DEVELOPING THE WORKFORCE OF PRIMARY SCHOOL ENGLISH THROUGH PEER COACHING IN PRE-SERVICE TEACHER TRAINING

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Introduction

Supplying and retaining teachers of primary school English (PSE) has been a concern in many countries, especially where English is taught as a foreign language (EFL). In Asia, a number of researchers and educators have recognized that the development of PSE teachers is a particularly critical issue (e.g. Wu 2012, in China; Kang 2012, in South Korea; Canh & Chi 2012, in Vietnam). PSE teachers need diverse knowledge and teaching skills, as well as English ability suitable for a given teaching context. Nevertheless, in many countries, primary school education is basically formulated based on a generalist model, where homeroom teachers cover the entire curriculum of subjects. Hence, it is understandable that teaching PSE tends to be a burden on homeroom teachers who are not specifically trained as English teachers and who have a perception that teaching English is difficult.

Teachers of PSE in Japan

In Japan, which is the context of the present study, homeroom teachers are fundamentally responsible for teaching all subjects, although there are cases in which some subjects including music and home economics are often taught by specialist teachers. In regard to PSE, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Science and Technology (MEXT) has considered two scenarios in which either homeroom teachers or specialist teachers teach, but the subject has been taught mainly by homeroom teachers in most public schools since PSE education commenced in 2002. The MEXT survey in 2007 reported that over 90% of homeroom teachers were in charge of teaching PSE (MEXT 2008). However, many of the teachers do not have confidence in their own English and PSE teaching skills (MEXT 2011), and MEXT continues to struggle with the best solution to the problem (MEXT 2016).

Allowing for the issue, many municipal boards of education recently started to give student-teachers written examinations or practical skill tests for teaching PSE in the process of primary school teacher employment to hire qualified homeroom teachers who can teach PSE (MEXT 2017). In this regard, pre-service teacher education at Japanese universities plays a significant role in nurturing an adequate workforce in PSE education.

Pre-service teacher training for PSE in Japanese university settings

Considering the cultivation of qualified homeroom teachers in terms of PSE, MEXT (2009) proclaimed that it is desirable to incorporate teaching methods for PSE into the curriculum of primary school pre-service teacher education. Based on the governmental notice, a number of universities have begun to establish classes for PSE teaching methods in their curriculum. Conversely, pre-service teacher education in many Japanese universities seemed slow to act on PSE education (Monoi 2012). Similarly, classes for PSE in pre-service teacher training vary according to university in Japan. Specifically, national universities relatively earlier established comprehensive courses for teaching PSE, including the study of English language skills, teaching methods for PSE, theories of second language acquisition, and education for international understanding. This is mainly because the curricula of the universities are basically connected to English teacher training in secondary schools. That is, the articulation between primary and secondary teacher education seems strong. On the other hand, private universities which offer primary school teacher training are not necessarily linked to secondary school English teacher training. Thus, the latter seem to offer fewer comprehensive courses for PSE education, and fewer classes for teaching PSE in the curriculum are offered than in national universities. Some faculty members of national universities in Japan claim that many programs and criteria fail to meet the quality assurance requirements for pre-service training for PSE teachers in the university courses (Honda, Takeuchi & Matsumiya 2017). In view of Honda et al.'s assertion, education departments of private universities need to make more efforts to enhance teacher training for PSE.

Recognizing the weak aspect in terms of developing the workforce for PSE education involved in private universities, since 2015 I (a

teacher educator) have conducted a PSE teaching project in a seminar class, which consists of a small number of students in a Japanese university setting who are interested in my field of specialty. The seminar class usually allows students to share their academic interests with others in a learner-centred manner. Harris, Spina, Ehrich, and Smeed (2013) claim that the learner-centred approach represents a global shift away from instruction that is fundamentally teacher-centred. Additionally, Baeten, Struyven, and Dochy (2012) suggest that instructors who use a learner-centred approach focus on the learner's individual processes of constructing personal knowledge and understanding rather than on memorization of the content of a given course. Consistent with this notion, the learner-centred approach can enhance learner autonomy, which enables students to take responsibility for their own learning (Holec 1981). It seems highly reasonable, then, that incorporating such an approach into pre-service teacher training will produce responsible, cooperative, and well-prepared PSE teachers.

In my previous project in 2016, student-teachers accumulated experience in teaching PSE following Wenger's Community of Practice (Wenger 1998) principles (Okumura 2017). Specifically, the student-teachers shared an interest in and an enthusiasm for PSE education and seemed to establish their knowledge and skills within a relevant community in a learner-centred way. Nevertheless, I recognized the need for further progress in developing PSE teaching to nurture collaborative skills more intensively and to overcome a psychological gap that tends to cause younger-year students not to be frank enough with older-year students, which is often acknowledged in the Japanese school culture (Okumura 2017).

Hence, in the following year I decided to incorporate the notion of peer coaching into my PSE teaching project. Moreover, I acknowledged a necessity of more systematic views on a PSE teaching project in a pre-service teacher education course. I therefore decided to adopt action research in my project.

Conceptual framework

Peer coaching

Many researchers advocate the importance and efficacy of teacher collaboration in schools (Brownell, Yeager, Rennells, & Riley 1997; Erb 1995; Goddard, Goddard & Tschannen-Moran 2007; Ostovar-Nameghi & Sheikhahmadi 2016; Pounder 1998; Shachar & Shmuelevitz 1997). Teacher collaboration in a team contributes to enhancing a teacher's professional knowledge and experience and facilitates learning and accomplishment. One of the effective approaches to nurture collaborative skills is peer coaching. Robbins (1991: 1) defines peer coaching as "a confidential process through which two or more professional colleagues work together to reflect on current practices; expand, refine and build new skills; share ideas; teach one another; conduct classroom research; or solve problems in the workplace". Goker's (2006: 240) definition focuses more on the school setting by describing it as "the process of two teachers working together in and out of the classroom to plan instruction, develop materials, and watch one another work with students". Yee (2016) argues that peer coaching contributes to lessening teacher isolation and developing cooperative norms which allow teachers to assist one another. Moreover, citing Chism (1999) and Joyce and Showers (1980), Goker (2006: 241) notes that peer coaching is a process in which teams of pre-service teachers regularly observe one another in order to offer assistance, suggestions, and support. The findings of Goker's study (2006) overlap with those of previous studies which found that peer coaching with consistent feedback plays a critical role in nurturing the self-efficacy and enhancement of English teaching skills in teacher trainees. Goker (2006) also suggests that asking questions and expressing ideas among peers freely lead to positive outcomes in peer-coaching activities in student-teacher education. This affirms the principle that peer coaching has a learner-centred nature that can improve learner autonomy and facilitate self-directed learning. The Queensland Government (2018) proposes four types of peer-coaching models based on a review of relevant literature. The first type is *collegial peer coaching*, which includes two or more teachers working together around a shared observation of teaching. The second is *challenge coaching*, consisting of a group of teachers working together to tackle a specific teaching issue. The third, *technical coaching*, is designed to assist teachers in transferring what has been learned in a workshop into classroom practice. Finally, *team coaching* involves an experienced and skilled teacher in a particular area.

My PSE project will involve *collegial peer coaching* and *team coaching*, which allow the student-teachers to learn from their peers collaboratively and from me (the supervising teacher educator), a specialist in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL).

Action research

In order to observe and reflect on practices of peer coaching, it is possible to adopt action research. Kemmis and McTaggart (1982: 5) define action research as "trying out the project ideas in practice as a means of improvement and as a means of increasing knowledge about the curriculum, teaching, and learning". Pine (2009: 30) highlights that "action research studies a problematic situation in an ongoing systematic and recursive way to take action to change that situation" and further argues that action research allows teachers to reflect on their practice to improve it and to become more self-sufficient and thoughtful practitioners. Similarly, Johnson (2012) states that action research enables educators to comprehend and develop the quality of the educational process.

Citing Kochendorfer (1997), Pine (2009: 32) introduces seven types of action research in classroom settings: 1) changes in classroom practice, 2) effects of program restructuring, 3) new understandings of students, 4) understanding of self as teacher, 5) new professional relationships with colleagues and students, 6) teaching a new process to the students, and 7) seeking a quantifiable answer. Additionally, Burns (2009: 292-293) suggests that action research can take on various forms: (a) required components in formal undergraduate or postgraduate courses; (b) collaborative teacher-researcher projects within educational organizations/programs; or (c) individual projects by classroom teachers/teacher educators, which are often localized and unpublished. My PSE project will explore effects of program restructuring and new professional relationships with colleagues and students in an individual project.

The purpose of the study

As mentioned earlier, supplying and retaining the workforce of PSE teachers is a continuing issue in Japan. Thus, pre-service teacher training should be ongoing to cultivate PSE teachers who possess adequate knowledge and skills to teach PSE effectively and who should be reflective and collaborative teachers in school. In order to play a role in developing the workforce as a teacher educator of a private university, I re-established a PSE teaching project. The overall goal of the present study is to examine student-teachers' engagement in the project. Additionally, this study will investigate effects of peer coaching on the student-teachers' engagement. Specifically, this study intends to answer the following questions:

1. How do the student-teachers engage in the reorganized PSE project?
2. How do the student-teachers perceive PSE teaching through the project?
3. Does peer coaching play a role in facilitating learner-centred collaboration in pre-service PSE teacher training?

This study offers significant value to the field of PSE. By sharing the findings of this PSE teacher training project, it adds to the ongoing discussion amongst teacher educators at the tertiary level in many countries regarding how best to prepare a competent workforce of PSE teachers.

The 2017 PSE teaching project

A re-established PSE teaching project was launched in the 2017 academic year, in collaboration with three neighbouring public primary schools. The participants of the project included a total of 20 student-teachers in a teacher education course at a private Japanese women's university. The majority of the participants intended to become primary school homeroom teachers after graduation; they were motivated and interested in teaching PSE. As Table 1 indicates, the student-teachers were divided into two groups which were in charge of teaching either lower or upper graders based upon their interest in the target age group. The seniors were asked to choose team leaders who would be responsible for taking the lead in group activities, and two leaders were selected in each semester based on their willingness. Yuma and Saki (indicated with one asterisk) were the leaders in the first semester, and Rino and Fumi (indicated with two asterisks) were those in the second semester.

Preparation

As soon as the groups were formed in the beginning of the first semester (April 2017), the student-teachers in each team met regularly to create and prepare for a 60-minute lesson. The teams worked separately for preparation throughout the project. All seniors, who had experienced teaching PSE in the previous year, took the initiative in making lesson plans and deciding the members' roles in each lesson. Furthermore, they gave the juniors advice in teaching PSE based on their previous experience.

Table 1. The participants.

Lower primary team		Upper primary team	
Juniors	Seniors	Juniors	Seniors
Ami	Tomoka	Ema	Saki*
Kiyo	Naomi	Mai	Hana
Miharu	Rino**	Nami	Reika
Chika	Sumire	Junko	Koto
	Yuma*	An	Fumi**
	Sayo		

Note. All members' names are pseudonyms to protect the students' anonymity.

In the initial stage, the juniors were mainly in charge of preparing teaching materials (e.g. picture cards and handouts) based on discussion in each team. Moreover, the juniors sometimes proposed their opinions or ideas when asked by the seniors. As a supplement to these meetings, the team members in each group frequently communicated with one another using a social network site called "LINE", which is currently the most popular among Japanese adolescents, in order to discuss their work. As their communication on "LINE" was unofficial, I did not participate in the online group. Instead, I sometimes participated in formal face-to-face discussion (mostly during my seminar class sessions) about making lesson plans in each team to identify their work progress in preparation.

To make a lesson, the teams adopted a topic-based approach as conducted in the previous year. They selected various topics according to the children's age level, established objectives, and developed activities and chose or produced appropriate materials. For the lower primary students, basic topics such as numbers and colours were chosen, and listening and speaking skills were focused on as lesson objectives. For the upper primary students, topics related to the contents of other subject areas such as art, music, and social studies were integrated into the lessons, and reading and writing activities were incorporated, in addition to listening and speaking, ensuring that the lessons would reflect the interests and cognitive demands of the students.

The lesson in this teaching project was divided into four basic parts: (1) warming up, (2) presentation, (3) practice, and (4) rounding up. Specifically, the student-teachers in both teams tried to incorporate small-group instruction into several activities such as chants in presentation and games in practice in order to increase interactions between the student-teachers and children and to enable children who have little experience in learning English to feel secure in outputting English.

Before the day of a lesson, all student-teachers gathered and confirmed each member's role. They rehearsed the lesson and checked many points in terms of teaching PSE, such as precise English usage and the way to facilitate children's engagement in a given activity. During the rehearsal, the student-teachers practiced using Classroom English (CE) expressions such as greetings, classroom commands, and praise. Similarly, the student-teachers who were in charge of storytelling practiced their role to achieve not only proper pronunciation but also just the right intonation to attract and maintain the children's attention. I observed their performance in the rehearsal, gave advice when needed, and sometimes trained them on English usage and pronunciation.

Implementation

The lessons were implemented according to the agreed-upon plan. An average of 30 lower primary and 15 upper primary students participated in each lesson. Half of the children joined in a few times and some participated in all lessons.

As decided in preparation, all seniors in each team basically played roles as main instructors who present target words and sentences, initiate games, instruct reading and writing activities, and tell a story. The juniors in each team observed the seniors' performance and also supported children to comfortably do any activity and to help them feel secure. For example, when a child had difficulty in pronouncing a target word, a junior student approached the child and they said it together. The child seemed to become comfortable with learning English. As in the previous year, the main teaching roles were partly shifted to the juniors in order to apply what they learned from the seniors. Additionally, as planned, several activities including chants and games were

conducted in small groups, initiated by all members in each team. During the lesson, the student-teachers in each team interacted with one another as much as possible in order to conduct the lesson smoothly.

Reflection

After the lesson, team members held a review session with each other and me. The aim of this session was for the student-teachers to enhance their reflective skills in terms of planning, implementation, and assessment of their lessons and materials. In the current project, the seniors and I decided to hold each team session separately, so that they could focus on their own teaching and supporting performances in the lesson. In the review session, the student-teachers first filled out a structured reflection note which asks about preparation for the lesson, performance in the lesson, observation of children's engagement, relationships with peers, and issues for the next lessons. Farrell (2013) proposes the effectiveness of writing reflections such as allowing language teachers to clarify their own thinking and to be better able to monitor their own practices. The student-teachers then discussed those points in each team while I observed the session, gave some comments on the lesson, or answered questions. Farrell (2018) suggests that sharing writing with peers and supervisors is another benefit of reflective practice. When student-teachers share their reflective writing, they can obtain different viewpoints about their work or performance in lessons.

The research

In order to explore the research questions noted above, the current research tried to utilize various methods which are vital for the triangulation of the data (Olesen 2004). Written materials including lesson plan documents, original teaching materials, and the student-teachers' reflection notes were reviewed to support the observation. Furthermore, impacts of peer coaching were explored by observing student-teachers' engagement throughout the project and by reviewing a specific question asking about relationships with peers on the reflection note. The instruments of the research are summarized in Table 2.

I informed the pre-service teachers that I wanted to use their written notes as data for the present study and asked for their consent. All of the participants agreed, and I certified that their reflections would be anonymous in the study. As their reflection notes were written in Japanese, the student-teachers' comments which could be applied for citation were translated into English.

Findings

The student-teachers' engagement and perceptions which are associated with research questions 1 and 2 were first described by dividing them into three phases: preparation, implementation, and reflection.

Preparation

Through my observation of the preparation phase, I perceived that all student-teachers enthusiastically engaged in planning and preparing the PSE lessons. In particular, the seniors in each team actively discussed and shared ideas in order to create attractive lessons for children. The outcome of such active discussion appeared in the content of the lesson plans. It was recognized that the lessons incorporated a variety of English games which enable children to practice their English in an enjoyable way. In fact, enjoyment is a critical factor that can facilitate language learning and acquisition (Krashen 2009). Comments by Fumi and Sumire (the seniors) are good examples:

> I think that we were able to adopt new activities that we had not incorporated before, and they seemed fun for children. (Fumi, reflection for lesson 3)

> In order for lower primary students to learn days of the week, we integrated a lot of auditory and visual activities. (Sumire, reflection for lesson 4)

Furthermore, it was acknowledged that the seniors seemed to understand how to use various digital resources for the creation and implementation of effective PSE lessons. This was especially evident in their frequent use of video clips suitable for PSE (e.g. songs and chants on YouTube) that helped the children listen to English as spoken by native speakers.

In regard to the juniors, it was appreciated that they sometimes proposed new ideas for making lesson plans in discussion. For instance, Miharu in the lower primary team introduced the building block game for lesson 4, applying her knowledge obtained from a different class in the teacher education course. It was also admitted that all juniors eagerly prepared teaching materials, and especially in the latter half of the stage, they were able to prepare materials more effectively. Nami's comment is an example to support this observation:

Table 2 Data, methods, and viewpoints

Phases	Data	Methods	Viewpoints
Preparation	Student-teachers' discussion and performance in each team	Observation	・To share knowledge and ideas ・To learn with one another in a team
	Lesson plan documents and teaching materials	Review of lesson plan documents and teaching materials	・To develop attractive lessons ・To create or prepare efficient teaching materials
Implementation	Student-teachers' performance in lessons	Observation	・To use English appropriately and precisely ・To conduct classroom management efficiently ・To support children appropriately
Reflection	Reflection notes	Review of the sheet	・To review a lesson properly by oneself ・To identify issues
	Student-teachers' discussion in each team	Observation	・To share reflections and issues

> I think that we were able to develop good teaching materials for a lesson because we made the materials while imagining actual lessons and considering how to use them. Also, it was good that we prepared authentic materials such as uniforms of various jobs. (Nami, reflection for lesson 3)

Implementation

I focused on the student-teachers' English use during the lessons because it is essential for PSE teachers in Japan to develop English skills which appropriately and precisely use a variety of CE expressions. I observed that many student-teachers did not have a perfect command of CE in the lessons although they practiced using it in advance. As a result, the student-teachers agreed on the further necessity of practicing their English skills for PSE teaching. A lack of English proficiency was exposed in a couple of seniors' comments on the reflection notes:

> I should have used English more to explain how to play a game. I need to use various types of Classroom English expressions more. (Rino, reflection note for lesson 3)

> For the greeting I tried to use only English, but my vocabulary was limited. I need to expand my use of English words for various situations. (Hana, reflection note for lesson 3)

It is obvious that developing English skills is an ongoing process. Thus, the continuity of practicing CE is essential for any pre-service teachers in their training for PSE education.

With reference to classroom management, as initially planned, they used the small-group teaching approach for several activities such as chants and games. I perceived that their attempt seemed successful when observing the activities. Interactions with the children were facilitated and enabled children to have many chances to speak English in small groups. Since many of the children may not have had a personal acquaintance with all of their classmates in the project, working in small groups tended to reduce their sense of insecurity in learning English in the setting. Research has found that security is important in maximizing the outcome of children's language learning (Scott & Ytreberg 1990).

Relatedly, the small-group approach also allowed the student-teachers to observe children's performance carefully. In their written notes, most seniors described how children performed in the small-group activity. Yuma's comment is a good example:

> During the chant activity children first looked embarrassed, but they chanted English after several times. (Yuma, reflection note for lesson 3)

I saw that the juniors sometimes struggled with supporting children in the initial stage, but they seemed gradually to understand how to do it efficiently as their experience increased. Ami's comments are an example of this progress:

> In the beginning of the lesson I just saw the seniors' performance. In the middle of the lesson

> I actively interacted with children. (Ami, reflection note for lesson 1)
>
> I was able to interact with children more closely than before. I interacted with children while thinking of what words should be given to children, so that they can play games or speak English efficiently. (Ami, reflection note for lesson 3)

Reflection

Review of the student-teachers' written comments shows that some student-teachers were focused on their own performance. For example, Junko (junior) reported that she needed to be aware of English pronunciation more. Other students highlighted the lessons themselves. For instance, Koto (senior) pointed out that time management for each activity should be more emphasized in the lessons. Though their reflective views varied, it was observed that all student-teachers enthusiastically shared thoughts offering their honest opinions despite grade. Such open discussion was a positive outcome that eliminated the psychological barrier often existing between juniors and seniors in Japanese school contexts.

Peer coaching

The outcomes of peer coaching, which are the critical concepts of the current project, should be clarified specifically to answer the third research question. I appreciated that the project seemed to facilitate learner-centred learning rather than a lecture-based approach from the initial to final stages. It was observed that all student-teachers participated in the project on their own initiative and closely collaborated with one another. Such close cooperation enriched unity among all members in the team despite grade. The student-teachers overall positively evaluated their collaboration in each team, and Tomoka (senior, lower primary team) and Mai (junior, upper primary team) gave positive comments which support the observation:

> The project itself was what we collaborated on and produced. (Tomoka, reflection note for lesson 4)
>
> Thanks to the seniors' support, we were able to conduct the activity in lesson 4 smoothly. (Mai, reflection note for lesson 4)

Likewise, the juniors learned from the seniors' performance and gathered tips for PSE instruction through the entire process of the project. Miharu (lower primary team) pointed out learning from the seniors:

> During the chant activity, I first imitated the seniors' performance, and I then did it well on my own. (Miharu, reflection note for lesson 3)

Examination of the data set shows that incorporating peer coaching into the year-long project produced positive outcomes that support the previous studies noted above. Specifically, peer coaching in the project facilitated a learner-centred engagement in teaching PSE in a pre-service teacher education. Also, peer coaching in the present project avoided member isolation and became a useful opportunity to enhance cooperative norms which allow teachers to assist one another. It is hoped that student-teachers who learn in a learner-centred and peer-coaching environment will one day be in a position to instil in their own PSE students this type of learner autonomy and motivation.

Limitation and suggestions

The present study incorporating action research used observation of student-teachers' engagement and review of written documents as data in order to explore student-teachers' performance and perceptions of PSE through the qualitative data set. However, the findings of quantitative action research projects are limited (Johnson 2012). Therefore, it can be argued that findings based on this data cannot be generalizable and thus should be interpreted thoughtfully.

One possible option to strengthen the triangulation of the data in action research, which investigates how student-teachers perform or perceive their PSE teaching, is to employ pre- and post-project interviews with all the participants. Specifically, semi-structured interviews would be preferable because they allow the participants to express their experiences and opinions more openly.

Another option to prove student-teachers' enhancement in PSE teaching skills is to conduct such projects by a faculty team involving several or a few specialists in the given or related field. This will be a project adopting collegial peer coaching that consists of a few teachers working together about a shared observation of teaching. Action research with collegial peer coaching will reveal different viewpoints in student-teachers' progress and change in PSE education.

Conclusion

In the present study, it was found that the PSE teaching project drawing on the peer-coaching principle helped the student-teachers practice desirable skills for PSE in the authentic context involving children in a learner-centred manner. The student-teachers engaged considerably in every activity throughout the project and they

acknowledged that it was a useful PSE teacher-training opportunity. Although it is difficult to say that the project contributed to developing PSE teaching skills, it is obvious that such teaching projects are valuable to cultivate student-teachers' awareness of their future professional duties. The development of the desired workforce for teaching PSE teachers is not an easy task. It is vital for any teacher educators to consider adopting a learner-centred approach which helps future teachers actively learn and collaborate with one another in PSE teaching rather than a traditional lecture-based approach.

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