

# Pre-service Teachers and the Multicultural Classroom — Are They Ready?—

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**Abstract:** According to data from the Statistics Bureau of Japan, a population trend in recent years shows an increase in the percentage of foreign residents, jumping up from 1.4% to nearly 2.0% of the total population in the last five years alone (Statistic Bureau of Japan, 2016; 2021). This data suggests that many of our current university students majoring in education will be entering a work environment that is drastically different from that of their predecessors; a multicultural work environment with not only students from non-Japanese cultural backgrounds but co-workers as well. The current study examines the results of a survey given to 75 students of education at one university in Japan to see how these pre-service teachers perceive their preparedness to work and teach in a multicultural classroom.

**Key words :** Multicultural Education, Teacher Training, Team Teaching

## **An Increasingly Diverse Japan**

The population of foreigners living in Japan has increased steadily according to the Japan population census, increasing by 6.3% (or 1.24% annually) between 2010 and 2015 and reaching 1.4% of the total population (Statistics Bureau of Japan, 2016). The trend noticed in 2016 has only been increasing, as a calculation of the population estimates recently released in 2021 shows an increase in the number and percentage of foreign residents in Japan from the above mentioned 1.4% to 1.98% of the total population (Statistics Bureau of Japan, 2021). This information, combined with the lowest population of people under 15 years old (11.9%) and the highest population of those over 65 (29%), suggests that Japan is facing an era in education with a high likelihood that teachers will be teaching in a multicultural classroom and where the knowledge of how to react to cultural differences between their students or themselves will be vital to successful instruction.

To further emphasise this point, particularly for Japanese teachers of English or those in elementary school education, this exposure to multiculturalism in the workplace reaches

beyond the classroom as more and more schools are bringing on foreign instructors to either help these teachers or to take the role of lead instructor in the classrooms. The difficulties that arise from this new element and collaboration between those native speakers of English who are often labelled as Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) and their Japanese teacher counterparts, the Japanese Teacher of English (JTE) at the secondary education level or the Homeroom Teacher (HRT) at the elementary education level, have been well documented (i.e. Leonard, 1999; Amaki, 2008; Ohtani, 2010; Tsuido, Otani, & Davies, 2012; Muller, 2015). Further, an uncertainty in both involved parties about the expectations and roles to be taken in the classroom have also been found (i.e. Mahoney, 2004; Reed, 2016; Hougham, Walter, & Sponseller, 2017; Walter & Sponseller, 2020), suggesting a lack of preparedness on the part of both the ALT and the JTE/HRT.

## **Research Questions**

As has been described above, there is a rising need to consider the changing situation of students and teachers in recent years in Japan.

Although this suggests a need to analyze multicultural training programs and workshops or seminars for improving ALT and HRT/JTE team teaching, there is one other aspect of education that researchers should be concerned with, the pre-service teacher. Many of these students in universities have limited exposure to other cultures, as was hinted at during the pilot study for the current research (Walter, 2017), and this leads to a natural concern for their future careers.

In order to get an idea of the concerns of pre-service teachers in regards to working in a multicultural environment, potentially with both students and co-workers from non-Japanese backgrounds, and an idea of how prepared they feel to teach a class on English, the following research questions were developed. First, *how confident are these students in their English ability and their preparedness to teach English?* Second, *how do these students feel about the importance of understanding other cultures and working in a multicultural environment alongside a native speaker of English?* Finally, *what do these pre-service teachers feel they are not prepared for in regards to working with a native speaker of English in a multicultural classroom?*

## The Study

### Participants

Participants were selected based on their chosen majors at one university in Japan. The majority of participants were in their undergraduate degree in Elementary Education or English Language Instruction, meaning they were studying to become either elementary school teachers or English language instructors in secondary schools in Japan. Names and student ID numbers of respondents were not collected to maintain the anonymity of the data. There were 75 respondents in total, 34 of which were male and 41 of which were female. The majority of respondents were in their second ( $n = 37$ ) year in university, with fewer first ( $n = 21$ ), third ( $n = 8$ ) and fourth year ( $n = 9$ ) students. Respondents were also asked

to rate their perceived English ability levels. The majority of respondents rated themselves at a beginner ( $n = 24$ ) or intermediate ( $n = 44$ ) level of proficiency.

### Instrumentation

A survey questionnaire piloted in a previous study (Walter, 2017) and validated in a separate study (Walter, 2018) was given to participants with the intent of exploring student concerns about working in a multicultural environment once they have begun their careers as teachers and to investigate student perceptions of what an ALT is both culturally and professionally. The questionnaire was designed using both quantitative and qualitative data, utilizing 20 Likert scale items rating from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree” (on a scale of 1 to 6) and 9 open ended questions. A Japanese version of the questionnaire was provided to avoid language bias and potential comprehension mistakes. Further, to avoid any possible influence on participant responses, participants were not given details about the identity or nationality of the researcher. A full copy of both the English and Japanese versions of the survey can be found in the article written by Walter (2017).

### Results

As described above, the original purpose of the questionnaire explored a variety of aspects in relation to working in a multicultural classroom with some items providing data beyond the scope of the current study. Because of this, not all data collected in the current study was analyzed as it lacked a connection to the research questions stated previously. The data from the questionnaire that was analyzed focused on three dimensions: the confidence and sense of preparedness of pre-service teachers to teach English, student perceptions of the importance of an understanding of culture when working in a multicultural classroom, and student concerns about their preparedness to teach alongside someone from

a differing culture from their own.

### **Confidence and Preparedness to Teach**

In order to examine pre-service teacher's confidence in their English language ability and their perceptions of readiness to teach English in the classroom, responses from two specific items were analyzed, one Likert-type item and one short answer item. For the Likert data, students were asked on a scale from 1 – 6 to rate how confident they felt that they could teach English. Of the total 75 responses, 13.3% ( $n = 10$ ) were strongly confident, 13.3% ( $n = 10$ ) were confident, 38.7% ( $n = 29$ ) were slightly confident, 16% ( $n = 12$ ) were slightly unconfident, 14.7% ( $n = 11$ ) were unconfident, and 4% ( $n = 3$ ) were strongly unconfident in their English teaching abilities.

To explore this question further, an open ended question was included in the questionnaire asking respondents what they thought about their language ability and whether they thought they could teach at their current English level. A variety of answers were provided, but some key trends appeared throughout the 75 responses. The two areas that seemed to concern the pre-service teachers the most were issues with their perceived inability in English pronunciation and with concerns over being able to use academic English to use during their instruction. Samples of these come from such comments as: "I can do reading and writing but am not good enough yet in speaking and listening. Even though I can teach grammar, I can't teach correct pronunciation," "I feel like I am not good enough at those sounds/pronunciation specific to English," "I am trying to improve my ability to share my thoughts using simple English. However, I think I need to learn how to communicate this to my students," and "having to explain the lesson to students using simple English words is difficult."

### **Culture and Instruction**

Data for information on pre-service teacher beliefs in the importance of understanding

culture when working in a multicultural class was collected through one Likert question from the survey. Students were again asked to rate from 1 – 6 the level of importance they put into this understanding. Responses to this question were almost completely positive, with the majority of responses, at 46.7% ( $n = 35$ ), as strongly agreeing with the importance followed closely by those that agreed with the importance, at 42.7% ( $n = 32$ ). The remainder of the responses were either slightly agree (9.3%;  $n = 7$ ) or slightly disagree (1.3%;  $n = 1$ ). There was a noticeable lack of disagreement with the idea that understanding of culture is important when working in a multicultural setting.

To examine how these students feel about working alongside a native speaker of English, a separate open ended question was asked in the questionnaire. Again, the 75 responses were analyzed and the following trends were discovered. For a large portion of the responses the researchers could see a mix of anxiety about communicating with the ALT at the level of the pre-service teacher's language ability and excitement for the opportunities such an experience would provide them. Most of the responses reflected positively on the teacher themselves increasing their cultural and language knowledge. Examples of these types of responses include: "I'm excited to learn about other countries but also worried whether or not I will be able to communicate with the ALT with my level of English," "I'm worried about my English, but excited all the same. I will be able to learn many new things," "I am worried about being able to communicate with the ALT with my English ability level, but am looking forward to being able to learn about foreign countries and making lessons together with the ALT," "I want to work with an ALT. I want to hear about things like culture and grammar from a native speaker," and "I'm worried if I can correctly explain the lesson to the ALT, but think it will be fun."

### **Concerns about the Multicultural Class**

The Likert-type item that most described

pre-service teachers' feelings of preparedness to work alongside someone from a different culture than their own focused mostly on their confidence with their language abilities. The question asked them on a scale from 1 – 6 to agree or disagree with the statement *I feel confident that I can have a conversation in English with my future ALT*. The most common responses were slightly disagree (29.3%;  $n = 22$ ) or disagree (28%;  $n = 21$ ). The remaining responses were, in order of percentage, slightly agree (18.7%;  $n = 14$ ), agree (9.3%;  $n = 7$ ), strongly agree (8%;  $n = 6$ ), and finally strongly disagree (6.7%;  $n = 5$ ).

The questionnaire also asked an open ended question of the participants to have them describe some of their concerns about teaching and working alongside an ALT as part of their future careers. Although many responses were similar to those given for the question discussed above (see *Culture and Instruction*) mainly with concerns about their ability to communicate with their ALT, a number of responses also spoke to concerns surrounding lesson planning and the effects of cultural differences between their ALTs and themselves on their ability to provide successful lessons to their students. Some examples of these types of responses include: “We may have a difference in teaching styles, I’d like to meet before classes,” “The ALT may not be able to work with a Japanese style of instruction,” “Communicating with the ALT, and since I may not know about their native culture I may do something impolite,” “More so than issues of language or roles, I’m worried we may not be able to work together well in the lesson,” “I’m afraid of being rude in the lessons due to things like a difference in cultures,” and “The way lessons are developed in Japan may be completely different from how they are done in other countries, so I am worried about our lesson planning.”

### Discussion

The changing face of the Japanese classroom as discussed above has the potential to create a

variety of concerns for Japanese English language teachers and homeroom teachers, especially if they have had little or no education focused on multiculturalism or cultures in general outside of Japan. Although there have been articles focused on the interaction and concerns between ALTs and their Japanese counterparts (i. e. Mahoney, 2004; Reed, 2016; Hougham, Walter, & Sponseller, 2017; Walter & Sponseller, 2020), very little has focused on the concerns of those students in universities who are hoping to start their career in English language or elementary education upon graduation from their programs. The current study utilized a questionnaire to answer three main questions: *How confident are these students in their English ability and their preparedness to teach English; How do these students feel about the importance of understanding other cultures and working in a multicultural environment alongside a native speaker of English; and What do these pre-service teachers feel they are not prepared for in regards to working with a native speaker of English in a multicultural classroom?*

Data collected for the first question about pre-service teachers' confidence in their English language ability revealed a majority of pre-service teachers who were slightly confident their current abilities. However, a large majority of these participants also felt nervous about their pronunciation skills and how their lack of pronunciation and that lack of confidence in their pronunciation may affect their ability to teach. A review of the data also revealed that even though these pre-service teachers may feel confident in their ability to communicate informally in English, they believe they are lacking in their knowledge of English used for the purpose of instruction. This may suggest that programs majoring in English language education or elementary education should consider the inclusion of this type of language or vocabulary instruction as part of their curriculums.

A summary of the data collected for the second research question above showed how

these pre-service teachers perceive the role of culture in their language classrooms and the interactions they may have with their native speaking ALTs. This data showed a strong belief of these participants in the importance of culture in a language classroom, as all but one respondent agreed with the questionnaire item. These participants also viewed their potential interactions working with an ALT positively, many focusing on the potential to increase their own knowledge of other cultures and the English language itself, but many still had concerns about their ability to communicate with their native speaking counterparts. This is not entirely surprising and actually reflects what is being found in the research about current teachers and the difficulties they are having communicating with their native speaking counterparts (Miyazato, 2009; Kano et al., 2015). This in itself is a challenge, but may suggest that the development of courses focusing on introducing these pre-service teachers to cultures and individuals from these cultures and providing them with opportunities to interact and converse with students from other cultures in English may help in improving their confidence in their own abilities before they graduate and enter their chosen field of education.

Finally, data collected for the third issue of concerns pre-service teachers have about working alongside an ALT and in a multicultural classroom revealed similar results to the responses above. In general, most students feel their English language ability is sufficient for having conversations with their ALTs, but are most concerned about and lack confidence in using more professional English when preparing for and teaching the actual English lesson. Further, a concern about a lack of worldly or cultural knowledge was discussed in many of the open ended responses. As stated in the previous paragraph, this suggests that pre-service teachers have not just a personal but a professional interest in learning about cultures. The inclusion of some type of course that focuses on increasing the multicultural

knowledge or awareness of pre-service teachers in the current educational curriculum may also help to quell some of these concerns that students are facing.

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