Impact of Action Research Experience on Novice Language Teachers

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate how the novice teachers' experiences of conducting action research in a teacher education program affect their teaching in their individual classroom context and their ability for self-development. The M.A. Japanese language teacher education program at the institution, where the authors of this paper teach, requires students to conduct action research while they are engaged in a three-semester long teaching practicum. This requirement aims to equip students with, not only teaching skills, but also the abilities and attitudes necessary to continue growing professionally throughout their careers. We conducted in-depth interviews with the four graduates of the program, who have been engaged in Japanese language teaching either in Japan or abroad. The analysis of the data indicates that their action research experience still has an impact on their daily teaching, especially on their reflective practices. Even in an informal manner, all of them continue to reflect on their everyday teaching and think about ways to improve it. We tentatively concluded that once acquired, these reflective skills may remain and continue to be a powerful tool for their professional development in the long term.

1 Introduction

As the scope of second/foreign language education becomes more and more diversified, knowledge and skills that a second language teacher is required to possess also become more complex and diversified compared to that a few decades ago. This awareness among second language teacher educators has necessitated reexamination of what second/foreign language education can and should offer to trainee teachers. Freeman and Johnson (1998) argued for a conceptual shift in language teacher education from the traditional transmission or behaviorist approach to more a constructivist approach. The authors of this paper are engaged in a MA Japanese language teacher preparation program which was established eight years ago aligned with this new view and has adopted educational approaches to foster Japanese language teachers who are equipped with the abilities and attitudes to continue their professional development throughout their careers.

Since the beginning of the program, 70% of all our graduates got a teaching job in their first year after graduation, and 57% of them are still teaching three years after graduation, so we felt it important to examine how their experiences in our program actually have impacted on their daily teaching. We are especially interested in the teaching practicum and action research requirements that we consider the most important elements in our curriculum, adopted to foster reflective teachers. By investigating their impact on our graduates' professional development, we hope to reexamine and improve our program and also contribute to the discussion in second language teacher education on what teacher preparation programs can and should offer for trainee students.

2   Literature review

2.1   Shifting the conception of teaching in second language teacher education

According to Freeman & Johnson's (1998) review of historical changes in language teacher education in the past few decades, up until 1980's, the majority of the classroom-based research on language teaching "sought to describe effective teaching behaviors, positive learner outcomes, and teacher-student interactions that were believed to lead to successful L2 learning" (p. 398). Accordingly, the dominant approach to teacher education was to equip teachers with those discrete skills and behaviors which were observable from outside (Borg, 2006).

By the mid-1980's, however, there was a growing awareness that teaching is more complex than just aggregation of discrete teacher behaviors and that "studies of teaching which examined individual teacher's work and cognitions in a more holistic and qualitative manner began to appear" (Borg, 2006, p. 6).

Teacher educators began to recognize that trainees enter teacher education programs not in the state of a blank slate waiting to be filled with new knowledge and skills, but they bring their personal beliefs, values shaped by their prior experiences, especially as learners, which have great impact on their learning in the programs (Freeman & Johnson, 1998). Freeman & Johnson have argued that the knowledge-base of language teacher education must account for how individuals learn to teach and for the complex factors, influences, and processes that contribute to learning and that "learning to teach is a long-term, complex, developmental process that operates through participation in the social practices and contexts associated with learning and teaching" (p. 402).

This constructivist approach now seems to be accepted by many language educators. Then how should a language teacher program that embraces this view be organized and what should it offer to its students?

2.2   Contents of second language teacher education and their educational impact

Kagan (1992) reviewed 40 studies on growth among preservice and novice teachers published between 1987–1991 to explore common sequences of developmental stages and processes by which teachers grow and to "infer the nature of teacher education programs most likely to promote professional growth" (p. 130).

Kagan found that teacher education programs had less effect on the beliefs about good teaching of future teachers than their experiences as pupils. This strong impact of the teachers' past experiences as learners on their teaching practices is also known as "apprenticeship of observation" (Lortie, 1975). Kagan argues that if teacher education programs are to help students grow professionally during their time in the programs, these personal beliefs must be challenged, modified and reconstructed. Kagan (1992) suggests some elements that might promote learning-to-teach processes of student-teachers. For example:

- Programs should provide opportunities for students to reflect upon their own beliefs and images of teaching and teachers and to become aware of the limitations that their beliefs impose on their growth;

- Students should acquire and develop standardized classroom routines for handling and managing their classes. If these routines are established, student-teachers are able to shift their focus onto their pupils, rather than on their own classroom behaviors;
- To help students achieve above goals, practicums or internships should be sufficiently long and frequent and consistent with the information provided in courses they have taken; and
- Programs should provide opportunities for student teachers to conduct structured research projects which involve systematic observation on their students' learning and classroom interactions, which will serve as opportunities for them to examine and modify their prior beliefs and image of self as teacher.

Wright (2010, p. 273) reviewed more recent research on second language teacher preparation programs and found that innovative pedagogy emerging in second language teacher education has common characteristics that include the following foci:

Such programs
- place emphasis on the student teacher's learning-to-teach process;
- include activities encouraging reflection on student teachers' learning experiences such as journals and diaries writing;
- commit to student teachers' inquiry into their own beliefs and into the professional contexts of teaching and learning for which they are being prepared, and
- embrace adult education whose central idea is learning from experience.

Farrell (2016) reported research findings on three novice ESL teachers who experienced difficulties coping with their classroom realities and felt that their pre-service teacher training had not prepared them adequately. To make the transition between the pre-service education program and real classrooms smoother, Farrell (2016, p. 106) proposes to include "reflective practice" courses in the programs which can provide pre-service teachers with the tools for reflection so that they can prepare for the unknown and unpredictable realities of their future classrooms. The framework of reflective practice consists of five levels of reflection which can guide students to engage in systematic and structured reflection.

Research findings implicate the interest in and emphasis on teachers' learning to teach processes and recognition of the positive impact of reflective activities in teacher preparation programs on student teachers' development.

2.3   Reflective teaching and action research

As discussed here, many teacher educators advocate that reflection ("reflective practice" "reflective model" "reflective teaching") can provide trainees opportunities for professional development (e.g. Burton, 2009; Farrell, 2016; Richards & Lockhart, 1994; Wallace, 1991). Burton (2009) states "being reflective assists teachers' lifelong professional development, enabling them to critique teaching and make better-informed teacher decisions" (p. 298).

Systematic reflection can make teacher trainees' personal theories which are often tacit become explicit and shared with other people as well. Now we see the explosion of interest in the ideas of teachers as reflective practitioners. At the same time, there is confusion about what it means in practice. The concept of reflective teaching has been developed drawing on Dewey (1933) and Schön (1983, 1987). Traditionally, it is considered that studies of teaching are conducted by researchers in universities and teachers are seen as passive consumers of such research findings and mere implementers. Wallace (1991) terms this approach the applied science model. The concept of reflective teaching, on the other hand, values teachers' experiences and knowledge gained from their teaching careers. Through reflection in action and on action (Schön, 1983), teachers can build their personal theories. Some researchers express their concern that the term "reflective practice" is used just as a slogan or a motto (Burton, 2009; Zeichner & Liston, 1996). Even so, if reflective activities are included effectively in a teacher education program, they seem to be a powerful pedagogical tool in the framework of constructivist view of teacher education.

Wallace's "reflective model" (1991) inspired us to create our curriculum. Wallace suggests that teacher education has two main dimensions; "received knowledge", that is, facts, data, theories etc. associated with the study of a particular profession gained from reading books or attending lectures. "Experiential knowledge", on the other hand, is developed during the teacher's on-going experience or action. In a more traditional transmission model of teacher education, knowledge gained in courses and experiences gained during student teaching or practicum are treated in isolation. Wallace claims that the relationships between the two knowledges should be reciprocal, so that the trainee can reflect on the "received knowledge" in the light of classroom experience, and so that classroom experience can feed back into the "received knowledge" sessions. This reciprocal cycle occurs throughout trainees' learning experience and helps them develop their professional competence as a teacher. The ability or disposition to conduct systematic reflection leads to action research.

Action research first began and developed in the1930s as researchers in the social sciences looked at employees improving their workplaces. It is now widely accepted in many other areas and is well developed especially in teaching (McNiff & Whitehead, 2011). In the field of second language teaching, the growing interest in learner-centered curriculum design, classroom-based research, and the notion of the teacher as a reflective practitioner have all been conducive to its dissemination in the 1980s (Burns, 2009). We see this surge in interest because the research is conducted by practitioners/teachers to improve their practice and demonstrate their professional accountability. By conducting action research, teachers are given opportunities to examine problems/concerns/interests arising from their own classrooms and explore ways to improve them and implement them. Unlike traditional applied science models, teachers are both researchers and implementers of plans based on their own research findings (McNiff & Whitehead, 2011).

Burns (1999) presents common features of action research by summarizing its definitions put forward by different researchers as follows.

1. Action research is contextual, small-scale and localized, defining and investigating problems with in a specific situation.
2. It is evaluative and reflective as it aims to bring about change and improvement in practice.
3. It is participatory as it provides for collaborative investigation by teams of colleagues, practitioners, and researchers.
4. Changes in practice are based on the collection of information or data which provides the impetus for change.

The most well-known model of action research is that proposed by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988), which involves four phases, Planning-Action-Observation-Reflection. This process is cyclic and Reflection in the first cycle leads to Planning in the second cycle and the process goes on. The researcher can continue this process to further improve the situation or to focus on a new issue or problem identified in this iterative manner.

Action research in teacher education is now considered to be one method to help teachers continue to develop professionally by reflecting on interesting or problematic areas in their teaching contexts in a systematic and structured way. It is different from other traditional types of research in that it focuses on individual contexts and is not so concerned about making generalizations. Its primary focus is to improve the situation of the teacher-researcher. But as Burns summarizes, it is often conducted collaboratively with colleagues or students. It seems quite natural in a social constructivist view since the teacher is considered to develop not alone, but in interaction with other participants, in the situation and in each specific social context.

Action research is now regarded as a powerful tool to empower teachers. Burns (2009) states, however, that "there is still very little evidence to indicate the extent of actual action research practice in teacher education" (p. 292), and claims that it is not yet so well developed except for Australia and North America, where teachers receive more professional support.

In Japan, too, there is a growing interest in adoption of action research for professional development in many areas including language teacher education (e.g. Yokomizo, Sakoda, & Matsuzaki,

2004). At this point, however, not many research findings have been shared in an international forum, and we hope more experiences in areas other than Australia and North America will be shared with international colleagues.

3 The study

This section presents empirical findings that answer the three research questions guiding the project. For the sake of clarity, the three issues are discussed under separate headings below.

3.1 Purpose of the study

As was discussed, shifts in the language teacher education are no doubt moving toward more social constructivist views from the transmission approach and many language teacher educators have been strongly interested in the process of how teachers, both pre- and in- service learn to teach. Farrell (2016) argues,

> There is little agreement about what constitutes the knowledge base for the profession: language teacher education programs vary greatly both in length (from a weekend course to an MA degree) and in content, with some focusing exclusively on theory (such as second language acquisition theory or linguistics) and very few [are] concerned with how teachers can put into practice what they have learned in these programs. (p. 2)

The program in which the authors teach aims to equip student teachers with the abilities and attitudes necessary to continue growing professionally throughout their careers. The practice of reflective teachers is informed through the teaching practicums and experience in implementing action research, which is, hereafter, defined as the small-scale research aimed at improvement of some aspect of professional practice of teaching that involves cyclic sequences of four phases: Planning-Action-Observation-Reflection. Future teachers engage in autonomous critical self-examination to address different teaching problems through systematic efforts for improving instruction.

As Wright (2010) maintains, if we are to evaluate a teacher preparation program, we need to examine "whether it has succeeded in meeting its own aims and demands, in the short term, and also, most importantly in the long term, whether the graduates of a program have the desired impact on the educational contexts where they teach" (p. 263). In this study, we attempted to evaluate the educational effect of our program in the long term. More specifically, we tried to investigate whether action research and other activities designed to foster our student teachers' reflectivity have actually had any impact on their everyday teaching in each of their teaching contexts. To explore this question, we conducted in-depth interviews with four graduates of our program.

3.2 Context of the study

We provide here some contexts for our program. The Japanese language teacher education program was established in 2008. It offers a two-year M.A. program whose curriculum consists of theory-oriented courses in the first year and practicum courses in the second.

The theory-oriented courses include indispensable subjects for Japanese language teaching such as introduction to Japanese language teaching, Japanese pedagogical grammar, second language acquisition theories for Japanese language teaching, foreign language methodology, pedagogy for Japanese speech sounds and prosody, evaluation and testing in Japanese language teaching etc. These courses aim to provide essential knowledge and theories concerning Japanese language teaching, which are reported and outlined by relevant Japanese government offices such as the former Ministry of Education and the Agency for Cultural Affairs (Agency for Cultural Affairs, 2000; Ministry of Education, 2000). These documents provide the official expectation for college-level Japanese language teacher training programs.

These theory-oriented courses provide not only facts and theories but also opportunities for students to connect what they have learned with how that knowledge relates to actual teaching. For

instance, in the Japanese pedagogical grammar course, students are asked to consider and discuss practical application of grammatical knowledge on teaching items, being followed by the instructor's practical comments or instructions about teaching experiences. This course also provides an opportunity for students to present demo classes as a culminating project. Students are also encouraged to reflect on their beliefs on language teaching and learning, what they consider good teaching and what not in the methodology course, and on their language learning experiences in the second language acquisition theory course. These activities are included in each course to connect the received knowledge to the experiential knowledge (Wallace 1991), to fill the gap between theory and practice, and to help students become aware of their own beliefs about language teaching and learning and the impact such beliefs might have on their learning in the program.

In the second year, students are required to take three practicum courses in three successive semesters, Fall, Winter and Spring and to engage in reflective activities which culminate in their action research. These requirements lie at the core of our curriculum and are intended to foster the abilities and attitudes necessary to continue growing professionally even after they have left our program. Each element in these requirements is meticulously designed to help students develop their teaching as well as reflective skills in a step-by-step manner.

To implement the idea of reflective practices and action research with cyclic reflections in the successive three practicum courses, we designed three-step teaching practices that make it possible to develop Japanese language teachers as effective reflective practitioners. The three-step teaching practices roughly reflect the following training-development continuum proposed by Freeman (1990, p. 115). (We omit the component of technique from the original model, since it does not always fit with ours).

Table 1. Freeman (1990)'s Model for educating Teachers

	Training ⟶ Development Continuum		
	Directive Option	Alternative Option	Nondirective option
Central issue	"What do I teach?"	"How do I teach?"	"Why do I teach what I teach?" "Why do I teach as I do?"
Stance: observer-teacher relationship	Observer is authority; teacher is implementer.	Observer is foil, "devil's advocate"; teacher is chooser of alternatives.	Observer is "understander," outside perspective, "seed planter"; teacher is chooser, implementer, authority.
Contents of observer's response	Discrete points that can reach mastery through specific courses of action	Possible alternatives illustrating a choice; variety of mastery possible	Open-ended discussion, based on a "questing" / "understanding" relationship

Freeman designated this model, based on how much or to what extent teacher educators intervene in student teachers' practice teachings, regarding second language teacher education as a continuum from training to development. In the directive option, an extreme for training on the continuum, teacher educators directly or actively intervene the student teachers' practice teaching by making explicit and concrete advices or comments. This training stage allows student teachers to have teaching experiences in the most sheltered setting. Our first practicum course reflects more aspects from this stage than those from the other stages.

In the nondirective option, the other extreme for development on the continuum, teacher educators "… allow the student teacher to sort through the practice teaching experience without interference or direction from the educator, to find individual solutions", allowing the educators themselves "to participate in this process and to contribute from knowledge and experience without directing the student teacher to specific conclusions or courses of action" (Freeman, 1990, p. 112). This development stage allows student teachers to have teaching experiences in the least sheltered setting. Our third practicum course focuses on more aspects from this stage than those from the other stages.

In the alternative option, the middle of the continuum, teacher educators intervene in student teachers' practice teachings in a less active or in an indirect way, suggesting alternatives and giving student teachers an opportunity to select or reject one of them on the basis of their own reasoning.

This intermediate stage allows student teachers to have teaching experiences in a more independent setting. Our second practicum course involves more aspects from this stage than those from the other stages.

In the following, let us illustrate how each practicum and the reflective activities are structured by implementing the idea of reflective practice and action research under the training-development continuum model described here.

Step 1 (Fall Practicum): Each student-teacher teaches eight to ten 25-minute long lessons during the semester. The lessons they teach are elementary level Japanese, and international students from regular Japanese courses are recruited for these lessons to play roles of elementary level learners. Although grammar items and expressions taught in each lesson are chosen from the designated Japanese language textbooks, the novices are encouraged to teach their lessons communicatively. All the lessons are videotaped so that each student-teacher can watch and use them for their reflection. They are also instructed to keep teaching logs or journals, which are also sources for reflection. International students participating in each lesson also gives written feedback comments to student-teachers. Each lesson is followed by a discussion session in which supervising instructors, student-teachers and their peers exchange comments on the lesson.

Since most of student-teachers have never taught in a classroom setting, they first need to develop basic classroom teaching and management skills in this practicum. At this stage, therefore, they need more assistance and guidance from supervising instructors to create their teaching plans. As they teach more lessons and feel more comfortable with classroom routines, the amount of time they need to spend with their supervisors in planning lessons decreases. In a discussion session, student-teachers reflects on what went well and what not and why. By having such an opportunity, they learn to verbalize explicitly what they did, why they did so, how they feel and think they can improve it, which otherwise may be implicit and be left as subjective feeling. Peer students observing lessons can see the problems of the student-teacher from an outsider's point of view and learn to provide constructive critique, for which they also need to develop skills to communicate what they think explicitly and clearly. In turn, such observations help them to examine their own teaching more objectively and analytically.

At the end of the semester, student-teachers write their final papers in which they reflect on the whole experience, what has and has not been improved, discussing why, and exploring ways for improvement which can be implemented in the next practicum.

Step 2 (Winter Practicum): In the Winter semester, student-teachers are required to organize a two-week intensive Japanese language program for students recruited from a partner university in Taiwan. This is a practicum for our student-teachers, but participants in the program are paying fees and expecting fruitful experience in the program, which gives student-teachers more responsibilities than the previous practicum. Unlike the first practicum, classes in the program are task-based and no textbooks are used. Instead, student-teachers design their own course based on the participants' needs and interests surveyed before the program. In this program, student-teachers not only teach their classes but also plan and implement cultural events such as field trips to local areas. Although supervisors assist student-teachers in preparing the program and creating lesson plans, once the program has started, the expectation is that student-teachers take initiative to run the whole program.

The participants from Taiwan are divided into two or three different classes according to their Japanese language proficiency levels and student-teachers in groups of two or three are in charge of each class. A team of student-teachers work together to plan classroom activities for the two weeks leading to the final task. Each student-teachers are in charge of five or six lessons individually, in which they can try out ideas to improve their problems they have identified in Fall. Since student-teachers interact with the same group of learners during the two-week practicum, they have ample opportunities to observe their learners' learning processes closely and continuously. Patterns of classroom interaction are also different from the ones in the previous practicum. Therefore, they may find new problems or challenges while teaching in the task-based class. Student-teachers are not only responsible for their classes but also for extra-curricular activities, which they are expected to implement working collaboratively as a team.

To make this whole program successful, the student-teachers also need to collaborate with all the administrative staff members involved, thus are expected to acquire program coordination skills.

After this program is over, student-teachers and supervisors have discussion sessions to reflect on the program and to prepare for the final practicum. Videotaped classes, lesson plans, journals and feedback comments by the participants are all valuable data for reflection. By this time, student-teachers have clearer ideas as to what they need or want to focus on and explore further in in their final practicum. Since the third practicum is also a task-based one, student-teachers can try their ideas for improvements in a similar setting. At this point, they are encouraged to examine and analyze their teaching performance as well as interactions with the learners and among learners in the second practicum quantitatively and qualitatively and begin to review related literature. They again write their final papers which consist of their reflections on and analysis of their performance in this practicum, whether they have made improvements from the first practicum, what they now see their problem to improve or issues to explore, and plans or ideas they want to implement in the final practicum.

Step 3 (Spring Practicum): The third practicum takes place at partner universities abroad, where our student-teachers, in groups of two or three, teach a two-week-long task-based special course. These universities have agreed to organize a special class and to recruit participating students from their regular Japanese classes for this practicum. This practicum course is totally independent of their regular curriculum. As such, student-teachers can design a task-based course based on the participants' needs and interests identified through survey as they did in the second practicum. We, supervisors help them prepare teaching plans for this course before their departure, but do not go with them to those universities. Instead, we receive daily reports from them every day during the practicum, and if requested, provide suggestions via e-mail, but otherwise, expect them to be autonomous and independent and to cope with unexpected challenges they might encounter there on their own. Since most of our students will teach Japanese abroad after graduation from our program, this practicum abroad provides them with valuable opportunities to teach in a "Japanese as a foreign language setting," to learn about different motivation or needs of students of Japanese there, to learn about different educational culture, and to learn about different working conditions and communication styles among teachers and staff members there. This final practicum abroad, all in all, is designed to provide student-teachers to work in a situation more similar to real life work settings.

After completion of the third practicum, for the rest of the final semester, student-teachers examine their teaching in the final practicum, whether their plans or ideas for improvements worked well or not and why. They can compare their performance with the previous practicum, especially with those in the second practicum by using qualitative and quantitative methods. They refer to related literature in order to connect their experience with theory. They also reflect on their whole learning-to-teach experience during the two years in the program and write up their action research paper. During this process, student-teachers and supervisors have discussion sessions as a group regularly and exchange comments on each other's reflection, analysis and findings. Here, again, they learn to explicitly communicate to their peers what they have discovered.

3.3   Participants

We contacted graduates of our program who were engaged in Japanese Language teaching and were available for interview either in person or via skype and the following four graduates agreed to participate in this study. We did not include those who were not engaged in Japanese language teaching at the time of this study. Of the four participants, three were Japanese language instructors and one was an administrative staff member in a Japanese language school. They are all female. Their names are pseudonyms.

Table 2. List of participants

Name	Information
Mika	• Position: Instructor at a university in Japan • Target Students: international exchange students. • No prior teaching experience before entering the MA program. Taught Japanese at a university in an East Asian country for one year after graduating from the program. • Total teaching experience: 4 years
Yumi	• Position: Instructor at a university in Japan • Target Students: international exchange students. • Taught Japanese at a university in an East Asian country for five years before entering the MA program. • Total teaching experience: 6 years
Reiko	• Position: Instructor at an institution which consists of primary and secondary education in a country in Southeast Asia. • Target students: Teaching Japanese to elementary, junior high and senior high school students. • Other responsibility: administrative duties as head teacher of the Japanese language section. • No prior teaching experience before entering the MA program. • Total teaching experience: 5 years at the current institution.
Hitomi	• Position: administrative staff member in the administrative office at a private Japanese language school in Japan • The institution has a Japanese language school for international students and a teacher preparation program. • No prior teaching experience before entering the MA program. Taught Japanese at a university in an East Asian country for one year after graduating the program. • Total teaching experience: one year

3.4   *Data collection and analysis procedures*

We chose in-depth semi-structured interviews ethnographic interviews as our main data collection method. As Ely (1991) argues, "the major purpose of an in-depth ethnographic interview is to learn to see the world from the eyes of the person interviewed" (p. 58). Since our aim was to discover how our former students make sense of their learning experience during their time in the program and in each of their teaching context at the time the research was implemented, our interview method is appropriate.

The interviews were semi-structured in that, in addition to the set of questions we prepared in advance, we asked more impromptu questions depending on the responses. These interviews were conducted during the period of March to July 2016. Each interview lasted 60 to 90 minutes. Interviews with Mika, Yumi, and Hitomi were conducted in person but the interview with Reiko was done via skype because she was not available for an in-person interview. All interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. Written reports on their initial beliefs about teaching and learning languages which they wrote in their first semesters in the MA program and their action research papers were also used for triangulation.

Since both the authors and the participants were native speakers of Japanese, all the interviews were conducted in Japanese. Also, all reports and papers described here were written in Japanese. After all the analysis was completed, segments of the transcripts that were to be quoted in this paper were translated into English by the authors. When some words or sentences in a quoted segment were omitted by the authors, the omission was indicated by "…" Words in parentheses in quotes were added by the authors to help the reader better understand what was actually meant by the participants.

Each of the authors read and examined all the transcripts, then coded segments of data which seemed important or pertinent to our research question. This was done both inductively and deductively, in that some codes came from our research question and others emerged as we looked at our data closely. While coding, we attended to recurring and salient patterns. Then, we tried to organize

the codes and to construct categories. In this process we searched for connections among and between the various categories (Seidman, 1991; Spradley, 1979).

4 Findings

Findings are presented in terms of two themes, which are emerged as we analyzed the interview data.

4.1 How are the participants' action research topics related to their current teaching?

All the participants commented that their action research experiences certainly have impact on their teaching practices now. For some, the topics of their action research now guided them as the teacher.

The topic of Reiko's action research was her own questioning behavior and its impact on students' output. She felt that her questions had not elicited enough response from her students. In order to improve her questioning skills, she analyzed the types and frequency of the questions she posed as well as the following interaction between her and her students. Looking back, she thought this experience was beneficial for her even now. She said:

> Thinking of what kind of questions I should ask students in my class, such as open questions or others, I can utilize my action research experience. Because I conducted my action research on this topic, I still have the awareness about making question. Even if I don't have enough time to make a thorough teaching plan, I would not skip making and writing down questions which I am supposed to ask in the class. Questions are my compass. In that sense, the action research experience directly affects my current teaching. (Reiko)

Mika's action research was on learner-centeredness. She wrote in one of her class reports in her first semester in the graduate program that she had thought that a teacher should understand individual differences among learners and be able to see things from the learner perspectives to help them learn better, especially those who had more difficulties. This awareness was based on her own experience as a student. Later in her first year in the program, she took a course in which the concept of "learner-centeredness" and various aspects of the teacher's role involved in learner-centeredness were introduced. She was very much interested in this concept, especially in the teacher's role to support and facilitate students' learning and chose it as the theme of her action research. She examined whether she was able to play different roles as a teacher in her practicum to promote students' learning. She explained how this was related to her teaching now,

> I am still aware and always considering and understanding students' needs, and organizing the class to meet their needs. That was the theme of my action research. (Mika)

The program in which Mika is teaching now has common syllabuses and textbooks for each level, and the content covered in one semester is also predetermined. Therefore, she does not have so much liberty to change the course content or pace as she wishes, but still is trying her best to provide support for each student.

> I cannot deviate from what has been predetermined [by the program], so while observing the program policy, I try to understand what each student really wants and to provide necessary suggestions to promote each of my students' learning. In order to do so, I often talk with my students individually. (Mika)

Mika said she was now aware that while taking good care of slow learners was important, a teacher should be able to help fast learners develop better at the same time.

> When I was teaching new items I noticed that some students were struggling to catch up with the class. But at the same time, I also noticed that fast learners were challenging themselves to use difficult words and expressions… I was aware of such learner diversity before, but now I became more strongly aware of it. (Mika)

Yumi's action research topic was task-based language teaching (TBLT). She had taught such classes before she entered the graduate program, which she felt were unsatisfactory. That was the reason she chose this topic for her action research. She had conducted a TBLT class at her former school because of the new educational policy of the school. Since her other classes were grammar-based, she had had no experience with this new approach. Without having enough knowledge of TBLT, she planned a project in which her students were to create short video messages in Japanese to introduce the campus.

> When I taught a task-based class for the first time [at my former school], I paid much attention to follow the schedule. I was too concerned about the schedule to observe my students. I tried to make students follow my schedule, and did not change it to the pace of the students' learning…I was not aware that I put my students in the framework I had created in advance, without paying attention to what they could and could not do, and without helping them learn to do what they could not do. (Yumi)

In addition, not wanting to discourage her students, she was, at that time, hesitant to correct grammatical errors students made while engaging in the project. In her practicum in the graduate program, therefore, she designed a task-based course, in which she wanted to examine how she could help her students work on the task and how her intervention would affect their learning. This action research experience helped her deepen her understanding of different teachers' roles in a TBLT class. She wrote in her action research paper,

> I realized I had believed that teachers' help or intervention would deprive learners of opportunities to learn autonomously. But [in the graduate program] through this practicum experience, I have discovered that providing necessary assistance or intervention with learners helped them advance the task and as a result yielded more opportunities for interaction with their peers. (Yumi's action research paper)

Yumi has been interested in TBLT since, and is trying to implement it in her class currently.

> I would like to continue what I have learned in my action research experience. I hope to include not a big project, but rather smaller tasks in my class activities. What I am interested in is how to assess students' performance in a task and how to incorporate students' self-evaluation in that process. I am also interested to see how my own assessment on students' performance and their self-evaluation correlate. (Yumi)

For Hitomi, rather than the topic of her action research per se, the whole experience of the teaching practicum seemed to have greater impact. Hitomi stated that her perspectives were broadened because of the challenge to run the short intensive program in the winter practicum. Her experience of not only teaching the participating international students but also working cooperatively with people from different sections during that practicum helped her realize the importance of coordination and cooperation skills.

> In the winter practicum, we were in charge of coordinating the whole program, which was challenging for us. There were so many things that we had to take care of during the program, but because of the challenge, we have acquired coordinating skills, and have learned to be more considerate of others. I know that our practicum supervisors were anxiously observing us, but they let us do everything. Now, because of that experience, I understand what I should think and prepare in advance, but in those days (before the practicum), I did not. (Hitomi)

Hitomi is currently an administrative staff member in a Japanese language school, working with colleagues in different sections. In that environment, she strongly feels that the coordination skill she acquired in that practicum now helped her to make daily operation smoother. She elaborated:

> I am now feeling that I have developed an ability to think about not only what I myself should do in a project, but also think about how each staff member involved should work to run the project. The importance of thinking ahead and seeing things from various points of view was instilled in my mind during my practicum experience, by having an opportunity to run a whole intensive winter program. (Hitomi)

As the above quotes indicate, the action research experience thus seemed to have an impact on the informants' professional lives in various ways. Reiko remains more aware of the importance of

asking students good questions. In the case of Mika, she deepened her understanding of student-centered teaching that sustains challenged learners, yet still inspires advances learners. Of the four study informants, Yumi was the only one with prior teaching experience. Because of action research, she improved her understanding on task-based language teaching and is incorporating such learning in her current classroom. An administrator, Hitomi is now able to run her program collaboratively, thinking ahead and administering more effectively to many demands of teachers and their students simultaneously.

4.2   How are the participants' reflective dispositions maintained?

As was explained in 3.2, reflective activities are built in the curriculum and participants were provided ample opportunities to reflect upon their teaching, which was the major component of their action research. Through this experience, reflection seemed to have become daily routine for each of the participants.

> What I have still been doing is reflection, which I learned from conducting action research. I don't video-record my classes now. But when I think that my class did not go well today, I just don't walk away…On the way back to my office, I start looking back at my class and thinking things, such as I should have done something this way, and I will try that way next time. I think this is because we did reflection after every class (in my graduate program). (Reiko)

> I want to continue my self-evaluation. I also want to receive students' evaluation. I guess that when I conducted action research, I could always receive comments about my teaching, and, based on the comments, I could reflect on it. I want to continue this cycle. Now I cannot receive comments from other teachers, but can get honest comments from my students. The awareness of self-evaluation and feedback from students has been formed during my teaching practicums. (Yumi)

> I always do reflection now. I know I should write it down (but I don't have time now). But if something happens in my class, I follow a reflective thinking cycle… When I write reports on my classes (at the end of each semester, which all the instructors are required to do), I reflect on my teaching. (Mika)

> I think that a habit of reflection was formed in my graduate days. It was hard for me to watch my teaching video because my teaching was so poor in those days. While watching, I felt depressed. But until then, I had not had the chance to watch myself objectively. I learned that I should not forget to observe myself. I learned that I should have objective eyes. (Hitomi)

Reflection also led to the development of meta-awareness as the teacher.

> When I watched my demo-teaching video, I found something absolutely unexpected about myself there. Then, I realized that my teachers' and my peers' critique was right. I definitely understood what they meant after watching my teaching. I realized the gap between myself that I imagined to be and myself that I discovered in the video. I realized how I looked in an objective way. (Hitomi)

> What I learned most in my graduate days was the skill of objectively watching my own teaching. I feel as if there were another 'myself' watching down on me calmly. I talk to myself while I am teaching, "This activity is not going well now," or "This questioning strategy was good." I have learned to ob-serve myself that way. (Yumi)

Interestingly, meta-awareness could emerge later. Reiko described her experience of taking care of student teachers, which put her in the position of the supervising teacher. She compared her ex-perience with the one she had with her supervisors when she was in the MA program.

> I don't remember anything that happened during my first two years here. I simply did not have time to look back. In my third year, I was put in a position to take care of student teachers who were college students from Japan. When I was observing their teaching, I remembered the time I was a student teacher myself conducting a teaching practicum in the graduate program. I began recalling what my teacher had said about my teaching … Now I am in my fifth year here, and have begun to see myself more objectively. I can now understand what my teachers in the graduate programs were talking about. (Reiko)

Reiko also talked about her colleague, who did not seem to reflect on her teaching as Reiko did and realized that being reflective is a skill that can be developed with training.

> When we had a teachers' meeting, that colleague would say, "My class did not go well today. My students did not learn that," and that's all. I wondered, "OK, so what would you do to help them learn?" Then I realized that now I am able to reflect on my teaching even if occasionally because I had experienced doing that when I was a graduate student and have learned to be reflective, and that we need practice to acquire that skill. Because I have done that I now can reflect on my teaching after my classes and think a little deeper about other options I could employ to teach better. (Reiko)

Being in a position to work with others or to take care of younger teachers could certainly be a stimulus for them to continue to develop their reflectivity in their teaching or working contexts.

5   Conclusion

In this study, we attempted to evaluate the educational effect of our program in the long term, specifically, the impact of action research and other activities on the teachers' current teaching practices.

All the participants seemed to maintain their reflective skills and reflective disposition even after they left the program and continued to reflect on their daily teaching. From our analysis, we can tentatively conclude that our action research requirement has had a positive impact on their development. The program's achievements share alignment with the researchers' descriptions of successful curricular innovations as discussed in Section 2 (Farrell, 2016; Kagan, 1992; Wallace, 1991; Wright, 2010).

- The curriculum provides both received and experiential knowledge, not in isolation but with an emphasis of their interconnectedness.
- The three practicum courses provide ample opportunities for student teachers to teach real students, first, develop basic routine as teachers, then reflect on their teaching to explore ways for improvement and implement them.
- The action research requirement provides opportunities for student teachers to conduct structured research projects involving systematic observation on their teaching practices and their students' learning.
- Many reflective activities leading to the action research requirement help the student teachers become aware of their tacit beliefs or assumptions about teaching and learning. These, then, become open to critical examination and shared with their peers.

Promoting reflection in a teacher preparation program is undoubtedly important. As one of the participants commented, however, it is a skill and disposition which can only be acquired through guidance and practice. Writing small reflection papers and a longer action research papers can help them raise their awareness about their beliefs that affect their teaching. These written requirements help the student teachers verbalize their beliefs and make their tacit beliefs explicit.

Although the impact of their action research experiences seems positive, two of the participants stated later that there is tendency in the field of Japanese language education, especially in the higher education community, not to consider action research as academic achievement. They said that their action research papers may not be considered as "academic research" when they try to apply for a university position. Most of our graduates first get a part-time or adjunct teaching job, and if they hope to get a tenured position, they will be expected to produce "research". This is the dilemma the authors also face.

Language teacher educators agree that reflective skills are important for teachers' lifelong professional development, but not many specific templates, guidelines, or exemplar strategies regarding how such expertise can be actually inculcated in teacher preparation programs have been shared. Our findings indicate that our curriculum has been successful to some extent. As Murray (2009) noted, however, the evaluation of a teacher education program should be done in the long term by closely examining how its graduates develop professionally throughout their teaching careers. We

believe it will be an important contribution to the research to continue to observe our graduates' professional development.

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Appendix

Interview Questions:

1. What was the theme of your action research? What do you think about the theme now?
2. Do you think that your action research experience has any impact on you/what you are now? If so, how?
3. Do you think that your beliefs about teaching and learning have changed? If so, how did they change?
4. In your current working place, do you feel any conflict between your beliefs and your working situation, such as your colleagues or staff members, your students, or class activities that you are required to do? If so, how do you deal with it?
5. In your current working place, how do you deal with/solve/overcome difficulties and problems you face with?
6. Do you want to improve your teaching skills? If so, what is it and how would you like to improve it?