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Reflections from a Blended Community of Practice for Japanese Teachers of English

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Abstract

Over the years, the problematic issue of teacher isolationism has been well documented by researchers. In the Japanese public school system, many English as an international language (EIL) educators find teaching to be a lonely and frustrating endeavour as they have limited interactions with colleagues and face increasing job demands. This paper highlights a research project that aims to provide Japanese junior and senior high school EIL teachers with emotional and practical support. The pedagogical strategies and lesson ideas that are discussed in this paper emerged during a series of interactive teacher-directed professional development (TDPD) workshops and informal online conversations that took place over an 18-month period during the COVID-19 pandemic. The researchers utilized Chen and McCray's (2012) Whole Teacher (WT) conceptual framework for in-service professional development to establish the online and face-to-face training sessions that were part of a blended community of practice. In our current post-COVID-19 world, the growing popularity of video conferencing platforms (e.g., Zoom) coupled with concerns about cost, time, and environmental issues means that virtual workshops will become increasingly commonplace (Zimmermann et al., 2021). Unfortunately, many virtual training sessions are beset with a host of technological and logistical problems. This paper also highlights five strategies that workshop leaders can utilize to facilitate successful interactive digital learning experiences for pre-service and in-service teachers.

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1 Introduction

The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic created an unprecedented period of disruption and uncertainty for the English as international language (EIL) field. At the beginning of the pandemic, most teachers were forced to revamp courses and adopt new online pedagogical practices in order to provide English language learners (ELLs) with emergency remote lessons. Likewise, numerous ELLs needed to familiarize themselves with various technological tools such as video conferencing platforms (e.g., Zoom) and learning management systems so that they could continue their studies.

While there has been a gradual resumption of most face-to-face educational activities in our current 'new normal' era, it is worthwhile to reflect on some of the key lessons we have learned over the last three years.

In many ways, the COVID-19 pandemic was like the proverbial double-edged sword for the teaching profession. From one perspective, it highlighted the adverse impact that the digital divide can have on ELLs, including those from technologically advanced nations such as Japan (Isha & Wibawarta, 2023), as well as the dissatisfaction and psychosocial frustrations that can be generated within virtual classrooms (Hagedorn et al., 2022). The flipside to this reality is that many educators became more adaptable and innovative. In fact, several researchers (e.g., Christensen, 2021) believe that the COVID-19 pandemic was 'a blessing in disguise' for the educational field as it spurred teachers to be more creative and integrate a variety of different information and communications technologies (ICT) such as YouTube channels and class websites into their professional practice. On a similar note, Jones (2022) argued the 2020 global health crisis was a "great leveler" because it forced many educators to engage in "fast upskilling" to improve their technological skills and opened up more digital spaces for collaborative learning (p. 111). Irrespective of whatever point on the virtual learning spectrum that an educator is on, there can be no denying that the COVID-19 pandemic underscored the need for ongoing teacher-directed professional development (TDPD) and enhanced digital pedagogy training.

1.1 Purpose of the study

This study aims to: (a) critically reflect on the lesson ideas and teaching strategies that were generated in a blended community of practice (B-CoP) for Japanese English teachers, and (b) explore the essential elements that need to be present in an online teacher-development workshop. The practical pedagogical strategies and lesson ideas that are highlighted in this paper emerged during a series of interactive TDPD workshops and informal online conversations that took place over an 18-month period during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. Members of the Japanese Teachers of English B-CoP, pre-service education students, and workshop leaders generously shared their teaching experiences and thoughts on technology-enhanced learning (TEL). The academic literary landscape is teeming with TEL studies (e.g., Waller et al., 2019) that are constructed on a foundation of technological determinism which trumpet the transformational impact of digital learning. This study seeks to provide a more nuanced portrayal of TEL in the hope that it can help frontline EIL educators expand their professional horizons and develop ELLs' twenty-first century skills. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What language learning tasks and pedagogical approaches can educators utilize to cultivate English language learners' twenty-first century skills in both virtual and face-to-face classrooms?
2. How can workshop leaders organize and facilitate successful interactive digital learning experiences for pre-service and in-service English teachers?

In the first part of the paper, we examine the academic literature that is relevant to this research investigation. Attention then shifts to the teaching strategies and lesson ideas that were shared during three interactive workshops which focused on fostering junior and senior high school ELLs' twenty-first century skills. The workshops and informal online conversations were spearheaded by the researchers as part of an ongoing TDPD research project for Japanese English teachers. The various virtual and face-to-face training sessions were underscored by Chen and McCray's (2012) Whole Teacher (WT) conceptual model of professional development (PD). This multidimensional framework enabled the researchers to cultivate a more holistic learning environment for the B-CoP members and shed some light on the complexities of the teaching profession. In the final section, we draw upon the participants' feedback in conjunction with our own critical reflections on the successes and missteps we experienced establishing a B-CoP for Japanese English teachers. The practical pointers

that emerged from our study can hopefully help other teacher trainers organize and conduct effective virtual workshops in a wide array of instructional contexts. Likewise, frontline educators can use the pedagogical suggestions highlighted in this paper to cultivate a more productive and active digital learning experience for twenty-first century ELLs.

2 Literature review

2.1 Twenty-first Century Skills

Nowadays, the phrase 'twenty-first century' skills has become a ubiquitous mantra in many business and educational circles (Lucas, 2019). Advocates of the twenty-first century skills movement believe that it is crucial for students to possess an array of abilities that go beyond literacy and numeracy in order to become more employable in our technology-saturated society (Care et al., 2016). For example, Geisinger (2016) claimed that graduates require technological acumen, innovative thinking, effective communication skills, and the ability to collaborate with co-workers. While there is no definitive list of twenty-first century skills, there is still a great deal of overlap between the various frameworks. The following competencies are considered to be essential for twenty-first century learners: (a) communication, (b) collaboration, (c) critical thinking, (d) problem solving, (e) creativity, (f) ICT skills, (g) digital literacy, (h) ethical awareness, (i) global mindset, and (j) autonomous learning (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2018; Partnership for 21st Century Learning, 2019; van Laar et al., 2017, 2020).

However, not everyone perceives the twenty-first century skills movement as something that is inherently beneficial. For example, Greenlaw (2015) claimed that stakeholders have placed "too much emphasis upon the accumulation and manipulation of information" while minimizing the importance of twenty-first century learners obtaining wisdom (p. 895). Likewise, Lucas (2019) believed that the twenty-first century skills advocates' "evangelical fervour" can seem "jingoistic, simplistic or distracting" to many thoughtful educators (p. 3). Critics have also questioned the strong undercurrents of technological determinism (Selwyn, 2019) and massive amounts of money that schools spend on ICT infrastructure and technological accoutrements (Greenlaw, 2015).

2.2 Teacher development: The traditional approach

Many educators find teaching EIL to be a lonely and frustrating endeavour even though the job is highly interpersonal in nature. Over the years, the problem of teacher isolationism has been well documented by researchers. For example, Lortie (1975) famously labelled teaching as the "egg carton profession" (p. 223). Four decades later, Trust et al. (2017) urged educators to "break down the silos" that have stilted their professional growth (p. 8). Both of these analogies are fitting as teachers are usually sequestered in their own classrooms and have limited interactions with their colleagues. In the EIL teaching field, PD has traditionally been "front-loaded" (Gebhard, 1998), "top-down" (Johnson, 2006), and situated in face-to-face conferences, seminars, and pre-packaged training courses. In other words, educators acquire most of their knowledge (e.g., teaching practicums, mentorships) during the early part of their careers and have little or no meaningful input into PD activities that are imposed by administrative overseers. Critics have argued that this type of PD approach is often "fragmented, disconnected, and irrelevant" to what goes on inside a classroom (Lieberman & Pointer-Mace, 2010, p. 77) and lacks sustained collegial learning (Lantz-Andersson et al., 2017). While the authors of this paper recognize these shortcomings, we still believe that participating in conferences and workshops are a worthwhile undertaking, especially if these activities are supplemented with other TDPD initiatives. Thus, we agree with Farell's (2022) claim that workshops provide language teachers with the following benefits: (a) provide expert input, (b) offer practical classroom applications, (c) raise teachers' motivation and collegiality, and (d) support innovations (pp. 88–89).

2.3 Communities of Practice

The importance of communication and community in the teacher development realm became more pronounced during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic (Jones, 2022). According to Mercieca (2017), the community of practice (CoP) approach is better equipped to alleviate occupational isolationism and foster ongoing learning than the traditional sites of PD (e.g., large-scale conferences). The CoP concept has been widely deployed by researchers for over thirty years to study learning and knowledge production in a wide array of educational and business contexts. Wenger's (1998) cutting-edge book, *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*, popularized this social learning theory. Wenger et al. (2002) defined a CoP as a group of people that "share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis" (p. 4). CoPs are supported by the following foundational pillars: (a) domain, (b) community, and (c) practice. These three pillars can empower CoP members to manage collaborative resources and spawn new ideas (Wenger, 2004). While the initial model was a face-to-face structure that required participants to live within close proximity to one another, technological advancements have enabled CoPs to migrate to digital spaces and become more flexible because of important affordances (e.g., "any time, any place" learning) and streamlined global communication options such as online discussion forums (Li et al., 2009).

2.4 Blended Communities of Practice: Opportunities and challenges

Nowadays, the continuous development of ICT tools in conjunction with the ubiquitous usage of digital devices and proliferation of social media platforms have created exciting new TDPD opportunities for EIL teachers. Not surprisingly, online CoPs are becoming a preferred site of PD in many educational circles. Lantz-Andersson et al. (2018) described informally developed online teacher CoPs as a "bottom-up" initiative that involves a "group of practitioners who choose to come together to discuss, share information and work together" (p. 304). While professional learning networks (PLNs) are in the same teacher development wheelhouse and sometimes used interchangeably with virtual CoPs, the two concepts are slightly different. A CoP comprises a "shared domain that becomes a source of identification" (Wenger-Trayner, 2011, para. 1), whereas a PLN is a much wider structure (e.g., a teachers' group on X) that can include CoPs on specific interests (Adobe for Education, 2020). Trust et al. (2016) defined teacher-directed PLNs as "uniquely personalized, complex systems of interactions consisting of people, resources, and digital tools that support ongoing learning and professional growth" (p. 35). The authors of this paper believe that a B-CoP is a powerful catalyst which can help EIL educators engage in organic learning and expand their PD horizons. Thus, Trust and Horrocks (2017) definition is the most appropriate one for the purpose of this study. These researchers described a B-CoP as a group of "practitioners who engage in a mix of face-to-face, online, formal and informal learning activities" (Trust & Horrocks, 2017, p. 4). Batchelor (2020) reminded us that blended or hybrid learning within a CoP also provides members with both synchronous and asynchronous communication opportunities.

There are a number of significant benefits that EIL educators can reap by actively participating in a B-CoP. First, the collective wisdom that is generated within blended learning environments can be quite fruitful as it incorporates multiple perspectives and experiences (Batchelor, 2020). According to Hsiao and Lin (2022), "bottom-up" teacher CoPs can "harness the strength of the current open and free Web 2.0 era, where sharing and collaboration turn knowledge consumers into knowledge creators" (p. 3). Furthermore, B-CoPs can help members alleviate occupational isolationism (Trust et al., 2017), receive emotional support (Alwafi, 2021), and develop genuine friendships (Trust & Horrocks, 2019). There are also a host of practical advantages in a teacher-directed B-CoP. Members can share pedagogical strategies, lesson plans, artifacts (e.g., exemplary student work), and elicit feedback on tricky classroom dilemmas (Flanigan, 2011; Lantz-Andersson et al., 2017). On another practical note, Cripps et al. (2024) reported that a B-CoP approach provided Japanese pre-service

teachers with essential support before, during, and after their teaching practicums. Professor Cripps used face-to-face workshops, sharing circles, and a popular messaging application (i.e., LINE) to foster his students' teaching performances and self-reflective competencies. Other researchers (e.g., Trust & Horrocks, 2019) claimed that B-CoPs can have a positive impact on educators' work-based performances and professional identities.

At the other end of the learning continuum, there can be several notable challenges within a B-CoP. First, organizing and launching a B-CoP requires a lot of time and preparation. Leaders must carefully consider important issues such as protocols, members' roles within the group, and appropriate discussion topics before any interactions can take place (Farrell, 2022). Online workshops and sharing sessions are a cornerstone of many teacher-directed CoPs. A number of educational and business researchers (e.g., Schilthuis-Ihrig, 2023; Zimmermann et al., 2021) have highlighted the many benefits of virtual training (e.g., affordability, flexibility, absence of geographical barriers), especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, B-CoP leaders must be cognizant that online workshops can also generate discomforting friction between participants who lack the necessary technological acumen to access digital resources and navigate online platforms, as well as others who become tangled up in problematic ICT issues such as a weak Wi-Fi connection and poor sound quality (Trifu et al., 2024). Trust and Horrocks (2017) reported that some teachers in their study experienced information overload and failed to see the relevancy between the learning in their B-CoP and classroom practices. A lack of trust amongst members of a B-CoP will impede the sharing process and make collective learning more challenging (Prenger et al., 2021). Furthermore, there can be an absence of 'real dialogue' if teachers over-post in discussion forums or are inhibited about offering genuine critical feedback out of fear that it might have a negative impact on their future career prospects (Robson, 2018). Selwyn (2000) argued that the lack of open participation can result in teachers' online CoPs being "enthusiastic but inward-looking cliques" (p. 774). Free riding, which refers to the tendency of certain individuals in online communities to rely on other members' contributions while failing to share their own ideas and resources (McClure Wasko & Faraj, 2000), is another potential obstacle that can generate a great deal of frustration in a B-CoP. Lastly, organizers can encounter difficulties recruiting and orientating new members (Moore & Carter-Hicks, 2014) as well as maintaining a high level of participation and interesting in an online learning community (Fontainha & Gannon-Leary, 2008).

3 Research design and methodology

A qualitative case study methodological approach was adopted for this research project as it aligned well with our critical realist ontological and epistemological assumptions. Haigh et al. (2019) argued that critical realism-inspired research seeks to understand "tendencies in phenomena that have been observed or experienced (e.g., events, effects)" (p. 3). Furthermore, this philosophical orientation is beneficial in a TEL research context as it can help to counterbalance the adverse impact of technological determinism and socio-cultural determinism (Allen et al., 2013). According to Simons (2009), a case study is "an in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project, policy, institution, programme or system in a 'real life' context" (p. 21). Critics have claimed that case studies lack scientific rigor, and the findings are not applicable to other research environments (Crowe et al., 2011; Simons, 2009). However, Flyvbjerg (2006) argued that case study research "contains no greater bias toward verification of the researcher's preconceived notions than other methods of inquiry" and the practical insights are transferable to other contexts (p. 237). While this qualitative research approach is not without certain limitations, it was still the most effective way for us to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences.

3.1 The whole teacher approach: Conceptual framework

The Japanese Teachers of English B-CoP and virtual workshops outlined in this paper were developed during the COVID-19 pandemic and grounded in Chen and McCray's (2012) Whole Teacher (WT) conceptual framework for in-service PD. This theoretical model, which is derived from the earlier work of Chen and Chang (2006), highlights the importance of fostering all areas of teacher development, including attitudes, knowledge, and practice. According to Chen and McCray (2012), these three components are interconnected (see Figure 1) and a WT PD initiative must be: (a) multidimensional, (b) integrated, (c) developmental, and (d) contextualized (p. 19). The researchers argued that the WT conceptual framework can lead to enhanced teaching and positive student outcomes as it "promotes multiple ways of learning, doing and succeeding" (p. 21).

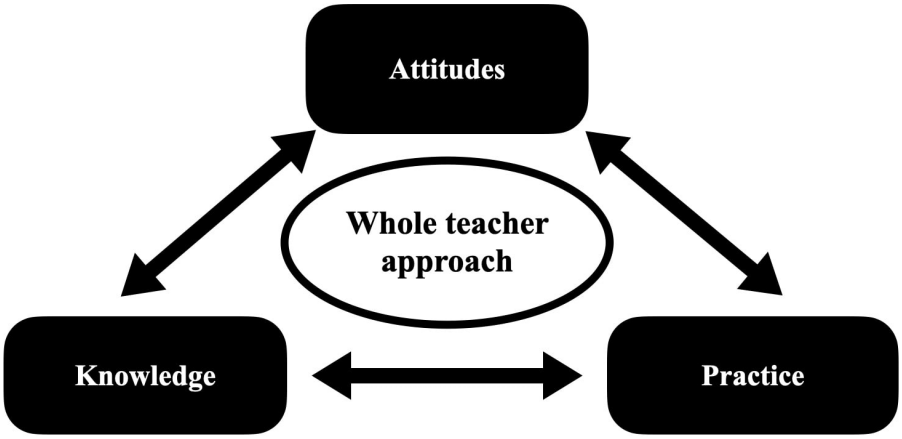

Fig. 1. Whole teacher approach (Adapted from Chen & McCray, 2012)

The authors of this paper believe that Chen and McCray's (2012) model is a beneficial theoretical instrument that can help develop TDPD opportunities for both pre- and in-service EIL educators. Therefore, we concur with Trust and Whalen's (2021) belief that the WT conceptual framework allows teachers to scrutinize their "experiences and learning holistically and uncover the complexity and dynamics of a multifaceted profession" (p. 148). This practical model also helped us to develop and spearhead the online and face-to-face workshops that are highlighted in this paper. More specifically, we integrated the three core elements (i.e., attitudes, practice, knowledge) from Chen and McCray's (2012) WT approach into the planning process and our post-workshop critical reflections.

3.2 Japanese teachers' Blended Community of Practice: Workshops

The idea for the Japanese Teachers of English B-CoP emerged in the summer of 2019 after a three-day intensive PD workshop for in-service junior and high school educators hosted by Nanzan University's Extension College (see Toland et al., 2021). The researchers were cognizant that many pre- and in-service teachers in Japan failed to receive adequate training on how they should establish an EIL classroom that is grounded in the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach (Okumura, 2017). Likewise, Cripps et al. (2023) argued that the practicum period for pre-service teachers is woefully inadequate because it only lasts two to three weeks and many student teachers fail to receive much guidance from their assigned 'mentors'. In addition to these noteworthy challenges, we realized that a great deal of the enthusiasm that gets generated during intensive workshops can quickly dissipate due to the one-off nature of the event. In many ways, our experiences facilitating and reflecting on the 2019 workshop acted as a type of pilot study for our current research.

According to Kim (2011), a pilot study is a "small-scale methodological test" which can help researchers refine their ideas and research instruments (p. 191).

Before launching the Japanese Teachers of English B-CoP we felt that it was essential to conduct a needs analysis so that we could properly identify the participants' learning needs and PD goals. Therefore, we created a 35-item questionnaire which was divided into the following sections: (a) demographics, (b) multiple choice questions, and (c) open-ended questions (see Appendix A). It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a statistical analysis of the responses (n=15) we received from this online survey. However, it is worth noting that most of the respondents (n=12) preferred a blended learning configuration which included opportunities for face-to-face get-togethers (e.g., annual symposium) and digital pedagogy training. Undoubtedly, the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic lockdown and lack of e-readiness to deliver online lessons in many Japanese public schools (Isha & Wibawarta, 2023) factored into the participants' preferences. In addition to the needs analysis questionnaire, the first online training session (i.e., *'Fostering teacher development through a blended community of practice'*) we facilitated helped us to have a better understanding of the PD challenges and desires of the workshop participants. In particular, the collaborative worksheet (see Appendix B) we utilized during this session proved to be an effective springboard which ignited a lively discussion on TDPD and the essential elements that should be in a teachers' B-CoP. Table 1 highlights the titles of both the online and face-to-face workshops which were delivered by a total of four teacher trainers.

Table 1. Japanese Teachers of English B-CoP: Workshop Sessions

Workshop Sessions
1. Fostering teacher development through a blended community of practice.*
2. Professional learning networks: Fostering self-directed teacher development.*
3. Strategies to enhance English language learners' twenty-first century skills.*
4. Cultivating English language learners' creativity and critical thinking skills in an online environment.*
5. Using technology to support learning.*
6. Cultivating English language learners' creativity.
7. Why can't they write?
8. Strategies to support Japanese English learners 21st century skills.
9. How to reverse the trend: Japanese could speak English better.
10. Tips for getting your students to speak English.
* - These five workshops were conducted on the videoconferencing platform Zoom.

A crucial element in our research project was collaborative and self-reflective practice. Several researchers (e.g., Carlson, 2019) consider reflective practice to be a crucial component in the learning process and many teacher training programs. According to Farrell (2013), reflective practice can help educators "develop a deeper understanding of their teaching, assess their professional growth, develop informed decision-making skills, and become proactive and confident in their teaching" (p. 33). After each workshop we elicited the participants' feedback (see Appendix C) and critically reflected on our own performances, as well as ways we could enhance the next session. The participants' post-workshop feedback forms, coupled with our own critical reflections and the WT conceptual framework (Chen & McCray, 2012), helped us to establish the Japanese Teachers of English B-CoP. Figure 2 showcases the various interconnected elements that are in our teacher development model and intended outcomes.

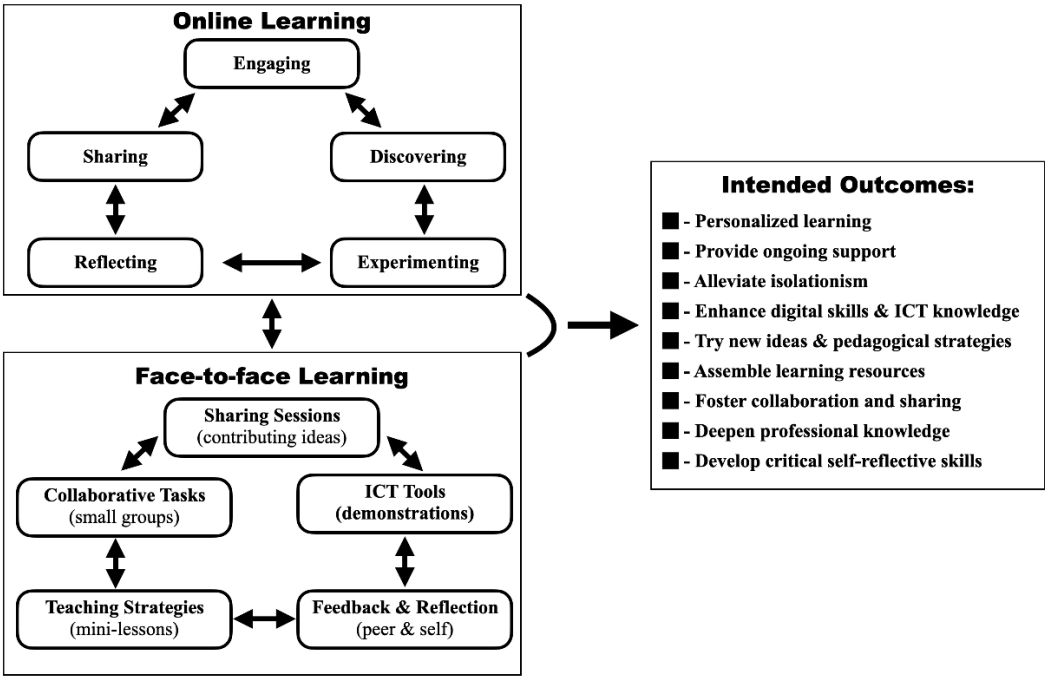

Fig. 2. Japanese Teachers of English B-CoP Model (Adapted from Krutka et al., 2016, p. 153).

3.3 Research site and participants

Our research was conducted at a private university in Japan and on the video conferencing platform Zoom. The sample was drawn from the Japanese Teachers of English B-CoP and students from the secondary researcher's seminar class. Four in-service teachers participated in two online workshops and 17 seminar students at a private university attended a hybrid workshop. In addition, five other teachers who are members of the Japanese Teachers of English B-CoP took part in four informal Zoom meetings. These PD events were developed and spearheaded by the authors of this paper. Together we have 61.5 years teaching experience (M=30.75 years) and have worked with Japanese ELLs for a combined total of 51.5 years (M=25.75 years). The lead researcher has conducted teacher training workshops for eight years, whereas the secondary researcher has over 22 years experience in this area. Over the course of our teaching careers, we have taught ELLs of all ages and from a wide array of proficiency levels. In order to accommodate our students' diverse linguistic abilities and learning needs, we have utilized a number of different pedagogical approaches such as project-based language learning (PBLL), task-based learning, communicative language teaching and TEL. Both of us have an advanced ICT proficiency level and are comfortable integrating TEL activities into our teaching practices.

3.4 Data collection and analysis

The data for this investigation were collected over an 18-month period from August 2021 to November 2022. Participation in this research project was voluntary and no incentives were provided. The researchers adhered to ethical research practices to minimize any negative repercussions to the participants and followed the ethical guidelines established by the research offices at their respective universities. Pseudonyms are used in this study to protect the participants' identity. Before each of the teacher-development events, the researchers discussed the purpose of the study and obtained the participants' informed consent.

The online workshops and meetings for the in-service teachers took place on the video conferencing platform Zoom. The first virtual workshop was not recorded because the research team felt that the participants would be more comfortable discussing the challenges they were experiencing during the COVID-19 pandemic off camera. Whereas the second workshop and four online meetings were video recorded. Similarly, the hybrid pre-service teachers' workshop, which was held at a private Japanese university, was video recorded. The combined workshops lasted 600 minutes or 10 hours (M=200 minutes). The four virtual meetings lasted a total of 325 minutes or 5.4 hours (M=81.3 minutes). Immediately after each workshop and virtual meeting, the researchers recorded their observations in a notebook. The researchers' reflections, video footage, and post-workshop participant feedback forms were housed and analyzed in NVivo 12 for Mac, a qualitative software package. The multifaceted data were then coded via a thematic analysis approach. According to Clarke and Braun (2017), thematic analysis is a "method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning ('themes') within qualitative data" (p. 297). The researchers followed the six steps in Braun and Clarke's (2021) thematic analysis model:

1. Data familiarisation and writing familiarisation notes;
2. Systematic data coding;
3. Generating initial themes from coded and collated data;
4. Developing and reviewing themes;
5. Refining, defining, and naming themes;
6. Writing the report (p. 331).

During the first step, we examined and re-examined the various sources of data to have a better understanding of the participants' thoughts on cultivating ELLs' twenty-first century skills, as well as the elements which will enable them to have a fruitful digital learning experience. Next, we organized and coded the different concepts that emerged from the data. Saldaña (2016) noted that a code is a "word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data" (p. 4). After assembling the initial themes from the coded data, we divided them into primary and secondary themes. MindNode, a mind mapping software package, helped us to organize our thoughts and break down the initial codes into more manageable parts. At each step, we cross-checked each other's interpretation of the data. Lastly, we decided to focus on three key themes for the first research question and five themes for the second research question. While critics have argued that a thematic analysis approach has "limited underpinnings and effectiveness" (Ozuem et al., 2022, p. 143), our experiences support previous studies (e.g., Xu & Zammit, 2020) which claimed that it is a flexible and valuable way for researchers to analyze qualitative data collected in an educational context.

4 Research findings and discussion

4.1 Research question one: Cultivating ELLs' Twenty-first Century Skills

In this section, the following research question is addressed: 'What language learning tasks and pedagogical approaches can educators utilize to cultivate ELLs' twenty-first century skills in both virtual and face-to-face classrooms?' The following three themes, which emerged from a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) of the data, will be highlighted in the pages that follow:

1. Importance of twenty-first century skills;
2. Project-based language learning activities;
3. Technology-enhanced learning in the classroom.

The teaching strategies and lesson ideas in this section are aimed at fostering Japanese junior and

senior high school students' twenty-first century competencies, especially the '4 Cs' (i.e., communication, collaboration, critical thinking, creativity) and ICT skills. However, they can also be applied to a wide range of instructional contexts and should be of interest to EIL educators who wish to establish a more active learning environment and expand their teaching repertoire.

4.1.1 Theme one: Importance of Twenty-first Century Skills

The Japanese Teachers of English B-CoP members and workshop participants were in full agreement that teachers must develop students' twenty-first century skills. For example, Yui stated: "*At university students will need the 4Cs and when they work. It's a globalized world with lots of technology … they need more than basic English skills*." Likewise, Mie commented: "*Creativity and critical thinking are important for our students' futures. Many students might need to change jobs or start their own businesses when they are older.*" Both Yui and Mie's thinking appears to have been influenced by the twenty-first century skills movement (van Laar et al., 2017, 2020). While the teachers clearly recognized the value of cultivating ELLs' twenty-first century skills, a few of the participants felt that it was quite challenging in their teaching context. This notion can be found in Kaori words: "*I like trying new ideas in my classes that develop the 4 Cs … but I'm also busy … my students are in their last year, so I've got to help them get ready for the* [university] *entrance exams*." Several of the pre-service teachers were also apprehensive about integrating new lesson ideas into their classrooms. Mio stated: "*When we start teaching, we will need to use a textbook and follow a plan* [curriculum]. *New teachers are really busy … the principal will watch our classes … it will be hard to try certain lessons*." Likewise, Haruka was concerned with utilizing a TEL approach when she starts teaching. She noted: "*I am not good at using it* [ICT] … *teaching with technology will be hard*." These comments were not surprising as Japanese teachers often have an intense workload (Sato et al., 2020). Furthermore, many education students often feel ill-equipped when they enter the teaching profession (Cripps et al., 2023, 2024) and have low levels of digital literacy (Toland & Cripps, 2024). The data from the feedback forms and discussions during the various training sessions underscored the importance of ongoing digital pedagogy training for teachers in the Japanese school system.

4.1.2 Theme two: Project-based language learning activities

Project-based learning (PBL), which underpins PBLL, is a student-driven, teacher-facilitated instructional method that can harnesses several important twenty-first century competencies (Bell, 2010). Greenier (2020) defined PBL as an "educational approach that aims to synthesize communicative interaction and imaginative thinking, promote peer collaboration, develop students problem-solving and critical thinking capacities, and stimulate affective and cognitive skills that contribute to intellectual and creative development" (p. 27). In the EIL teaching realm, several studies have shown that PBLL is an effective way to develop students' communication skills (Kato et al., 2020), digital literacy (Thomas, 2017), creativity (Bell, 2010), critical thinking, and collaborative work skills (Beckett et al., 2020).

The participants in this study were using a variety of different PBLL activities in their classrooms. For example, Mari highlighted her use of role-play: "*My students acted out a scene from Cinderella. They practiced reading their lines and using gestures … like Cinderella clean my shoes! My class enjoyed this lesson so I will do it again*." Likewise, Mie stated: "*I also like doing role-plays with my students. My class has done more serious ones like online bullying and gender issues. The students write the scenes and perform the role-play in a small group*." These comments support Shapiro and Leopold's (2012) claim that integrating role-playing tasks into a lesson is an effective way to expand ELLs' cognitive and linguistic horizons. A number of EIL educators resist using role-plays because they are not a "drama specialist" (Kluge, 2018), whereas others erroneously assume that Japanese students will do an impersonation of a human statue if they are asked to do any type of performance-assisted learning activities in their English classes. The findings from our study

challenge these widely held notions as several teachers successfully utilized different types of role-play activities with their ELLs.

A reoccurring theme throughout the workshops was getting ELLs to overcome their fear of public speaking. Kaori noted: "*Some of my students were really nervous when they made a short speech about their favorite place*." Several teachers were cognizant of the adverse impact that foreign language anxiety can have on students' public speaking performances so they utilized the poster presentation format instead of class-fronted speeches. For example, Yui stated:

> *I did a poster presentation with another teacher. We moved all of the desks and divided our classes into speakers and listeners. Most of the posters were creative … The students did their presentations in front of two or three classmates so I think they were more relaxed … I will do this project again.*

Previous studies (e.g., Toland et al., 2016) have shown that the carousel poster presentation format can enhance the quality of oral presentations and reduce ELLs' public speaking anxiety. On a similar note, Mahiro had his students make a collaborative travel brochure and discuss it in a small group. He stated: "*My class did something like that* [poster presentation] … *the students made a one-week travel plan and tried to get their classmates to join their trip. They used a PC to make the travel pamphlets. The activity worked well*." The findings from this study support previous studies (e.g., Bell, 2010; Greenier, 2020) which reported that the PBLL approach is an effective way to develop ELLs' twenty-first century competencies.

4.1.3 Theme three: Technology-enhanced learning

The third theme that emerged from the virtual workshops and informal online discussions is the value of incorporating TEL activities into English classes. According to Kirkwood and Price (2014), TEL is the application of ICT to teaching and learning. Throughout the duration of the research project, the participants shared several TEL activities (e.g., viral marketing videos, e-portfolios, multimodal video projects) that they have successfully utilized in their classrooms. For example, Mari's students created a digital storytelling project on their mobile devices. She highlighted this project as follows: "*One of my students who is quite shy was like another person when she made an iPad video with a partner. I think she watches a lot of TikTok videos, so the project was probably interesting*." Likewise, Mahiro's ELLs recorded their voices on smartphones as part of their travel brochure project. He noted: "*They made an ad like on Spotify. Each student recorded a one-minute audio file about their seven-day trip and played it to other students … It helped their pronunciation and listening skills.*" Mio's students discussed and shared their favorite music videos. She stated: "*My students made a report about their favorite English music video. They talked about the images in the videos and song lyrics*." Kaori discussed how she adapted a TEL activity:

> *I had my students do a paper PechaKucha presentation in a small group. My students are not allowed to use smartphones at school so I had to make some changes … the students made 10 slides not 20. Each person printed 5 slides before the lesson … most students liked doing a shorter presentation*.

Kaori's comments highlight another issue that falls under the TEL umbrella, namely the challenges that some Japanese teachers face integrating ICT into their lessons. Ryosuke commented: "… *the PCs at my school are old and YouTube is blocked … my students can't use their smartphones either … it is harder for me to use technology-enhanced learning lessons*." Similarly, Mio noted: "*I had the same problems at my old school so I got the students to watch YouTube videos at home and talk about them in class*." Saki used digital content as a springboard for various descriptive writing and future predictions activities. She stated: "*My students read online news stories and watched TikTok videos for homework. They had to write a short summary and what they think*

would happen next. They shared their ideas in class." While Mio was also handcuffed by antiquated ICT and administrative policies, she deployed a flipped-learning approach to develop her students' digital literacy skills. Chang and Lin (2019) defined flipped learning as a combination of "asynchronous learning via out-of-class multimedia lectures and synchronous learning through in-class student-centered activities" (p. 193).

Anecdotally speaking, many people erroneously believe that a typical English lesson in the Japanese school system consists of teachers reciting grammatical rules and test-taking strategies while their pupils take copious notes. Our experiences working with Japanese English educators challenge this outdated stereotype. While the participants in this study were sometimes bound by administrative and curricular constraints, it was evident that they were highly innovative and creative, especially in their approach to fostering ELLs' twenty-first century skills.

4.2 Research question two: Organizing and conducting virtual training sessions

In this section, the following research question is addressed: 'How can workshop leaders organize and facilitate successful interactive digital learning experiences for pre-service and in-service English teachers?' There are a number of diverse elements that filtered into the five strategies that are highlighted in the pages that follow. First, we conducted a thematic analysis of the data and examined relevant studies are pertinent to digital training. We also critically reflected on our successes and missteps spearheading online workshops, as well as the dozens of virtual conference sessions we attended during the COVID-19 pandemic. More specifically, we discussed both the exemplary presentations and ones that were derailed by problematic ICT and logistical issues. Frontline educators and teacher trainers should find each of the practical pointers that we discuss to be useful, especially since they can be applied to a wide range of instructional contexts.

4.2.1 Strategy one: Pre-workshop preparation is essential

Over the years, we have attended numerous PD workshops whereby the speakers overwhelm and bore audience members with a plethora of facts and figures plastered on text-heavy MS PowerPoint slides. Therefore, we were cognizant of important design principles (e.g., simplicity, usage of high-resolution images), which are based on Reynold's (2020) book *Presentation Zen*, when we created our slides and handouts. Two weeks before the workshops, we exchanged our instructional materials and provided one another with critical feedback. The slides, handouts, and finalized schedule were then made available to the participants at least one week before each of the workshops. We also adhered to the following mantra when we planned out workshop: 'Don't put the technology before the pedagogy'. Thus, we encouraged the attendees to print the handouts, use a PC instead of a smartphone and familiarize themselves with the video conferencing platform that we were using. During the COVID-19 pandemic we delivered a virtual presentation at a conference organized by a Taiwanese university. The conference organizers used the Cisco Webex video conferencing platform and prepared an easy-to-understand instructional booklet. They strongly encouraged the presenters to practice using the various features (e.g., screenshare) before the conference. It became obvious very quickly during the online conference which of the attendees had heeded the organizers' advice. Our session moderator made this comment to a presentation trio: "*Your team was not prepared. You have less than 10 minutes remaining*." Integrating ICT into a training session or classroom requires practice in order to be able to use technology with confidence. In an earlier study, albeit one that still resonates two decades later, Joyce and Showers (2002) discovered that most educators require an average of 20 separate practice sessions before they can master a new skill.

4.2.2 Strategy two: The 'Less is More' principle

The primary goal of the teacher-development workshops was to provide members of the Japanese Teachers of English B-CoP and education students with practical pedagogical strategies and

resources that they could use in their professional practice. Thus, we adhered to the KISS (keep it short and simple) principle when explaining certain complex concepts like critical thinking and creativity. Furthermore, we did not want to overload the participants with too much information during our virtual sessions. According to the American Psychological Association (2023), information overload is the "state that occurs when the amount or intensity of information exceeds the individual's processing capacity, leading to anxiety, poor decision making, and other undesirable consequences" (para. 1). Likewise, we were cognizant of the 'Zoom fatigue' phenomenon from teaching a content-driven academic English course to first-year Japanese university students. We had to make significant changes to the curriculum (e.g., fewer assignments, creating a flexible schedule) during the COVID-19 pandemic as numerous students were exhausted and overwhelmed from being constantly online (see Toland & Cripps, 2024). Dr. Brian Wind, a psychology professor at Vanderbilt University, described 'Zoom fatigue in the following manner: "When we're on Zoom, the brain has to work overtime to process information. It isn't picking up the social cues it's used to identifying. This places stress on the mind and uses up a lot of energy" (Padilla, 2022, para. 3). A reoccurring theme in the informal virtual meetings that we hosted was the desire for a healthier work-life balance. Miki captured this sentiment in these words: "*I'm busy coaching, grading, teaching, planning lessons, talking with parents so I'm tired … when I get home I need to cook dinner, help my children with their homework, lots of things. Every day is really busy*." The excessively busy nature of Japanese junior and senior high school teachers' jobs is another reason why we followed the 'less is more' principle.

4.2.3 Strategy three: Interactive collaborative activities generate synergy

Both virtual and face-to-face workshops for in-service teachers are a genuine goldmine of information as the participants have a wealth of experience and practical insights into the localized educational environment. Furthermore, frontline teachers are arguably much more attuned to curricular undercurrents and administrative landmines than the outside 'expert(s)' conducting their PD training sessions. Thus, it is crucial that organizers try to harness this collective wisdom. We believe that in-service teachers can learn just as much, if not more, from one another than they can from any workshop leaders. Therefore, we integrated collaborative 'breakout' room activities into all of our virtual training sessions. These interactive learning tasks can generate group synergy, a concept that is defined as "performance in excess of what would be expected for a similarly sized collection of individuals working independently" (Almaatouq et al., 2021, p. 1), and "co-creative flow" (Schmoelz, 2018). A case in point concerns a group activity (i.e., 'create your ideal B-CoP') that we used in one of our workshops (see Appendix B). The rich ideas that were generated during this collaborative task filtered into the design process of the Japanese Teachers of English B-CoP website.

4.2.4 Strategy four: Include time for informal socializing

A tremendous amount of informal learning takes place at workshops and conferences during breaks and mingling events (e.g., dinners, sightseeing tours). Furthermore, contacts are made and the seeds of future collaborative research projects are often planted. After two years of attending virtual PD events, the researchers relished the opportunity to once again participate in face-to-face conferences as we could socialize with fellow EIL educators and absorb different teaching perspectives. Unfortunately, most virtual PD training sessions do not include enough time for informal learning. Although Zoom is considered to be a 'game-changer' by most technology enthusiasts, this video conferencing platform can be a little too impersonal. Moreover, there is always the potential for virtual workshop participants to turn into "Zoom-bies" – a concept that unites the words Zoom and zombie (Wellner, 2021, p. 1) if careful consideration does not go into the planning process. Therefore, we strongly recommend that 'coffee breaks' be incorporated into online training sessions and attendees are provided with an opportunity to participate in an optional 'meet and greet' breakout room event at the conclusion of a workshop.

4.2.5 Strategy five: Eliciting the participants' feedback

Enhancing the effectiveness of online teacher-development workshops requires the leaders to make an unbiased assessment of their own performances and adequately evaluate the learning outcomes. Therefore, we partake in two activities whenever we finish facilitating a virtual training session. First, we engage in critical self-reflection and critical collaborative reflection. Shortly after each workshop, we meet online to discuss things that worked well and activities that need to be tweaked or scrapped entirely from future sessions. Not surprisingly, we concur with Richards (2017) contention that "experience linked to reflection can lead to a deeper understanding of the meaning of teaching" (p. 294). Next, we elicited the participants' feedback via an online questionnaire immediately after a training session has concluded. For example, the informal and written feedback forms (see Appendix C) we received after conducting a workshop for education students helped us to improve the overall quality of subsequent teacher-development events. Therefore, we believe that it is important for workshop leaders to critically reflect on the participants' comments and compare this data to their own observations.

5 Conclusion

Several scholars (e.g., Zimmermann et al., 2021) have predicted that virtual workshops will become increasingly commonplace in our post-COVID-19 world because of concerns about cost, time, and environmental issues. While online training sessions are undeniably convenient, they are often beset by a variety of problematic logistical and ICT issues. The researchers were cognizant of these notable challenges and thus deployed several strategies (e.g., connectivity test, preloaded handouts) to ensure optimal learning conditions. Our observations during the online workshops support previous studies (e.g., Trifu et al., 2024) which reported that attendees in virtual training environments can become frustrated and sidetracked by ICT problems (e.g., poor Wi-Fi connection). Similarly, we recognized that many Japanese educators find teaching EIL to be a frustrating and isolating endeavour so we established a B-CoP to help alleviate occupational isolation and provide them with some much needed support. The B-CoP workshops were constructed on the WT conceptual framework (Chen & McCray, 2012) because the three crucial components (i.e., attitudes, practice, knowledge) that underpin this PD model can help educators enhance their professional competencies. Thus, we concur with Trust and Whalen's (2021) contention that this theoretical tool can allow teachers to better understand their own classroom experiences and complexities within the educational field.

This study has highlighted five strategies that workshop leaders can utilize to facilitate successful interactive digital learning experiences for pre-service and in-service teachers. In addition, it has put forward three pedagogical approaches that can cultivate ELLs' twenty-first century skills. The ideas discussed in this paper are the tip of the proverbial iceberg as there are a myriad of ways that EIL educators can foster an active learning environment and conduct a fruitful virtual training session. We concluded one of our online workshops with the following quote from American linguist and social activist Noam Chomsky: "If anyone … is teaching the same thing they were teaching five years ago, either the field is dead, or they haven't been thinking" (Solomon, 2003). These words resonate with us because teaching EIL is a challenging endeavour that requires continuous learning and growth. Therefore, we encourage fellow EIL educators to join a B-CoP to not only share lesson ideas and pedagogical strategies, but also to break through their 'silos' of isolationism and provide one another with emotional support.

5.1 Limitations

There are a number of limitations to this study. First, the research only involved a total of nine in-service teachers and 17 pre-service teachers. Furthermore, the majority (76.9%) of the participants in this study are female. Clearly, the research would have been more reliable in it included

more in-service teachers and a better gender balance. It should be noted that we recruited 23 in-service teachers to join the Japanese Teachers of English B-CoP. The low response rate (39.1%), which may in part be attributed to the increased workloads many educators experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, supports other researchers (e.g., Moore & Carter-Hicks, 2014) who claimed that recruiting new members to an online CoP can often be difficult. The second limitation is that the secondary researcher investigated his own students which can create problems related to personal bias (Burns, 2005) as well as power and influence (Cresswell, 2014). The researchers adhered to ethical research practices to minimize these potential pitfalls. Third, the majority of the participants were based in Aichi prefecture which is located in the central part of Japan. Future research on B-CoPs in Japan should include teachers who live in different regions and work with ELLs from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds. Lastly, this study provides readers with a snapshot in time. It would be naïve and disingenuous to claim that the TDPD activities highlighted in this paper resulted in a fundamental change in the B-CoP participants' attitudes and beliefs about teaching. However, other researchers (e.g., Trust & Horrocks, 2019) believe that B-CoPs can have a positive impact on teachers' work-based performances and professional identities. Future researchers may want to conduct a mixed methods longitudinal study to delve deeper into this area of teacher development.

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Tony Cripps (https://orcid.org/0009-0000-4315-7348) is a Professor at Nanzan University and has been teaching in Japan for over thirty years. His research interests include teacher training, learner autonomy, material design, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), pedagogical innovation, and English for Medical Purposes (EMP). Tony has run numerous teacher-training workshops in Japan and overseas. He is currently working on a major research project (Kaken B – No. 21H00551) funded by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS) which aims to provide pedagogical support for pre-service English teachers in Japan.

Appendix A

Japanese English Teachers' B-CoP Research Project: Questionnaire (translated from Japanese)

This research project aims to establish and maintain a blended community of practice (B-CoP) for Japanese English teachers who work at junior and senior high schools in Aichi Prefecture. Our goal is to create a supportive online environment that will facilitate collegial learning and provide a platform for sharing instructional resources and strategies.

All information that is collected in this questionnaire will be treated confidentially. Participation in this study is voluntary and you may withdraw at any time. Thank you for your time and cooperation!

Part #1: Background Information

1) What is your gender?
- **a.** female
- **b.** male
- **c.** rather not say

2) How old are you?
- **a.** under 25 years old
- **b.** 25-29 years old
- **c.** 30-39 years old
- **d.** 40-49 years old
- **e.** 50-59 years old
- **f.** 60+ years old

3) How long have you been working as an English language teacher?
- **a.** less than 1 year
- **b.** 1-2 years
- **c.** 3-5 years
- **d.** 6-10 years
- **e.** 11-15 years
- **f.** 16-20 years
- **g.** more than 20 years

4) Which best describes your current workplace?
- **a.** public elementary school
- **b.** private elementary school
- **c.** public junior high school
- **d.** private junior high school
- **e.** public high school
- **f.** private high school
- **g.** other: _____

Part #2: Professional Development
Please think about your own teaching context. Check the most appropriate box.

5) What impact do you think the following activities will have OR have had on your development as a teacher?

0	1	2	3	4
Not applicable	**No impact**	**A small impact**	**A moderate impact**	**A large impact**

a. education conferences
b. professional development seminars / workshops
c. formal study / training (e.g., distance education course)
d. massive open online courses (MOOCs)
e. formal classroom observation from a supervisor (e.g., principal)
f. informal peer classroom observation (e.g., trusted colleague)
g. mentoring / coaching – as part of a formal school arrangement
h. engaging in informal discussions with your colleagues on how to improve your teaching
i. teachers' critical friends group
j. participation in a voluntary online professional learning network for English teachers
k. social media platforms (e.g., X [formerly known as Twitter], Facebook)
l. reading professional literature (e.g., academic journals, teaching magazines)
m. reading teachers' blogs
n. lesson study groups within your school
o. sharing lessons and exemplary student work with colleagues

6) Please think about areas of your teaching that would benefit from PD. Please check the most appropriate box.

0	1	2	3	4
Not applicable	**No need at all**	**Low level of need**	**Moderate level of need**	**High level of need**

a. student assessment practices
b. changes to the curriculum
c. classroom management issues (e.g., student discipline & behavioural problems)
d. working with neurodiverse students (e.g., autism spectrum disorder, dyslexia, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder [ADHD]) and students with disabilities (e.g., special needs)
e. information & communication technologies (ICT) skills for teaching
f. knowledge and understanding of communicative English teaching strategies (e.g., communicative language teaching [CLT])
g. teaching English in English
h. school administrative work
i. preparing students for high school or university entrance exams
j. other: _____

Part #3: Open-ended Responses

7) What are the main challenges you experience working as an English teacher in the Japanese school system. Please give some examples from you own experiences.

8) What kinds of PD have you experienced? How satisfied were you with each of these PD approaches? Please give some examples from your own experiences.

9) What additional areas would you like to improve through PD?

10) A **blended community of practice** (B-CoP) is a group of teachers who engage in a mix of face-to-face, online, formal and informal learning activities. Please describe your ideal B-CoP. Think about the following items:

- Who will be involved?
- What type of discussions will you have?
- What platforms will you use?
- How often will you communicate with the other members of the community?
- Will you share lesson plans and teaching resources?

11) Please let us know if you any have specific requests or suggestions. This information will help us to create and maintain a B-CoP that will best suit the needs of the participants.

Appendix B

Teacher Development Workshop: PD Worksheet

Task #1 – Professional Development (PD) Challenges
Instructions: Write down your ideas for **3 minutes**. Discuss your answer with your group.

T1: What **challenges** do you experience with your own PD?

Task #2 – Types of PD
Instructions: Write down your ideas for **3 minutes**. Discuss your answer with your group.

T2: What **kinds of in-service** and **pre-service PD** have you experienced?

Task #3 – (a) Areas I want to Improve / (b) Helpful PD Environments
Instructions: Write down your ideas for **4 minutes**. Discuss your answers with your group.

T3 (a): What areas do you want to improve through PD?

T3 (b): What type of PD environments would be helpful for you?

Task #4 – Design your own Blended Community of Practice (B-CoP)
Instructions: Work in a small group. Your team has been selected to organize a teachers' B-CoP. Think about the following questions:

- Who will be involved?
- How will you recruit members of your B-CoP?
- How will you communicate?
- How often will you communicate?
- What types of discussions will you have?
- Will you share teacher resources? How will you share resources?
- What type of resources will you share?

Your team will make a short mini-presentation to another group.

Appendix C

Feedback Sheet – Pre-service Mini-workshop No. 1

Thank you for agreeing to complete this short survey. It should take about 10 minutes to complete. Your answers will be used to help understand pre-service English teachers' needs, to aid research, and to help design future workshops.

Your answers will be treated with strict confidentiality and at no time will your identity be revealed. The questionnaire is anonymous. Once again, thank you for your help.

Tony Cripps

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1) Please provide some feedback about Professor Toland's session.

2) Please provide some feedback about Professor Uchida's session.

3) For students who have **NOT** done their teaching practice yet – What topics would you like to see included in future workshops? Please give some examples.

4) For students who have **NOT** done their teaching practice yet – What skills do you think you need to learn to help prepare you for becoming a teacher? Please give some examples.

5) For students who have **NOT** done their teaching practice yet – What is your opinion of the teaching license course?

6) For students who **HAVE** completed their teaching practice – What is your opinion of the training/support that you received while at your junior high or senior high school?

7) For students who **HAVE** completed their teaching practice – Please write about your experience of teaching at your junior or senior high school.

8) For students who **HAVE** completed their teaching practice – Considering your experience of teaching at your junior high or senior high school what topics would you like to see included in future workshops?

9) When is the best day and time to hold future teaching workshops? How long would you like the workshops to be?

10) If you have any questions/comments please e-mail me or write them here.

Once again, thank you for your time!