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The Perplexity of Conducting Language Activities at Junior High Schools in Japan: From the Perspective of Student Teachers

James M Hall
(jhall@iwate-u.ac.jp)
Iwate University, Japan

Abstract

One significant change in the latest curricular guidelines in Japan for junior high schools is that students are intended to learn grammar and vocabulary through language activities. This study describes the experience of carrying out language activities in junior high school English classrooms from the perspective of student teachers, focusing on the perplexities, or conundrums, that they encounter. These perplexities were identified through an analysis of the critical incident reports written by 172 student teachers between 2016 and 2024. The reports described incidents during the student teachers' junior high school English teaching practicums that went against their expectations. The critical incidents were coded using thematic analysis, and five perplexities extrapolated from the coding are described. Two perplexities relate to activity facilitation: *Creating a shared understanding of activity participation with students* and *Managing oneself, learners, and time*. The remaining perplexities relate to facilitating language learning: *Dynamicity of language instruction*, *The unpredictable nature of student language use*, and *The difficulty of using English*. Exploratory Practice, which prioritizes deep understanding of issues over quick solutions, informs the discussion of this study. Based on the discussion, this paper proposes a longitudinal process for exploring perplexities student teachers face.

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1 Introduction

For 21 years, as a teacher educator at a national university in Japan, the author has mentored student teachers (STs) and novice teachers in carrying out communicative language teaching at junior high schools (Hall, 2017, 2024b). With recent changes to the national curriculum, the challenge of carrying out communicative activities has arguably intensified. The latest National Curricular Standards (NCS) for the foreign language subject in junior high schools stipulate that students learn English by participating in language activities (MEXT, 2018). This paper describes issues that STs in Japan encounter while carrying out language activities. These issues are called *perplexities*. The term perplexity is adapted from the concept of a puzzle in exploratory practice. According to Allwright (2003), the term *puzzle* avoids the negative connotation associated with the word problem

and "involves areas of professional life that we want to understand better" (p. 117). While a problem denotes that something needs resolving, a puzzle implies that the starting point is understanding a phenomenon (Allwright & Hanks, 2009).

This paper answers the research question "What perplexities are STs likely to experience when carrying out language activities at junior high schools?" To do this, it analyzed the critical incident reports written by 172 STs between 2016 and 2024, which detailed their experiences conducting language activities at junior high school (JHS). A critical incident, from the perspective of teachers, is an unexpected event that occurs in class which causes them to rethink an aspect of their pedagogical practice or reflect on their beliefs. Critical incidents overlap with perplexities in that they represent unclear areas of pedagogical practice that STs want to understand better.

Exploratory practice (EP) serves as the theoretical framework of this study, informing the way that STs' experiences are interpreted: not as problems requiring solutions, but as rich sites of inquiry into the realities of carrying out language activities in Japanese junior high schools. A clarification is needed regarding why the term *perplexity* is used instead of *puzzle*. In EP, teachers and learners engage in nominating and exploring puzzles together and are thus considered co-researchers (Hanks, 2017). In this study, however, it was the author who proposed the perplexities based on the myriad critical incidents written by STs. Like a puzzle, perplexity acknowledges the complexities of carrying out language activities and operates on the premise that a deeper understanding can assist teachers in making better pedagogical decisions.

While some factors behind the perplexities experienced by STs can be attributed to their being new to the profession, research has found that teachers in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts are often not ready for communicative reforms (Copland et al., 2014). Furthermore, recent research in Japan has shown that a gap between language policy and actual practice exists in Japanese secondary schools (Smith, 2025). Thus, the concerns of the STs in this study are likely to overlap with those of in-service teachers grappling with the new education policy. This study may also serve as a reference for English teacher development in other EFL contexts in which it is difficult to incorporate more communicative pedagogies (see Nguyen, 2017; Todd & Darasawang, 2020).

2 Literature review

2.1 Definition of language activity in the context of Japanese JHSs

In its supplement to the NCS, MEXT (Ministry of Education, Science, Sports, Culture and Technology) describes language activity as featuring "real use of English to communicate one's thinking and feelings" [author's translation] (MEXT, 2017, p. 85). Content can range from areas of personal interest to everyday and social issues. Language activities are also intended to provide students with opportunities to use previously learned vocabulary and expressions. An example of a language activity is shown in Figure 1. It shows language activity instructions from a JHS textbook and a student interaction that is appropriate for the activity. In this activity, students are expected to engage in authentic communication using the target expressions "I'm glad/sorry to hear that" (shown in italics).

Instructions
Talk freely in pairs: tell each other and react to what happened over the weekend. (Sanseido, 2020, p. 48)

Possible student interaction
A: Saturday, I participated in a relay race.
B: Really?
A: Yes, but I didn't run well. My time was bad.
B: *I'm sorry to hear that.*

Fig. 1 Example of a language activity

Note. Instructions are translated by the author, and the possible student interaction is created by the author.

Language activities are a focal point of the JHS foreign language curriculum, as evident in the overall objective of the NCS:

To develop students' competencies that form the [sic] communication such as understanding, expressing and communicating simple information and thoughts etc. … through language activities of listening, reading, speaking and writing in a foreign language while activating the Approaches [sic] in communication in foreign languages. (MEXT, 2018, p. 1)

Although the concept of language activity was introduced in a previous version of the NCS in 2011, Nakashima (2021) writes that the emphasis on language activities in the latest NCS (implemented in 2021) represents a significant change as "the focus is not on how much individual knowledge such as vocabulary and grammar has been acquired, but how knowledge and skills are utilized in actual communication" (p. 5). These changes have compelled teachers to incorporate student-centered learning and active learning into their classes (Jennings, 2024). Although a language activity can involve any of the four skills, critics have argued that they place too much emphasis on learning through interaction (Torikai, 2018).

According to MEXT (2024), language activities currently occupy over 50% of class time in over 75% of junior high schools. Thus, language activities are prevalent enough to assume that STs in Japan would be expected to carry them out in their teaching practicums. The following section discusses how critical incidents have been used to understand aspects of teacher development such as carrying out language activities.

2.2 The use of critical incidents in understanding the perplexities in teaching

The experience of cognitive dissonance has been recognized as a catalyst for teacher learning, both for pre-service teachers (Braaten et al., 2022; Golombek & Doran, 2014; Johnson & Worden, 2014) and in-service teachers (Caspari-Gnann & Sevian, 2022; Treacy & Leavy, 2023). Sources of such dissonance in language activities include students' unfamiliarity with open-ended speaking (Hall, 2020), language activities generating more noise than teachers are comfortable with (Hall, 2024a), or teachers' own limited language proficiency (MEXT, 2024). Golombek and Doran (2014) propose that when contradictions arise between the ideal (how teachers imagine they should teach) and the real (what happens), they prompt further exploration and problem-solving.

Critical Incidents (CI) are one way to capture contradictions that might warrant further attention. In English teacher education, Richards and Farrell (2005) describe a CI as an unanticipated event during a lesson that serves to trigger insights into some aspect of teaching and learning. According to Tripp (1993), however, a CI can also be a common event in the classroom. It is rendered as critical by its author for revealing an underlying trend, motive, or structure (Tripp, 1994). In research on teacher learning, CIs have been used to facilitate teacher reflection (Brandenburg, 2021; Chien, 2018a; Nejadghanbar, 2020), to examine teacher development (Badia et al., 2021; Chien, 2018b; Hall, 2017), and to investigate the challenges teachers encounter when implementing a teaching method or pedagogical objective (Atai & Nejadghanbar, 2016, 2017; Hall & Townsend, 2017). This study focuses on the latter: understanding challenges.

Tripp (1993) writes that a CI can be seen as an example of a category in a wider context. Thus, CIs that are written or described by teachers can give readers a particular insight into a specific issue. For example, Farrell and Baecher (2017) collected 40 CIs written by English teachers to show how they handled such issues as teaching mandated curricula or mixed-level classes. Hall (2024a) analyzed student teachers' CI reports to investigate issues they experienced while conducting foreign language activities at elementary schools in Japan. Grouping the CIs into categories revealed that CIs within a category often contradicted one another. For example, one ST wrote that it was not necessary to use Japanese in class because students could follow in English while another ST wrote that using Japanese was necessary to ensure that all students could understand. The contrasting CIs

in each category were used to describe pedagogical dilemmas that student teachers were likely to experience.

3 Methodology

This study used the CI technique to identify and describe perplexities that STs are likely to experience when carrying out language activities. The technique was originally developed by Flanagan (1954) and is used to study psychological states and experiences (Borgen et al., 2008). The primary data for the CI technique were retrospective self-reports. The technique consisted of the following steps: (1) Ascertaining the general aims of the activity; (2) Making plans and setting specifications (determining the types of situations to be reported); (3) Collecting data; and (4) Analyzing the data.

3.1 Aim of the language activities and research context

The research focus of the study was language activities at junior high schools. The aim of language activities is for students to communicate their thoughts or feelings about a topic of interest, a social issue, or an everyday matter using previously learned expressions or vocabulary. The STs in this study were enrolled in a teacher education program at a university in Japan. To complete the necessary coursework for a Type 1 English Teacher's License (*isshu menkyo*) for secondary schools, the STs took four English Teaching Methodology (ETM) courses over two years, starting in their second year of university (Figure 2). Each course consisted of university-based instruction on disciplinary areas of English language teaching, coupled with teaching experiences at schools. STs wrote one CI report in each ETM class about a teaching experience that they encountered during their practicum.

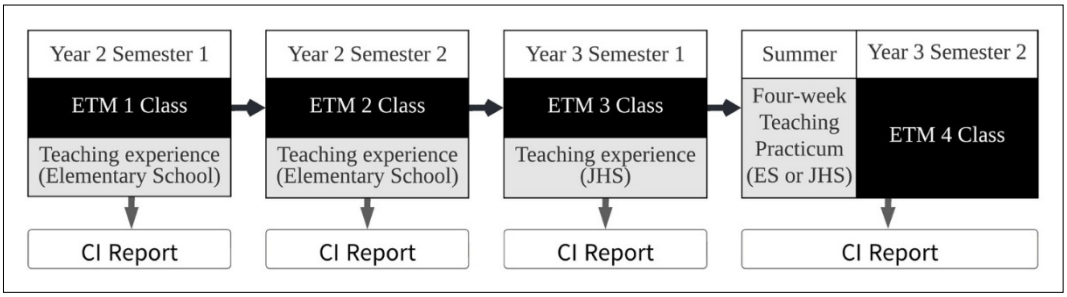

Fig. 2. ETM program

It can be assumed that most STs' English proficiency level was at the CEFR B1 level or higher, given that their ETM coursework involved reading and writing academic English as well as discussions in English. The author received approval from his institution's research ethics committee to gather data for this study, and all participants consented to have their CI reports used for this research on the condition that their identities remain anonymous.

3.2 Making plans, setting specifications, and collecting data

CIs describing the STs' experiences in carrying out language activities were extracted from reports written during the ETM 3 and 4 courses. The author was the instructor of ETM 3 and served as an assistant instructor of ETM 4. The CI reports were written in English, commented on and graded by the author, and then revised by the STs. The CI reports analyzed in this study were the revised versions. Altogether, 233 reports written by 172 STs between 2016 and 2024 were collected.

Based on Farrell's (2013) recommendation, STs wrote CI reports consisting of *Orientation*, *Incident*, and *Interpretation*. Under *Orientation,* STs provided background information such as their lesson plan and the type of students they were teaching. The *Incident* section was a description of notable events in the class. The *Interpretation* section was a discussion of how the *Incident* impacted their knowledge or beliefs about language teaching.

3.3 Data analysis

The *Incident* section of each report was coded based on procedures from applied thematic analysis, which aims to "understand how people feel, think, and behave in a particular context related to a particular research question" (Guest et al., 2012, p. 13). Incidents related to achieving the aim of language activities were coded inductively; they included setting up an activity, facilitating an activity, teaching relevant language, or helping students practice relevant language. NVivo 13 (Lumivero, 2025) was used for coding and calculating code frequencies. The procedures for the analysis were as follows: segmenting text, writing codes for the segments using descriptive coding (Saldaña, 2013), grouping these codes into themes, and creating a hierarchy of themes.

Figure 3 demonstrates how a descriptive code fit into a hierarchy of themes. It shows a CI written in 2018 by an ST teaching grade 1 at a JHS. The incident was given a descriptive code incorporating the ST's own words. This was put into the theme *Felt that students did not understand*; a total of 13 other STs had a CI coded under this theme. This served as one factor explaining why some STs did not use enough English in the class and was thus a sub-theme of *Did not use English sufficiently*, under which 28 STs had CIs coded. Not using English sufficiently was one of the phenomena experienced when STs attempted to use English and fell under *Teacher English*, a second-level theme. 62 STs wrote CIs related to this theme. Finally, *Teacher English* fell under the primary theme *Language Teaching and Learning*.

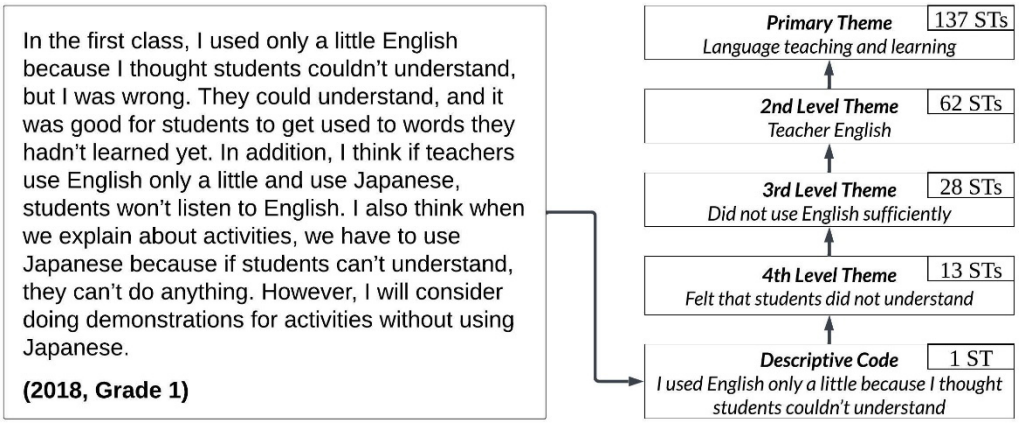

Fig. 3. Coding sample

The coding was done by the author. As the author had graded the reports, facilitated classroom discussions, and witnessed many of the CIs, he was in the position to understand the writers' intended meaning, whereas the CIs might not have been clear to others. In other words, the author shared the same insider perspective as the STs. According to Atai and Nejahdghanbar (2016), CIs can have multiple meanings and can be difficult to group into exact categories. Thus, replicability of the codes for these data with other researchers was not feasible. This study sought to establish trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) by being transparent about (1) the kind of data collected; (2) how and when the data were collected; and (3) how the data were categorized. Braun and Clarke

(2006) advise that the write-up of thematic analysis should "tell the complicated story of your data in a way which convinces the reader of the merit and validity of your analysis" (p. 91), which the next section will attempt.

4 Findings

The CIs were grouped into two primary themes: *Activity Facilitation and Participation* and *Language Teaching and Learning*. Table 1 shows the two primary themes (**in bold**) and their related second-level themes (*in italics*), along with the number of STs who wrote at least one CI in each theme and the total number of CIs categorized. Many STs wrote multiple CIs sometimes within the same theme and sometimes across different themes; therefore, the counts across themes exceed the number of individual participants (172). For example, a single ST could write a CI under *Characteristics and states of students* and a second CI under *Classroom management*. The numbers are presented not to suggest that one type of CI is more likely to occur than another, but rather to illustrate the prevalence of certain ST experiences.

Table 1. Primary and second-level CI themes

Primary and *Second-level Themes*	STs	CIs
Activity facilitation and participation	**155**	**264**
Characteristics and states of students	*73*	*106*
Classroom management	*104*	*158*
Language teaching and learning	**137**	**234**
Language instruction	*73*	*108*
Student language use and learning	*42*	*50*
Teacher English	*62*	*76*
Total (unique)	172	498

This section describes a perplexity for each second-level theme and provides relevant extracts from the CIs to demonstrate these perplexities. The extracts were edited by the author to protect the identity of the original writers and to improve clarity. Omitted text is marked by "…".

4.1 Activity facilitation and participation

CIs under *Activity facilitation and participation* were related to the way students participated in activities (*Characteristics and states of students*) or how STs attempted to facilitate participation (*Classroom management*). Table 2 shows the second-level and third-level CI themes as well as the associated perplexities.

Table 2. Sub-themes of activity facilitation and participation and their associated perplexities

Second-level and Third-level Themes	*STs*	Perplexity
Characteristics and states of students	*73*	
Attitude or behavior	38	Developing a shared understanding of activity participation with students
Proficiency and performance	31	
Understanding activities	23	
Classroom management	*104*	
Explaining and Q&A	47	Managing oneself, learners, and time
Managing learners	32	
Managing time	56	
Total (unique)	155	

4.1.1 Developing a shared understanding of activity participation with students

Language activities involve such activities as students interacting with one another, interacting with the teacher, and demonstrating before the class. Most CIs associated with the perplexity *Developing a shared understanding of activity participation with students* described situations where students were not participating in language activities as the STs had anticipated, as shown in the extract below. It should be noted that each extract is followed by the year it was written, the grade level of the JHS students, and the name of the third-level theme under which it was categorized.

> At the beginning of the lesson, we asked students," What's the difference between the two teachers' demonstrations?" but only a few answered. In addition, we asked them to demonstrate their conversations in front of their classmates at the end of the class. Some students were nominated to demonstrate by their classmates, but they didn't do so. I was confused about this situation … According to [Teacher X], these students were not talkative, and [Teacher X] was looking for a way to get them active in class. (2023, Grade 1, *Attitude or behavior*)

The above hesitancy can be partially explained by younger adolescents tending to want to belong to the pack (Ariza-Pinzón, 2023). STs often found students to be hesitant in numerous communicative situations:

> I experienced the "adolescent problem" in various situations. Such situations were conversation partners being a different gender, disliking English, not good at talking with friends, being shy, and so on. It was difficult for them to exchange opinions. (2021, Grade 1, *Attitude or behavior*)

In addition to hesitancy, STs encountered situations where some students had already mastered the day's material while others found it too challenging. STs struggled to address differences in learning progress among students, especially when some had already learned the lesson content:

> When we instructed students to practice their dialogue without looking at their paper, I heard one of the students say, "I have already learned it!" … Our lesson was a little boring for some students. (2019, Grade 2, *Proficiency and performance*)

STs also found that even in situations where they had carefully explained how to do an activity, students often did not understand what they were supposed to do. Possible reasons included students failing to understand the STs' instructions, misunderstanding the procedure or rules, or not understanding the point of doing a particular activity.

> Although some pairs of students did all parts of our activity, others only did some parts. I did not know the students' level, so I wanted to change the time or process depending on their progress. I thought it would be possible to make changes to the activity by observing students' reactions, but I was wrong. It would have been better to give clear instructions before the activity. (2019, Grade 2, *Understanding activities*)

Regardless of the quality of the explanations, it is evident that coming to a shared understanding of how to do an activity would require a co-construction of meaning (Lafford, 2007) between the students and teachers. Overall, the perplexity of developing a shared understanding involves STs negotiating how to do a language activity with a group of cognitively diverse learners who may not be inclined to participate.

4.1.2 Managing oneself, learners, and time

The perplexity *Managing oneself, learners, and* time is related to classroom management, which includes everything a teacher does to organize students, space, and time so that learning takes place (Wong & Wong, 2009). When facilitating language activities, STs monitored their own actions, the actions of the learners, and the progress of the lesson. The CIs showed that STs tended to be preoccupied with the quality of their explanations: STs wrote about explaining too much, forgetting to explain something essential, giving explanations that were too complicated, giving explanations that lacked clarity, being too nervous, or speaking too quietly. Below is a CI in which the ST wrote about explaining too much when teaching a class on international understanding:

> When I taught about invisible culture, I talked about it a lot, so we didn't have enough time to think about culture. (2023, Grade 3, *Explaining and Q&A*)

STs' interactions with students also included formulating questions to encourage their understanding and replying to unexpected student responses:

> Some students gave joking answers. I did not know what I should say, and so I said, "Oh, that's an interesting idea!" … I thought I could have been stronger. (2022, Grade 2, *Explaining and Q&A*)

Managing learners involved the STs helping individual students, encouraging students to behave themselves, handling multiple levels, organizing group work, and monitoring student activity; all of which were situations for which the STs were likely to feel unprepared, as the trainability of these skills is not clear (Buchanan & Timmis, 2019). In the CI below, an ST reported how he learned a classroom management skill.

> In my class, I asked a student to express her opinion, but she could not answer. In this situation, I asked all students to help her. So, her friend raised his hand and helped her as a volunteer… I could not learn how to teach students who have different abilities in college. (2016, Grade 3, *Managing learners*)

One of the most frequent CI themes was *Managing time*; STs frequently felt that they did not have enough time. Among the reasons for the lack of time were: students taking longer than anticipated, teachers speaking too long, teachers spending too much time on warm-up or ice-breaking activities, or teachers underestimating the amount of time an activity would take. The following CI describes the students and teacher taking longer than anticipated.

> It took more time than we expected. The reasons were: (1) When students spoke with their partners, I did not know when to ask them to stop. (2) It took time for students to write their own dialogs. Students wanted to write perfectly. (3) I talked a lot. I wanted students to understand my intention. (2018, Grade 3, *Managing time*)

Overall, the perplexity of classroom management, according to the STs, lay in the numerous demands placed on them. First, STs were expected to give concise and useful explanations, sometimes in an impromptu manner, while responding to the unpredictable questions and reactions of the learners. Second, they were tasked with managing student activity work, while spontaneously handling the needs of individuals and groups to ensure an activity was completed. Third, while handling these exigencies, they had to be aware of the time and finish activities within the 50-minute lesson period.

4.2 Language teaching and learning

Language teaching and learning incorporated CIs related to how STs attempted to teach language (*Language instruction*), STs' observations on how students used the target language (*Student language use*), and how the STs used English (*Teacher English*). Table 3 shows the second-level and third-level themes as well as the associated perplexities.

Table 3. Sub-themes of language teaching and learning and their associated perplexities

Second-level and Third-level Themes	STs	Perplexity
Language instruction	*73*	
Practicing language	16	Dynamicity of language instruction
Teaching structures and expressions	61	
Student language use	*42*	
Issues with production	38	Unpredictable nature of student language use
Successful production	5	
Teacher English	*62*	
Critical consideration of teaching in English	10	
Did not use English sufficiently	28	The difficulty of using English
Specific problems with my English	21	
Success teaching in English	10	
Total (unique)	137	

4.2.1 Dynamicity of language instruction

The perplexity *Dynamicity of language instruction* was derived from the third-level themes *Teaching structures and expressions* and *Practicing language*. Many CIs in the themes directly contradicted one another. For example, one described grammar practice benefiting learning while another described it as hindering it. Such contradictions highlighted the dynamic nature of grammar instruction: optimal pedagogical strategies vary according to context. *Dynamicity of language instruction* encompassed questions such as the amount of explanation, timing of teaching grammar, and what to explain when teaching a grammar structure, as well as puzzles related to practicing grammar.

A common CI theme that emerged related to STs explaining grammar thoroughly and then second-guessing themselves afterward:

> We gave a detailed explanation of grammar. This was not good for the students because they didn't have time to think about the difference between "don't have to" and "must not" for themselves. We should have given them enough time to consider the difference. (2017, Grade 1, *Structures and expressions*)

In their CIs, STs often wrote that they realized the importance of having students work out the meaning of grammatical structures on their own. This contradicted their previous beliefs about teaching grammar, as exemplified in the CI below.

> My teaching supervisor said, "You don't have to teach grammar in detail." However, I thought grammar description was important for students. Therefore, I taught grammar thoroughly in my first class. However, students did not seem to understand it well. In the next class, I taught grammar through activities, and I had students say sentences containing the grammar many times ... By this method, students started to use that grammar naturally. I felt that teachers don't need to teach grammar in much detail. (2019, Grade 2, *Structures and expressions*)

On the other hand, STs also regretted not explaining grammar sufficiently. In the CI below, an ST had attempted to teach "have to."

> When we asked the students about what they "have to do," one student answered, "She has to washes dishes." This is because we put emphasis on speaking over grammar … We must teach some grammar such as usage and form. (2018, Grade 2, *Structures and expressions*)

Some STs also discovered that certain grammar structures did not warrant much attention. As discussed earlier, the NCS emphasize that new grammar and vocabulary be learned through communication. While many STs mentioned the importance of introducing and using grammar in context, it was difficult to put it into practice with certain grammar points. For example, the ST below had a lesson goal of teaching the expression "speaking of" as a means of changing a conversation topic.

> It was difficult for us to teach how to use "speaking of. " We thought about how to use "speaking of…," but we didn't find the best method. We made a game about "speaking of," but I felt uneasy about whether students would learn how to use it in the game. (2022, Grade 3, *Structures and expressions*)

Because "speaking of" is one of many discourse strategies available to speakers and tends not to be repeated multiple times within a single conversation, it was unnecessary for the ST to design an entire activity devoted exclusively to this expression. When STs teach language from the textbook, the findings suggest that the attention given to target expressions should be differentiated, as not all expressions require equal emphasis.

Similarly, STs could have conflicting experiences about how much to practice a structure. One ST wrote that practice was a way for students to gain confidence in doing communicative activities. However, other STs found practice ineffective when its purpose was unclear, when it was too easy, or when it was unstimulating as shown below.

> I was surprised that students didn't want to practice the dialog many times. We tried to have them practice the dialog while changing their roles, so I gave them three minutes. However, they only practiced once and were quiet. (2017, Grade 2, *Practicing language*)

As with other techniques, the effectiveness of a practice depends on what you are teaching, whom you are teaching, and how you carry it out. In conclusion, language instruction is dynamic: It is contingent on the nature of the structures or expressions to be learned and environmental factors.

4.2.2 The unpredictable nature of student language use

STs designed lessons in which JHS students were expected to learn a specific structure and then use it in a language activity. Often, though, students either used the desired language infrequently, not at all, or incorrectly. These CIs described the perplexity *The unpredictable nature of student language use*. In the CI below, an ST expected that students would use the target language "have to."

> In the role play, we wanted students to use "have to" and "don't have to," but students used it only once. It happened because our demonstration and explanation were not enough. (2018, Grade 2, *Issues with production*)

In this case, the ST attributed students' failure to use the target structure to his demonstration. However, in natural conversation, which role plays should promote, it is not common to use the same grammar structure repeatedly. The following extract is from a lesson for the target expression "I am happy/sad to hear that." The lesson was supposed to cover a situation where one reacts to a friend's personal news. The STs predicted that students might say uncommon utterances such as "I am hungry to hear that" and had planned the activity in such a way as to discourage it. However, they encountered difficulties:

> Some students used the words "hungry" and "tired", but they could not be used with the target grammar … We don't say "I am hungry to hear that" as a reaction in conversations… Even though we tried to remove the risks of teaching incorrect knowledge, the students' genuine ideas made teaching tough. (2024, Grade 3, *Issues with production*)

Additionally, in activities where students were supposed to speak in an impromptu manner, STs encountered instances where students would read out a dialog they had written rather than speaking extemporaneously. In communicative writing activities, STs found that students tended to work at significantly different paces from one another or frequently struggled to write anything on paper. As CIs under *Issues with production* (Table 3) were more prevalent than CIs under *Successful production* on the part of the students, it can be concluded that STs are likely to grapple with the perplexity of students' variable language use.

4.2.3 The difficulty of using English

The difficulty of using English refers to the perplexity STs experienced when using English. It was common for STs to describe their personal goals in their teacher education program as improving their English ability or teaching a lesson using English (Hall, 2022). However, this was a potential source of anxiety for STs; although they often had the intention of using mostly English in class, they found their usage of Japanese to be much greater. Contributing factors to this, as illuminated by the CIs, included: STs feeling uneasy when students did not understand, STs being generally nervous, STs not being able to express what they wanted to say in English, or STs being too focused on carrying out the lesson to speak English. Of these factors, the most common was STs' uncertainty about the students' understanding of the teachers' English.

> I tried my best to use a lot of English in class, but the students did not respond well, and I was afraid that they did not understand what I had said. So, I explained in detail in Japanese after speaking in English … After the class, our teaching supervisor advised us that we did not need to use Japanese because the students could understand in English. (2022, Grade 2, *Did not use English sufficiently*)

While the ST above was encouraged not to use Japanese, STs also encountered situations where the use of Japanese could be justified:

> Using English or Japanese depends on the situation. For example, when we teach grammar like relative clauses, we should use Japanese because it is hard to understand only in English. (2020, Grade 3, *Critical consideration of teaching in English*)

When STs discussed specific problems they had with English, it was common for them to mention their inability to use "simple English." One strategy for STs, when teaching a class in English for the first time, was to write out what they intended to say beforehand. One ST, who wrote a script for what she would say before teaching a lesson, stated the following:

> As a negative experience, I was not able to use simple English. When I was speaking in English, there were no smiles on students' faces, and students gave us some advice on our words in their [post-class] reflections. When I prepared my script for the class, I should have checked whether there were difficult or unknown words. (2022, Grade 3, *Specific problems with my English*)

Lastly, STs frequently reported being too nervous to use English:

> I used a lot of Japanese throughout the class. I had prepared a manuscript with almost everything I would say, but the day we taught the class, I was very nervous, and I forgot what to say in English. I tried to continue to explain in English, but I could not do it. (2019, Grade 3, *Did not use English sufficiently*)

To summarize the perplexity, STs often had to overcome their nerves as language learners and use the target language competently enough for students to understand. On top of this, the students' first language, Japanese, played a role in their learning, and STs had to judge when to use the L1 and L2.

It should be noted that although most CIs were associated with the complexity of teachers using English, some STs reported using English successfully in the classroom (*Success teaching in English*). STs who were successful wrote that they often repeated the same words and expressions, tried to use words that students understood, and encouraged students to explain to one another what the teacher said.

5 Discussion

After identifying the perplexities, it became evident that there was one essential element of language activities that STs did not mention. According to the NCS, the main purpose of language activities is for students to acquire communicative competence through expressing their ideas and feelings in English. However, few CIs mentioned the content of students' communication. The perplexities suggest that STs were preoccupied with mastering the pedagogical techniques for establishing a class where both communication and learning by students would take place. In the teacher development literature, it is widely recognized that novice teachers prioritize being able to carry out the lesson from beginning to end over the quality of student output (Farrell, 2009).

As noted earlier, language activities require teachers to teach in a different way (Nakashima, 2021). While this study focused on STs, the findings may be generalizable to novice teachers or teachers who have little experience with language activities. Wong and Wong (2009) state that novice teachers must first master pedagogical routines to manage student learning. Thus, teachers with little experience in teaching language activities also need to learn the basics of executing them. Understanding and navigating the five perplexities described in this paper will help teachers learn to carry out the basic elements of language activities: student participation, communication, and language learning. The remainder of this section relates the perplexities to ST learning, but it is the author's belief that they are also relevant to the professional development of teachers unfamiliar with language activities.

The two perplexities related to Activity facilitation and participation, *Developing a shared understanding of activity participation with students* and *Managing oneself, learners, and time*, show that STs are likely to encounter situations in which students' ideas differ from their own in terms of what activity participation entails. Additionally, STs will need to facilitate student participation while they themselves are learning how to give useful explanations, react appropriately to learners, and manage class time.

The perplexities related to *Language Teaching and Learning* show that language teaching and learning is not a straightforward process. It can be deduced that STs will need to grapple with when and how much to teach new grammar to students. For example, students are supposed to deepen their understanding of target grammar and expressions through meaningful communication in language activities. Nevertheless, a teacher's guidance is necessary to support students' learning of specific language aspects (Willis, 1996). *Dynamicity of language instruction* reveals that optimal instruction can be dependent on the language being learned and how well students are understanding the language itself.

Another perplexity, *Unpredictable nature of student language use*, further complicates the issue of learning language through language activities. STs have expectations that students will understand and use target structures and expressions taught before an activity. However, the CIs within the perplexity show that this expectation is often unfeasible.

Lastly, *The difficulty of using English* shows one of the biggest obstacles many STs may face: anxiety about their English. Although, as teachers, STs are expected to encourage students to be active communicators of English, they are still learning the language themselves and may feel anxious about using it during a lesson. In such situations, a potential outcome is classes where both the students and teachers are reluctant to interact in English.

Using EP as both a theoretical and pedagogical framework, this section concludes with suggestions on how teacher educators and STs can work together to become knowledge makers (Allwright, 2006) of language pedagogy. Allwright and Hanks (2009) explain that EP starts with an issue of immediate interest which practitioners, instructors, and learners, investigate together. In EP, the purpose is not to immediately come up with solutions, but rather to develop students' and teachers' understandings of what is going on in the classroom (Miller & Cunha, 2019). The author suggests that the starting point in EP should be perplexities that STs are likely to discuss, such as those shown in Figure 4. After a series of teaching experiences, long-term concerns and rationales behind lessons can be addressed.

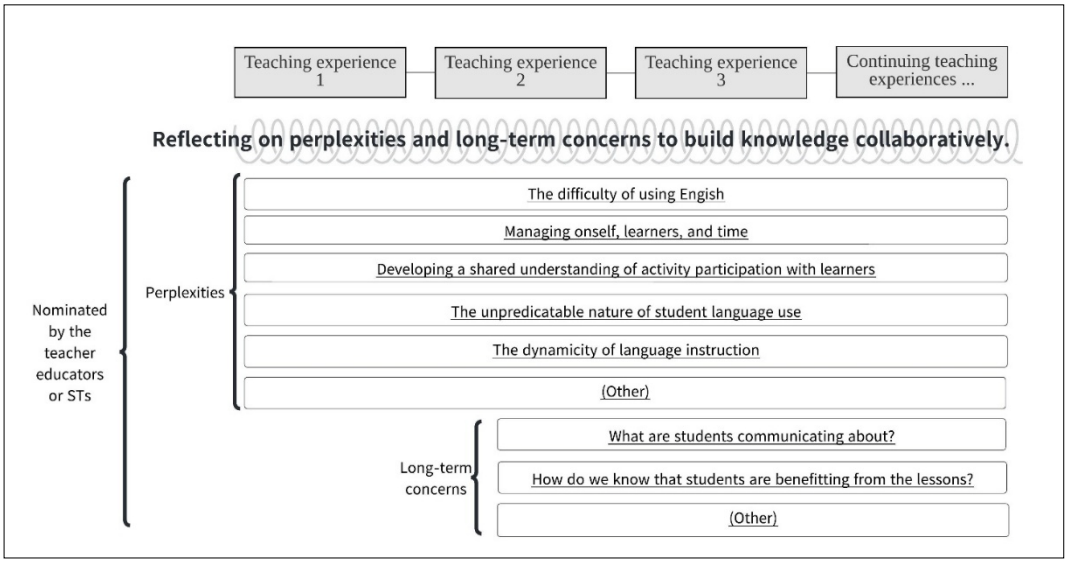

Fig. 4. Process of reflection using perplexities as a starting point

An example of an area of immediate concern is *The difficulty of using English*, as an examination of STs' reflections over the years has shown that they commonly write about their conflicting feel-

ings regarding using English in the classroom (Hall, 2024a). To explore this issue further, the following questions can be discussed:

- How do you feel when you speak English as a teacher? Why do you feel this way?
- How do your colleagues feel when they use English? Why do they feel this way?
- How do you think the learners (your students) feel when they hear you use English?
- As a group, are we using too little, too much, or just the right amount of English? Why?
- Is it necessary to conduct classes primarily in English as the national curriculum recommends?

The above questions represent some of the possible inquiries that can be carried out. They range from the self to colleagues to the classroom, and lastly to the education system in general. The aim is to help STs and teacher educators gain a better understanding of the perplexity and to develop a rationale for the pedagogical decisions that they make. STs and teacher educators can also archive the results of their discussions and revisit their answers after their subsequent teaching practice, supporting an incremental cycle of improvement.

6 Conclusion

It is intended for students in JHSs in Japan to acquire communicative competence and language knowledge through communicating in language activities. Due to the prevalence of language activities, STs should understand the rough waters they may need to navigate to carry them out successfully. Although not exhaustive, this study used the CI technique to describe five perplexities that STs can encounter when carrying out language activities at JHSs:

1. Developing a shared understanding of activity participation with students
2. Managing oneself, learners, and time
3. The difficulty of using English
4. The dynamicity of language instruction
5. The unpredictable nature of student language use

These perplexities can help illuminate the contingencies involved in carrying out language activities or communicative lessons both for STs and more experienced teachers who are unfamiliar with this style of pedagogy. Taking an EP approach, STs and teacher educators can assume the roles of practitioners learning to navigate the perplexities associated with foreign language pedagogy over an extended period. Farrell (2022) argues that teachers should have a tolerance of ambiguity because no simple solutions are available. It is hoped that this paper has revealed some of the ambiguities inherent in language activities. Van Manen (1991) argues that contradiction in education, which can be seen in the perplexities previously described, is "probably the foremost factor that prompts us to continually reflect on questions of how we should act with children and students" (p. 61).

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About the Author

James Hall (https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6979-4281) is a professor of English education in the Faculty of Education at Iwate University. He has worked as a teacher educator in Japan for 23 years. His current research interests focus on teacher learning and development from a phenomenological perspective.