

# *An ALT's Narrative Inquiry as a Reflective Practitioner*

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**Abstract:** *The ALT system has been in place for more than 30 years in Japan, and there are currently about 20,000 ALTs assigned to schools. However, the professional development of ALTs has not been institutionalized in teacher preparation nor in-service teacher training programs. To further enhance the quality of foreign language education, there is a need to build a professional learning program that meets the needs and realities of ALTs who have been practicing in Japanese schools. This paper examines an ALT's professional learning in a graduate teacher education program. The case study of ALT A, who is teaching five different elementary schools, is used to reveal his longitudinal professional learning and transformation process. First, the structure of the graduate teacher education program which ALT A is currently enrolled in is introduced as a proposal to equip ALTs with competencies. Then, an analysis of ALT A's monthly and annual narrative writings is conducted to unfold his reflective enquiry into professional practice. Lastly, the factors attributing to his transformation are discussed in relation to the impacts of the graduate teacher education program.*

**Keywords:** *ALT; narrative inquiry; reflection; professional learning; teacher education*

## **1. Introduction**

The origin of ALT system that invites foreign language teachers from overseas to teach in Japanese schools can be traced back to 1950s, when the Fulbright Secondary School Teachers of English program began (Imura, 2003). Throughout years of transitions, the Japan Exchange and Teaching Program (JET Program) was launched to enhance foreign language education and promote international exchange in 1987. The JET Program invites foreign youths to Japan for language instruction. The name "ALT" was first coined by the JET Program, but as more and more foreigners are hired by various types of employment to teach English, the term "ALT" is often used by people who are not JET Program participants as well.

In response to drastic changes in society and quality assurance of school education, there are a variety of attempts to enhance teachers' professional development in both teacher preparation and teacher continuous professional development programs. However, professional development of ALTs has not been paid considerable attention in either foreign education or teacher education (Wang, 2020a, 2020b). With the introduction of English as a subject in elementary schools in 2020, and the full implementation of the new course of study for junior high schools in 2021 and high schools in 2022, the demand for ALT's professionalism has increased. Therefore, there is a need to develop professional learning systems and programs that enact ALTs' agency to contribute to high foreign language education quality. This paper focuses on a school-based in-service teacher education program provided by a professional school for teacher education in a national university, Japan. As one of the first ALT cohort, the case study of ALT A is chosen to showcase an ALT's narrative inquiry as a reflective practitioner.

## **2. Previous Studies**

Realities and challenges that ALTs are facing at schools have been reported in previous studies. Otani (2010) pointed out that the lack of communication between ALTs and Japanese teachers of English (JTE) has led to misunderstandings and mistrust. She argued it is important to be aware that ALTs are a minority in the staff room, and it should start to develop international understanding from the staff room. There are JTEs who have minimal contact with ALTs due to the language hurdle and time restriction, and teachers have excessive expectations of ALTs' teaching ability and feel a gap in their actual teaching. On the other hand, there are cases that ALTs feel isolated and marginalized, not being fully briefed on the school's educational policies and lesson plans, and not being recognized as a member of the school, because they are not allowed to come to school events nor participate in subject meetings. In addition, Reed (2015) also presented that some ALTs are team teaching without having a common understanding with JTEs about their duties and professional backgrounds. ALTs' duties and competencies vary with their employment contacts and teaching experiences. A nationwide survey on the implementation of English education conducted found that the use of ALTs in the classroom was limited to serving as models in demonstrations and as interaction partners (MEXT, 2019). However, although ALT system has been introduced for more than 30 years, few studies have

addressed the professional development of practicing ALTs and systematic program to support their continuous professional learnings.

Literature in teacher education stresses the importance of preparing thoughtful reflective practitioners. In contrast to applying scientific theories and concepts to practical situations, Schon (1983, 1987) argued that professionals should learn to construct and reconstruct their professional experiences to modify actions and solve problems, which implies reflection is practice-based and action-oriented. A wide variety of implications of reflection in teacher preparation programs and impacts of strategies designed to foster reflection in intending teachers have been studied by analyzing different teacher education programs (Valli, 1992; Hatton & Smith, 1995). Previous studies indicate that collaborative reflection, scaffolded dialogue monitoring and coaching are important factors to develop reflective approaches to teaching. In reference to the nature of teaching as “reflective practice” (Shon, 1991), the “professional learning community” (PLC) of “learning organization” (Senge, 1990) has been used in schools (Myers & Myers, 1995). In the wide published literature of PLC, attributes, and critical elements to initiate and sustain PLCs are described (Kruse, Louis & Bryk, 1994; DuFour, Eaker, 1998; DuFour, 2004; Riley & Stoll, 2004), as well as how to cultivate a community of practice (CoP) (Wenger, 1998; Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002). The significance of collaborative inquiry in functioning PLCs and CoPs is addressed in relation to meaningful shifts in teachers’ practice and professional development (Butler & Schnellert, 2012).

Integrating with the above rationales, a school-based teacher education graduate program aiming to facilitate teachers’ reflective practice leading to problem-solving, school reform and education change has been applied at a professional school for teacher education (PTE) in a national university. This school-based M.Ed. program opens to both preservice and in-service teachers. Each enrolled graduate student together with their schools is supported by a university faculty team comprising members of researchers and scholarly practitioners. Preservice teachers, most of whom have gained teaching licenses in undergraduate programs, intern two or three days a week for two years in partner schools. In-service teachers take part in on-the-job internships at their affiliated (partner) schools by conducting practice-based action research towards solving realistic school problems as school middle leaders or in school reform management roles. These practicing teachers come to the university to have reflection meetings with preservice teachers once a month. University faculty teams also visit their schools regularly to attend teachers’ research meetings and school-wide lesson study meetings, as well as share ideas on how to motivate and organize teacher-initiated communities of practice. Through these internships, meetings, and school visits, preservice and in-service teachers collaborate with university faculty and school colleagues to solve realistic school problems. In April of 2020, three practicing ALTs were enrolled in this program as in-service teachers for the first ALT cohort. A professional learning community of ALTs is cultivated and integrated with Japanese teachers. This study focuses on one ALT’s learning journey

within this school-based graduate program in order to unfold his professional learning, and to clarify the critical attributes to it.

### **3. Method**

#### **3.1 Participant**

ALT A, who is a graduate of JET program in his 30s, has been teaching for six years and is currently hired by the city's board of education to teach at 5 elementary schools. He has been striving to provide easy-to-understand lessons that attract learners. With no previous experience in teaching English, he obtained a TEFL/TESOL certification in teaching English to non-native English speakers through distance learning. He uses his specialization in graphic design in classroom teaching practice. He realized the key concept of "communication" is common to both design and education. Just like presenting a product to a customer in any way possible, the key to getting children to understand the language of English is how to "communicate" in a creative way.

There are two other ALTs who work at the same city, and each of them is in charge of 5-7 schools. They rotate every year, and ALT A has been involved with 17 schools. Although it is difficult to build a deep relationship with one school like a stationed ALT, he has encountered a variety of teaching styles and gained a perspective to critically look at his own teaching by interacting with various teachers from many schools.

Until 2018, he had the freedom to choose the best method and content for the children in consultation with their homeroom teachers. At that time, ALTs took the lead and had a strong sense of responsibility in creating lessons. However, not all ALTs have the same ability to create lessons. Therefore, there was a variation in the classes from school to school. As a result, relying on ALTs did not benefit the school teachers or the development of English education. The textbooks have changed and pre-prepared lesson plans by the prefectural board of education are being used. These two years were seen as a "bridge" period to ease the anxiety of the teachers and the children in preparation for the reform. While there were some great teachers, there were also cases where teachers who were not confident in their English skills experienced negative hindrances in teaching. For classes that he only taught once a month, he tries his best to positively influence the children and at the same time gives guidance and cheers up the homeroom teachers.

As an ALT, he is aware of his supportive role and has to follow the prefectural syllabus and designated materials. As a native English speaker and a creative thinker, he has the ability and experience to play the role of a responsible middle leader within the constraints. He set his research theme to study how teaching materials and media affect children's motivation to learn. He plans to observe, document, and improve teaching practices to motivate children. Teachers and children are facing challenges and difficulties in terms of teaching and learning English in elementary schools. He hopes that his studies at the graduate school could contribute to overcome these difficulties.

#### **3.2 Ethical considerations**

The participant ALT A's consent was gained by explaining him the research purpose in July, 2021 and the final manuscript has been read and approved at his consent. The

participant was informed that neither his name nor schools would be identifiable in any research resulting from this study and all data collected would be accessible only to the named researchers involved in the study. Further, it was ensured that the participant understand that participation in the study was voluntary and he may withdraw at any time without giving any reason and without his study or work being affected in any way.

### 3.3 Data collection

Like other in-service Japanese teachers, ALT A fulfills his duties in his affiliated schools on week days. At his request, University faculty visit his school to observe his lessons and set up lesson study meetings, arrange counseling meetings with him. He comes to university to have reflection meetings with other graduate students and university faculty once a month. All reflection meetings are conducted in small group discussions among different members. All graduate students are asked to write and submit their reflective writings in reference with what has been talked and their takeaways during monthly meetings. A total of 13 reflective reports written by ALT A during FY2020-2021 is collected and analyzed (See Table 1).

**Table 1: ALT A's Reflective Writings (monthly reports) 2020~2021**

<b>Month</b>	<b>Monthly Meeting Theme</b>	<b>No.</b>
04/2020	Supporting the development of education in unpredictable situations to explore perspectives of long-term practices	1
05/2020	Unraveling potentials and opportunities for collaborative research based on current school conditions and practices	1
06/2020	Two-day Roundtable (open to public): cultivating reflective practitioner community	1
07/2020	Reflecting on the first term & Recapturing the challenges	1
08/2020	Summer intensive course Cycle1: Constructing frames of understanding longitudinal processes of educational practices through reading reflective practice writings Cycle2: Overarching theory studies in and on organizational learning Cycle3: Reframing the process of practice development, practitioner competence formation, and its community and organization by writing your own educational practices	1 1 1
10/2020	Learning across generations (invoice teachers, school middle leaders, veteran teachers, administrator teachers)	1
11/2020	Building networks to connect schools to learn from and support practice-based research of other schools	1
12/2020	Winter intensive course	1

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	Cycle1: Problems and challenges of public education/ School and society	
	Cycle2: Longitudinal reflective practice writing	
02/2021	Presentations based on longitudinal reflective practice writings	1
	Two-day Roundtable (open to public): cultivating reflective practitioner community	1
Yearly summary	Reflective writings for the whole year learning cycles	1

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### 3.4 Data analysis

Narrative writing embodies reflective enquiry into professional practice, and narratives of key areas of professional experience can be communicated and explored directly and simply through expressive writing (Gillie, 2016). ALT A writes as a reflective practitioner, which leading to his professional development and professional learning. Longitudinal reflective writings of ALT A are analyzed using a qualitative content analysis (Holsti, 1969), which focused on interpreting and understanding his professional learning through episode narratives (Kujiraoka, 2005). To be specific, episodes of “turning point” for change and improvement in teaching were extracted from his longitudinal reflective reports. Extracted episodes were displayed in timelines to examine the characteristics of his professional learning journey during analysis procedures. Words and phrases of originawrl writings are quoted as concrete evidence in the findings. Descriptions and episodes pertaining to the theme were peer analyzed by other two analysts to ensure consistency of interrater and interrater reliability.

### 4. Results

Reflecting and reconstructing practices has greatly influenced ALT A’s professional learning. Writing reflective narratives enables us to explore and understand rationales behind his actions. To unfold ALT A’s reflective enquiry into his professional practice, the results will detail critical episodes in terms of turning point and discuss factors attributing to the change and improvement.

As a city ALT in charge of several different elementary schools, A has difficulty in working consistently with home room teachers and following learners’ progress over consecutive lessons due to limited school visits. In spite of wanting to make each school visit impactful, there is rare opportunities for A to take actions in class. A realizes it is important to reflect and examine lessons and activities as to figure out how to better encourage learners’ growth. However, he has assessed lesson aspects independently without consulting with other teachers.

*During my (first) year of study with the (graduate program) this was changed. From my own initiative I have been talking more with teachers during school visits, not only about the current lessons, but foreseeable problem areas, or notable good points that they have had during classes. I have also been trying to keep track of the teachers’*

*difficulties during English lessons when the ALT is not around.*

(P23, No.13)

The graduate program provides school-based lesson study sessions. A team of four university faculty members is formed to observe A's lessons and organize post-lesson discussions. These outsider perspectives help A consider things or criticize things he may not have thought about. Two classes of the *Hungary Caterpilla Returns!* for a fourth grade and *Understanding food groups* for a sixth grade have been observed and reflected. Having enrolled in the program and supported by a university team empower him to be the prime teacher in class and take initiatives to offer new ideas in designing activities. A has gained confidence from his teaching experiences, and started to be aware of the need to work with home room teachers for the overall unit design rather than only ALT classes. This leads to his second-year initiatives.

In addition to school-based lesson study, A also participates regular collaborative reflection meetings with teachers from various backgrounds; and engaging with communities of practices as professional learning communities. Regular monthly reflection meetings involve with group sharing about designated theme topics, which are chosen in line with school rhythm and events. A considers it as a way to keep track of his initiatives, evolution and growth with a long-term reflective practice. A group of ALTs and international students gathers every two weeks talk about their school practices. This group has become a community of sharing ideas and support.

*The monthly meetings with other teachers ... has been very encouraging. There have been months where I have had the chance to listen to people from different teaching areas express their passion for teaching and share their observations. There are a few notable teachers whose talks have had an impact on my way of thinking about how students learn and what is important to their growth. Sometimes, admittedly, I had trouble keeping up with the more technical discussions about school management. I am sure that my talks in English may have also been difficult to understand. But it has been a privilege to be part of such a breadth of community of teachers.*

(P31, No.13)

Furthermore, reading materials of theory and case studies of teaching practice has deepened his understanding in learning and teaching, as well as role of an educator. A has mentioned two works he learnt from the most: Wenger, McDermott & Snyder's (2002) *Cultivating Communities of Practice* and Ina elementary school's (2012) *Children Growing up from the Inside*. His perceptions of teaching has been enriched with these readings provided by the graduate program.

*The idea is one that can be applied to a variety of observable instances. For example, during my reading of "Cultivating Communities of Practice" I began to think of my classes as a possible example of a mini community. And the teacher's and myself as the organisation/co-ordinators of that community. While not falling completely in line with*

*the definition of a COP, instances in which the principles and themes contained within a COP's definition, could be applied to the practice within the classroom.*

(P33, No.13)

*The title of the book that this text was extracted from is called "Children growing up from the inside". It is a very appropriate title, since much of the story revolves around the students and the development of their own abilities. The teacher is essential to guiding their interests, providing motive, and giving them the space to explore, play and learn in a way that supports their cognitive ability. There are many things that stood out to me while reading this literature.*

(P34, No.13)

The significance of institutional arrangements for entwining practice and reflection through regular, reflective writing about one's daily teaching practices is a key factor contributing to A's growth. He writes periodically about their progression while reading books and materials, listening and talking with other teachers in monthly/bi-weekly reflective meetings, and in the end come to acknowledge the impact that writing have on their personal experiences and teaching practices. It is evident that certain features of the program, such as that of teaching as a reflective practitioner, engaging in collaborative reflection, and cultivating a community of practice, contributed to ALT A's professional development. By unfolding the individual trajectory of reflective practices of ALT A in this study, the findings reveal that the school-based collaborative inquiry action research approach, employed in the program, plays a significant role in developing professionalism by achieving agency and cultivating PLC culture.

This study demonstrates the possibilities of a new model that combines research and practice. In this model, university faculty members are not teacher trainers who put ALTs 'through the mill', so to speak, or pour excessive amounts of knowledge and theory on them; but rather supporters and collaborative researchers who talk to them, practice together with them, and collectively think about solutions for solving their real-life school problems, while learning from each other. Through this program, we, the university faculty, further developed our own identities as teacher educators and learned how to relate with teachers as professionals who are struggling and fighting on the front lines in education.

It is important to acknowledge that this study relied mainly on the reflective writings of ALT A, which may present issues in terms of overall validity and applicability to other contexts. This dataset requires further research to explore its utility for academic research. Alternative data sources should be explored as well for tracking further evidence of A' professional development, and identifying potential attributes that can promote it. Likewise, additional follow-up studies of his current professional life are needed, in order to examine the long-term relevancy of the identified factors attributed to their professional development.

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