessons                        | Fuzoku (university-attached school) ALT                   |
| 10 | 2020/11/25 | What you need to know about teaching English in elementary schools   | Former elementary school principal                        |
| 11 | 2020/12/23 | Game night and yearly review   | Chair speakers were invited to host each breakout session |
| 12 | 2021/01/27 | Why learn foreign languages?   | Elementary HRT  |

|    |            |  |   |
|----|------------|--|---|
| 13 | 2021/02/24 | The GIGA school project and foreign language education in Japan's schools  | ALT   |
| 14 | 2021/03/31 | Teaching practice to enrich English expression through self-reflection   | Fuzoku JTE  |
| 15 | 2021/04/28 | Learning from Finland: discussion about the future of EFL in Japan   | Graduate student (pre-service teacher)  |
| 16 | 2021/05/26 | AI translation incorporating foreign language education and Japanese education   | Supervisor from prefectural board of education                                |
| 17 | 2021/06/30 | Improving students' motivation through team-teaching   | Junior high school ALT  |
| 18 | 2021/07/28 | Magic of "Jishobiki" in foreign language education   | University professor  |
| 19 | 2021/08/25 | Getting to know each other: for the good of our students and us  | Junior high school ALT  |
| 20 | 2021/09/29 | Why can't I speak English?   | Parent of a high school student   |
| 21 | 2021/10/27 | EFL education in Cambodia & Malaysia   | MEXT teacher trainees   |
| 22 | 2021/11/24 | Visual autobiographies: rediscovering your own plurilingualism   | University part-time lecturer   |
| 23 | 2021/12/22 | Are you aware of your teaching beliefs?  | University lecturer (former ALT)  |
| 24 | 2022/01/26 | Joint event with ALT Agora   | ALT Agora (online PLC for ALTs)   |
| 25 | 2022/02/23 | Lesson study of a G8 EFL lesson in Chongqing, China  | University professor  |
| 26 | 2022/03/23 | How to foster good language exchange   | Junior high school ALT  |
| 27 | 2022/04/27 | Annual curriculum plan making & Joint event with Kumamoto English Café   | Elementary HRT, Junior high school ALT  |
| 28 | 2022/05/25 | Lesson study reflection on a G5 lesson video in Japan  | MEXT YouTube Channel  |
| 29 | 2022/06/29 | How to help students to speak English fluently in high school  | High school ALT   |
| 30 | 2022/07/27 | My experience as a pre-service teacher: reflecting on my teaching practicum in JHS as an English teacher                               | Undergraduate student   |
| 31 | 2022/08/31 | Cultivating autonomous English learners  | Junior high school JTE  |
| 32 | 2022/09/04 | Joint event with OTJ: From an ALT to a full-time English/homeroom teacher in Japanese public schools                                   | University professor, Former ALT supervisor at prefectural board of education |
| 33 | 2022/10/26 | Incorporating presentation, extensive reading and communication with foreign students in lesson design                                 | Secondary school JTE  |
| 34 | 2022/11/30 | Extemporaneous speaking and debate   | Secondary school ALT  |
| 35 | 2022/12/21 | Life story of Naniwa global teacher  | Former high school principal  |
| 36 | 2022/12/27 | Joint event with JACET SIG: Thinking about the past, present and future of EFL education in China through the 2022 national curriculum | University professor  |

|    |            |  |             |
|----|------------|--|-------------|
| 37 | 2023/02/22 | Enhancement and innovation of international education/exchange activities inside and outside of the school | NPO manager |
| 38 | 2023/03/29 | Reflecting in/on the past three years of Monthly Edu Café  | Open floor  |

### 3. Feedback from Participants

#### 3.1 Description of Participants

As an online community of practice, the *Monthly Edu Café* is open to all interested parties, which includes JTEs, ALTs, HRTs, pre-service teachers, and university researchers. There is also an increasing number of international students and educators who are studying or previously studied education in Japan. They see the *Monthly Edu Café* as a window through which they can know and make sense of the reality of Japanese education in classrooms, by talking with practicing teachers. The group of attendees is composed of people who are regular members and attend monthly meetings regularly, as well as participants who attend just one or some specific meetings. Among the regular participants, there are a few foreign language teachers (mostly ALTs), and a significantly greater number of Japanese participants from various fields. This allows the group to provide a variety of perspectives and insights that serve the needs of both ALTs and Japanese school teachers. While it is known that ALTs lack systematic professional development in their careers, one of the activities of the *Monthly Edu Café* is to continue encouraging ALTs to engage with, and interact with their Japanese teaching peers through these meetings. At the workplace, both ALTs and their Japanese teaching partners lack the time required to adequately foster meaningful relationships, discuss educational philosophies or teaching practices. *Monthly Edu Café* offers participants opportunities for professional practice-based reflection across grades, school levels, cultures, and countries.

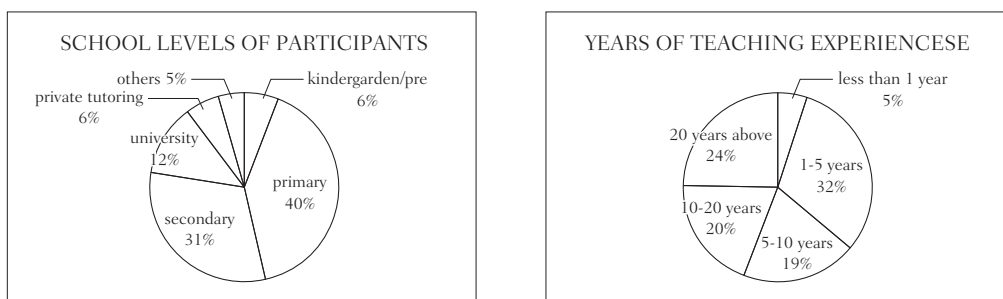
Beginning in September 2020, new participants were asked to submit a form about their respective backgrounds, so as to better understand the individuals themselves and the reasons why they felt strongly inclined to join the monthly meetings. Participants were asked for their contact information (e-mail), as well as the specifics of their teaching context, and how many years of experience they have in teaching. There are 337 participants who took the valid survey and answered to all questions.

Through this survey, it became clear that 40% of the participants, thus comprising the largest group, come from primary teaching context. There was also a significant number of

teachers who work in the secondary (31%) and university levels (12%). Those who teach at a private tutoring institution (including Eikaiwa—i.e., English conversation school—or cram school) took up 6%, while individuals who are categorized as “Others” (5%) come from business fields related to teacher training or testing contexts. It should also be noted that “Others” includes undergraduate and graduate students who are interested in a future career in teaching or using English.

In terms of years of teaching experience, more than half of the participating teachers has less than 5 years (32%) and between 5-10 years (19%) of teaching experience. This indicates that teachers in their early teaching career are more likely to feel motivated to talk to others and willing to gain new perspectives concerning professional learning. The results show that 20% of the teachers have 10-20 years of teaching experience, and 24% have more than 20 years. In this respect, the numbers suggest that older teachers also feel the need to engage in continuous learning as a profession, despite their many commitments. It can be said as a whole that the participants of *Monthly Edu Café* are comprised of teachers from a variety of teaching career stages. Since this group has members of different ages and from different educational generations, this can lead to a more active and meaningful sharing of ideas and discussion. The variety of the participants resonates with the demand for critical reflections from multiple perspectives, which was the initial impetus for designing the *Monthly Edu Café*.

Figure 1: Participants (n=337) of *Monthly Edu Café* (2020/09–2022/03)



### 3.2 Analysis of Participants' Needs from the Survey

Participants were also asked to describe their expectations or suggestions for the *Monthly Edu Café*, and the reasons for choosing to attend it. The answers were collected and categorized using a grounded theory approach in Table 2. While there was a lot of variety in the answers of the individuals, it was found that “sharing and exchanging teaching practices”



(49%) was the most popular item, followed by “gaining new ideas and methods” (19%). There was a set of specific topics that attracted the interest of 12% of the participants. This means that a significant number of participants choose which meeting to attend depending on the specific topic which is to be discussed. Given that an increasing number of cities and prefectures are hiring ALTs as full-time tenured English teachers in public schools (Wang & Kuziw, 2021), there is an interest among ALTs in knowing how to apply and prepare for the prefectural or city teacher hiring exam/interview (9%). “Knowing other perspectives” and “working with ALTs” were selected by a noticeable number of individuals who were interested in specifically learning how to improve their teaching rapport with ALTs (8%). Some participants (3%) described the diversity of this community, its bilingual system that is friendly to all participants, and freedom to talk in small group discussions as the main reasons for joining.

**Table 2:** Participants’ Expectations & Reasons for Joining *Monthly Edu Café*

| Categories                            | Examples  | Percentage    |
|---------------------------------------|---|---------------|
| (n=337)                               |   |               |
| Networking:<br>share/exchange         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Excited to learn from seasoned teachers!</li> <li>• Connect, learn and share with other teaching professionals who teach in similar environments and grade levels</li> <li>• To meet people willing to collaborate across school levels.</li> </ul>  | 49%           |
| Gaining<br>new ideas/methods          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I hope there will be fun game ideas that you can share, and how we can let the shy students engage in the lessons.</li> <li>• An engaging and innovative community; exploring new ideas to make English teaching more relevant to the students.</li> <li>• To widen my horizon in the teaching field.</li> </ul> | 19%           |
| Specific topics                       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How to deal with disrespectful kids</li> <li>• Team teaching research, CLIL</li> <li>• Want to know how to decorate English corner</li> </ul>  | 12%           |
| Knowing<br>how to teach<br>in Japan   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exploring the option to teach in Japan long-term</li> <li>• My goal is to be an HRT or JTE; I’m an ALT now.</li> <li>• In particular, how to prepare for a teaching job exam.</li> </ul>   | 9%            |
| Knowing<br>more about<br>ALT/JTE/HRT  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A look into the ALT world</li> <li>• I want to know how to cooperate with ALT.</li> <li>• I haven’t seen many groups that include both JTEs and ALTs. I’m very curious and looking forward to hearing about team teaching experiences.</li> </ul>  | 8%            |
| Open/friendly/<br>bilingual/diversity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Frank and casual discussion</li> <li>• Accessible for every teacher</li> <li>• I highly appreciate the bilingual style of this meeting.</li> </ul>   | 3%            |
|                                       |   | 100% in total |

#### 4. Future Prospects

In the field of teacher education, a number of international trends in professional learning communities (PLCs) can be seen, in conjunction with a modal shift in classroom research in Japan. Hord (1997) was the first to propose the concept of PLCs and argued that collaborative professional development of teachers is important for improving student learning. DuFour (2004) then emphasized the benefits of fostering a culture of teacher collaboration that continues to develop expertise, as the emphasis shifts from teacher teaching to student learning. Further, Hargreaves & O'Connor (2018) developed PLC theory by introducing a shift from “how teachers collaborate among themselves” to “how to deepen collaboration” in order to promote the growth of all students. From this trend, it is proposed that one of the common points that allows us to shift from mere superficial collaboration towards a deepening of collaboration is to reflect on daily practice in a collaborative manner.

In contrast to overseas trends, traditional classroom research in Japanese schools has served the function of a PLC for teachers to enhance their expertise. The qualitative shift in classroom research is evident in Kimura & Kishino's (2019) analysis (based on qualitative data) of the modal shift in classroom research. He introduced four types of modes: Mode 1 emphasizes the evaluation of teachers' teaching methods; Mode 2 emphasizes the validation of teaching plans; Mode 3 emphasizes the search for evidence of children's learning; and Mode 4 emphasizes teachers' continuous collaborative exploration of children's learning processes. Kimura & Kishino (2019) indicates that in order to realize the shift to a “Mode 4” collaborative inquiry-based classroom research, it is essential for teachers to collaboratively reflect on their practices, and reconstruct them through such reflection.

Considering these trends, in order to enhance the quality of professional communities that can realize Japanese-style school education as a holistic approach, it is extremely important to improve the practical competence of not only Japanese school teachers but also ALTs, who are closely involved in school education. By doing so, it will pave the way for further advancements in the ALT system and professional development that may lead to the improvement of Japan's unique foreign language education system.

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### Appendix:

Bilingual Online Monthly Edu Café Newsletter & Poster Archive. Retrieved from [https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/16yRHw0GtzUaJCmbmCKRuIC7j-Var\\_49J?usp=sharing](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/16yRHw0GtzUaJCmbmCKRuIC7j-Var_49J?usp=sharing)