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Teaching What, to Whom, How, and Why: A Review of Pre-service Japanese EFL Teacher Beliefs

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This paper reviews research on the cognitions of Japanese and other Asian pre-service EFL teachers about who the learners are, what is being taught, how it is taught, and why it is taught. Research suggests that Japanese pre-service EFL teachers may hold an inadequate, thin conception of subject matter knowledge. It also suggest that they lack practice in basic classroom pedagogy and may have conflicted beliefs about CLT. This paper also discusses what kind of reflective activities might be most effective and practical in the Japanese teacher education context.

THE TEACHER-THINKING PARADIGM

In the twentieth century, research on teaching moved from the prescriptive to the descriptive. There have been several paradigm shifts, from a focus on teacher characteristics, to the interaction-analysis approach (the process-product paradigm), to the cognitive, or teacher-thinking, paradigm. (Lowyck, 1990) Research in teacher cognition attempts to understand educational practice through teacher belief, knowledge, context, experience, and reflection.

Beliefs: Synthesizing nearly 80 papers in philosophy and educational research, Pajares (1992) described beliefs as emotional and judgmental, strongly influencing behavior. They are formed early and tend to self-perpetuate: beliefs about teaching are quite well established by

the time a student enters college. Beliefs must be inferred from intentions and behavior in addition to stated beliefs.

Knowledge: Knowledge about teaching involves two integrated areas: knowledge about the subject-matter that is being taught and knowledge about the practice of teaching. Andrews (2003) quoting Schulman, says this pedagogical content knowledge is teachers' "own special form of professional understanding" (p. 353).

Context: Professional learning depends very strongly on context as schools and schooling embody the values of the society. Teachers are first socialized as learners in classrooms: it is as students that they begin their *apprenticeship of observation*, learning what their society expects of teachers. This learning continues as teachers enter pre-service programs and go on to in-service programs.

Experience and reflection: Critical reflection leads to a holistic blending of knowledge and experience. The accumulation of experience that allows teachers to make split-second decisions in an uninterrupted flow is knowing-in-action (Shon, 1983). Teachers also experience reflection-in-action when an element of surprise catches the teacher's attention.

These interwoven concepts will be familiar to those in the field of education, but not necessarily to teachers of English. Trends in the field of education tend to filter down to the field of TESOL very slowly. For example, it was only this year that the term *apprenticeship of observation*, students' intuitive but limited understanding of teaching, was defined in the ELT Journal's "Key concepts in ELT" column (Borg, 2004).

In Japan, studies of teachers' beliefs about English language teaching have not been highly regarded. Language teaching has been considered to be merely the application of authorized methods, and "teachers'

beliefs have been regarded as incidental" (Iida & Wakamoto, 2000, p. 5). However, as CLT has come into the picture, their beliefs will be at the core of whether changes in method occur or not.

Worldwide, although there is more and more research (much of it action research) on the beliefs of in-service teachers, "there is still a shortage of research that investigates the beliefs of pre-service ESL teachers" (Peacock, 2001, p. 178). In this paper, I review research on the cognitions of pre-service teachers of English in Asia, particularly in Japan. The issues that I am addressing are: What do we know about their cognitions? Can education programs change their mistaken beliefs, and if so, what type of interventions are productive and practical?

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT PRE-SERVICE EFL TEACHER COGNITIONS?

Teacher cognitions —beliefs, decisions, reflections— can be classified in various ways. I begin with one study by Richards, Li, and Tang (1995) that provides a framework for the other studies.

One way of uncovering the skills needed by pre-service teachers is to compare their actions to those of experienced teachers. Richards, Li, and Tang (1995) compared how pre-service teachers and experienced ESL teachers planned a reading lesson around identical content. The first group was 10 student-teachers with little or no experience who were in a BA TESL program in Hong Kong. The second group was 10 secondary Hong Kong teachers with post-graduate TESL qualifications and an average of five years teaching experience. Participants were asked to spend about one hour planning a secondary level 40-minute English reading lesson around a short story. After the planning task, participants were asked about their problems, decisions and rationale.

The researchers discuss the differences between the two groups in relation to four dimensions of learning to teach ESL:

1. Learning to think about the subject matter from the learner's perspective; for example, by anticipating difficulties and recognizing how students might respond. (e.g., The experienced teachers produced learner-focused plans; the pre-service teachers produced teacher-focused plans.)

2. Acquiring a deeper understanding of the subject matter. (e.g., The experienced teachers produced plans with linguistic objectives; the pre-service teachers gave priority to creating a pleasant reading environment.)

3. Learning how to present the subject matter in appropriate ways. (e.g., The experienced teachers produced detailed, varied plans; the pre-service teachers produced plans with little detail or variation.)

4. Learning how to integrate language learning with broader curricular goals such as cultural understanding, values clarification, or personal reflection. (e.g., The experienced teachers produced plans with broader objectives; the pre-service teachers saw limited teaching potential in the reading passage.)

I will use these four dimensions —— how the teachers understand who the learners are, what is being taught, how it is taught, and why it is taught —— as a way of framing the remaining studies. What does research on pre-service EFL teachers in Japan tell us about their perceptions in these areas?

(1) Thinking about the lesson from the students' point of view

Pre-service teachers usually intend their lessons to be enjoyable for students, but this is not the same as thinking about the lesson from the students' point of view. Pre-service teachers tend to emphasize and

overvalue the affective variables and undervalue cognitive variables (Holt-Reynolds, 2000; Johnson, 1994), focusing on student enjoyment rather than on student understanding and learning.

Pre-service teachers tend to assume that students will learn easily (Joram & Gabriele, 1998). In Japan, Hatta (1996) provides comments from seven Japanese pre-service English teacher's journals as examples of novice thought. He found that these student-teachers had no schema for student personality differences. I infer that they were probably not able to visualize the lesson from the point of view of students who had different learning styles than themselves.

Similarly, when I examined the time-management perceptions of fifteen Japanese pre-service teachers (Yonesaka, 2003), I found that they sometimes failed to anticipate difficulties that students might have. For example, when students took too long to translate sentences orally, some student-teachers completed the exercises for them, and so they were unable to achieve their stated belief that students should participate.

In an ethnographic study of five Japanese pre-service teachers of English, Asaoka (2003) examined four types of data: weekly journal assignments, official practicum diary notebooks, additional voluntary reflective journals, and transcripts of a pre-practicum interview and of a post-practicum interview. She found that one area of difficulty was communication with the classroom students. I infer that this is both a cause for, and a result of, the pre-service teachers not being able to view the lesson from the students' point of view. For example, two participants wanted to teach in English and to incorporate various communicative tasks that they had learned about in their teacher education program. Unfortunately, these lessons did not go well because students were not accustomed to or interested in this style of teaching.

Despite these negative results, I suggest that seeing the lesson from the students' point of view is actually one dimension of teaching where the pre-service teachers could be relatively successful, as Japanese teachers are trained to put an emphasis on *kizuna*, interpersonal relationships that foster empathy with the students (Shimahara & Sakai, 1995). Research is needed to discover the factors that allow teachers to see the lesson from the students' point of view and whether this dimension can be developed during training.

(2) Subject matter knowledge

For the non-native teacher, there are two overlapping areas of subject matter knowledge: "knowing English", or being proficient in it, and knowing about English as a subject of study.

Competency in the subject matter is vital for any teacher, and it is clear that non-native teachers must be competent in English. Medgyes (1999) says that the literature hardly ever questions the importance of near-native proficiency; it is seen as the most essential characteristic of a good language teacher — a make-or-break requirement.

However, it is likely that many pre-service teachers lack confidence in their own mastery of English language ability. In their journals, seven Japanese pre-service English teachers worried about their poor knowledge of English (Hatta, 1996). This is also true for experienced teachers who are new to the subject of teaching English. Laskowski (2001) summarized research on what Japanese elementary teachers themselves would like in their in-service English training. The majority felt that the training they needed the most was not in methodology but in improving their own English language ability.

In the second area, exactly what subject matter knowledge EFL teachers need is an open question. The field of TEFL is still construct-

ing its pedagogical knowledge base (see, for example, Freeman & Johnson, 1998). Lacking guidelines, what do pre-service EFL teachers think they need to know about linguistics, pragmatics, phonology, testing, and other areas?

There are a number of studies that show that ESL *learners* tend to hold mistaken core beliefs that learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of (1) learning a lot of new vocabulary words, (2) learning a lot of grammar rules, and (3) being intelligent (Peacock, 2001). What about pre-service teachers? As their training proceeds, do they tend to modify these core beliefs about language learning so that they approach the beliefs of experienced teachers who tend not to hold these beliefs as true?

Peacock (2001) conducted a longitudinal study that investigated, among other issues, changes in the [stated] beliefs about L2 learning held by pre-service ESL teachers. The participants were 146 trainees enrolled in a 3-year-long teacher-training program at a Hong Kong university. Data was collected through the Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI), a self-report attitudinal questionnaire consisting of 47 items, and the beliefs of first-year trainees were compared with those of second- and third-year trainees. Although some beliefs were found to change significantly, disturbingly, in spite of three years of training, the above three beliefs were found to be resistant to change.

In Asia, the idea that subject-matter knowledge consists of a good knowledge of grammar surfaces in the beliefs of some teacher educators themselves. For example, Cheng, Ren, and Wang (2003) lament that most beginning teachers in China lack sufficient subject knowledge of English; the example that they provide is that beginning teachers cannot explain why certain usage is incorrect or inappropriate. In

Japan, Hatta (1996) mentions that the subject-matter knowledge needed by a teacher of English is a good knowledge of grammar and literature.

The field of TEFL is beginning to map out its pedagogical knowledge base, and it is complex, inter-disciplinary, and wide-ranging. Pre-service teachers who believe that the subject-matter that they must master consists of knowledge of grammar rules and their own speaking ability will misjudge the complexity of becoming an EFL teacher. It is likely that most Japanese pre-service EFL teachers hold an inadequate, thin conception of subject-matter knowledge, but more research is needed to find out what their beliefs are. This is the first step to helping them to understand the multi-disciplinary nature of their chosen field.

(3) *How to present material*

Lacking classroom experience, pre-service teachers struggle at first with routine classroom tasks. For example, a retrospective verbalization study of fifteen Japanese pre-service English teachers found that five of them were shocked at the unforeseen amount of time they needed to write accurately and legibly on the blackboard. (Yonesaka, 2002) In a study of the practicum diaries of seven Japanese pre-service English teachers, Hatta (1996) found that they had virtually no pedagogical content knowledge. Because the teaching practicum is so short in Japan, even simple classroom routines cannot be adequately rehearsed.

One creative solution is an in-house TA program that gives students the opportunity to start becoming aware of what it means to be a teacher. Williams (2000) describes a voluntary program at a regular 4-year college in which pre-service English teacher candidates serve as teaching assistants in first-year English listening classes taught by

native-speaker teachers at their own college. These candidates observe classes, demonstrate dialogues, pair up with students who are having difficulties, circulate and advise the teacher, and occasionally conduct a mini-lesson. In a follow-up survey, teaching assistants said that they had gained confidence and had learned classroom English as well as teaching ideas.

Another teacher-trainer asks pre-service teachers to consider not the actions of expert teachers, but of their peers. Indoh (2001) extracted examples of classroom actions by pre-service teachers of Japanese as a second/foreign language from transcripts of videotapes of their practicum lessons. The examples were categorized according to the five categories of teaching ability considered essential by the Society for Teaching Japanese as a Foreign Language: casual talk, explanations, directions, questions, and feedback. Indoh believes the examples could illustrate possible alternative actions, thus promoting student teachers' decision-making abilities. My suggestion is that, if possible, these examples would be greatly enhanced by the videotaped teachers explaining their decisions and beliefs.

Next, turning from basic classroom routines, I look at research on the cognitions of teachers on how to present ELT materials. The presentation of materials involves decision-making, which is itself based on idiosyncratic beliefs, experiences, and contexts. In EFL contexts, there is a recurring theme in the presentation of materials: the uneasy relationship between grammar and CLT. Many in-service teachers in Asia are striving to reconcile CLT with the traditional approaches to grammar of their *apprenticeship of observation*. How do pre-service teachers in Asia understand and begin to resolve that gap? Can their beliefs be developed during pre-service training?

In Singapore, most pre-service teachers of English have been

educated by traditional methods of drill and memorization of grammar rules. Farrell (1999) contends that these experiences are valid, but that there is a mismatch between what the students have learned in the past and what they are taught in the teacher education program. He used reflective writing to help 34 pre-service teachers of English in Singapore explore their beliefs regarding grammar. The participants were enrolled in a BA course in Grammar Methods, in which the question of whether grammar should be taught inductively (students formulate the underlying pattern for themselves) or deductively (students are supplied with the grammar rule before they are given examples of usage) was taken up.

Participants were given a three-part reflective assignment in conjunction with teaching an actual lesson. Before teaching, they wrote about their own past experiences of learning English and about their personal approaches (i.e., pedagogy) to grammar. Next, they wrote a detailed lesson plan and taught it. Finally, after the lesson, they reflected at length on the lesson, and on grammar in particular.

Farrell (1999) presents a detailed analysis of data from five of the participants, who were judged to be representative of the entire group. All five of the participants decided to use an inductive approach; however, their reasons for doing so were very different. We are reminded here that there is not a one-to-one correspondence between beliefs and actions: similar actions can result from various beliefs.

The author concludes that the participants gained the awareness that the teaching of grammar requires flexiblity in approach and became more aware of the influence of their past experiences as learners. My impression is that their reflective comments were very similar to reflections by Japanese pre-service teachers (Yonesaka, 2002). This type of assignment, focusing on a single aspect of gram-

mar teaching, might be useful for Japanese teacher candidates.

In Hong Kong, although CLT was officially introduced to the English language teaching curriculum more than twenty years ago, CLT has had little impact on the way English is actually taught. This is due to the examination syllabus, "teacher-proof" textbooks, and aversion to the relative disorder of CLT classrooms (Miller and Aldred, 2000).

Miller and Aldred (2000) explored the perceptions of 24 pre-service Hong Kong teachers of English regarding CLT methods. The participants were BA TESL students enrolled in teaching methodology classes that focused on CLT. The participants were previously given a set of focus questions to consider. They divided themselves into four focus groups of six participants; their one-hour discussion on the guided questions was videotaped, transcribed, and analyzed. One notable result was that only four reasons were given for CLT being appropriate for the Hong Kong context (e.g., "Students can learn more actively"), but 17 reasons were given against the appropriateness of CLT (e.g., "Not suitable for examination system").

The participants then experienced three weeks of teaching practice in which they all reported using some form of CLT. Next, 18 of the 24 participants were given a list of statements about the appropriateness of CLT in the Hong Kong context and were asked to agree or disagree with them. Participants were not aware that these 4 positive and 17 negative statements had been generated from their own previous discussion. There was a shift in perceptions regarding about half of the negative statements; for example, only four participants now supported the idea that CLT is not appropriate for exam preparation.

Miller and Aldred (2000) conclude that this study's "natural approach"— discussion of beliefs, evaluation of activities, and reflec-

tion of beliefs after the practicum — is an effective way to promote critical reflection and belief development. In Japan, however, candidates do not participate in the teaching practicum at the same time; the catalyst activity would have to be some type of simulated classroom, which might not have the same powerful effect.

In Japan, Asaoka's (2003) ethnographic study of five pre-service EFL teachers found that one area of difficulty was the construction of lesson plans. The participants were concerned with how to narrow down the teaching points for each lesson and "were constantly struggling with the question of which goals and methodologies were best for which context" (p. 11). These pre-service teachers became aware of the gap between theory and practice: although their training courses taught about CLT, it was not implemented in the practicum schools and so was not a reasonable option.

I found similar conflicts in the retrospective comments of seven Japanese EFL teacher candidates (Yonesaka, 2001). While intending to focus on communication, they all used the translation-based *yakudoku* method in their practicum. First, CLT was not a realistic option because the classroom teacher had told them to teach via *yakudoku* and the students themselves had requested unambiguous translations. Second, the candidates held the anomalous beliefs that "*yakudoku* is ineffective", but also that "it is the most efficient way to cover the material and ensure student understanding". Holding conflicting beliefs, candidates cannot override the wishes of the classroom teacher and students.

In fact, even teachers with additional training and practicum experience might remain conflicted. Warford and Reeves (2003) used long interviews to investigate the thinking of nine novice TESOL teachers, with "novice" indicating from one month to one semester as

a tutor or student-teacher in the US. This study is of interest because three of the nine teachers were non-native speakers (NNS), although the study does not explicitly contrast NS and NNS beliefs. Evidence of the *apprenticeship of observation* phenomenon was more prevalent among the NNS participants. "Two of the three NNS [Japanese and Thai] were so profoundly marked by their...[grammar-based] EFL language learning experiences [in their home countries] that they found it difficult to envision teaching any other way; this is in spite of the fact that they were favorable to the more communicative teaching methods they experienced here in the U.S." (p. 57).

In summary, there is strong evidence that Japanese pre-service EFL teachers lack practice in basic classroom pedagogy and have conflicted beliefs about CLT. It seems that interventions that focus on particular aspects of presenting materials, such as teaching grammar inductively or using classroom English, are effective. Perhaps these new behaviors can be integrated into a more traditional teaching approach without threatening the entire belief structure.

(4) EFL within broader curricular goals

The final dimension of EFL teaching involves understanding how it relates to broader curricular goals such as cultural understanding, values clarification, and personal reflection. For example, to return to the research at the beginning of this paper, experienced teachers planned reading lessons that asked the students to explore social attitudes, but the pre-service teachers produced reading lesson plans with purely linguistic goals (Richards, Li, & Tang, 1995).

In another research project on the teaching of reading, Farrell (2001) found that 24 pre-service English teachers in Singapore were able to deepen their understanding of the teaching of reading to include the

concept of *metacognitive awareness*, which would be an example of a broader curricular goal. Before beginning a Reading Methods course, participants were asked to draw a concept map about their understanding of the reading process. These were synthesized into a group concept map composed of 5 level-one concepts: reading aloud, vocabulary, comprehension, fun class, read silently. In a follow-up group interview, participants indicated that they had drawn on their experiences as students to generate the concept maps.

After completing the Reading Methods course, participants again generated concept maps. Participants produced three types of maps, showing that individuals internalized the information of the Reading Methods course in different ways. The maps were again synthesised into a much more complex and inter-connected group map with 8 level-one concepts. One of the new concepts was *metacognitive awareness* — being aware of one's own learning. This suggests that appropriate training can enable pre-service teachers to relate the teaching of EFL to broader curricular goals such as being aware of one's own learning.

In Japan, the teaching of English in secondary schools is associated with the broader curricular goal of developing students' international identity. My experience is that pre-service teachers have no awareness of this broader curricular goal; when they include cultural information in lessons, they simply want to spark student interest. However, to sustain their own sense of purpose, they will eventually need to relate English to broader curricular goals/either the development of international identity or others/by exploring their beliefs about why they are teaching English.

In summary, research on the cognitions of Japanese pre-service teachers of English is sparse, but it fits in well with research from other

parts of Asia, suggesting the following:

1. They may have difficulty communicating with students, and so may believe that the students have learning styles similar to their own. Not being able to think about the lesson from the students' point of view, they may believe that the lesson will flow without difficulty. These mistaken beliefs may undermine their intention to provide interesting lessons in which students actively participate.
2. They may believe that they lack English proficiency. It is likely that they hold an inadequate conception of subject-matter knowledge, believing that a good knowledge of grammar and vocabulary is sufficient.
3. They may mistakenly believe that classroom routines will be easily accomplished. They tend to hold conflicting beliefs on how to present material, believing in the efficacy of traditional grammar-based methods, yet believing that CLT methods are preferable.
4. Finally, research in other Asian countries suggests that pre-service English teachers can learn to relate the teaching of English to broader curricular goals, but we know little about the cognitions of Japanese student teachers in this area.

CHANGING PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS' BELIEFS

Although beliefs about teaching tend to be resistant to change, more and more research is finding that, if in-service teachers are able to reflect adequately upon their experiences, their belief systems can develop. But what about pre-service language teachers who lack classroom experience? Can beliefs about language teaching change during the teacher education courses as well? Obviously, teacher trainers would hope so, but some beliefs may be more difficult to

change than others. (See, for example, the 2001 study by Peacock described on page 7.)

Cabaroglu and Roberts (2000) also found changes in the beliefs of 20 student teachers of Modern Languages. Data were gathered through a written autobiography, three interviews, and an end-of course questionnaire. Although the researchers intended to code the data according to content, it was found that "different students revealed different beliefs on different dimensions at different times" (p. 392). So instead of attempting to create categories that might have artificially held the data together, the researchers chose to examine the data in an entirely different manner. Rather than labelling the content of the beliefs, they noted how the beliefs changed: beliefs were elaborated upon, were given a different name, were reversed, and so on. Nineteen of the participants exhibited some change in their [stated] beliefs, leading the researchers to conclude that there is evidence of flexibility and development in pre-service teacher' beliefs.

Practical interventions

Teacher education programs based on the constructivist paradigm ask prospective teachers to reflect on and explore their own beliefs about teaching, then to (re)construct their own knowledge base. The question is what kind of reflective activities will work best in the Japanese teacher education context.

How the reflection occurs is important. For example, teacher educators Joram and Gabriele (1998) had found that student-teachers hold four core (but false) prior beliefs: 1) Education courses have little to offer because learning is best done in the field; 2) I can learn to become a good teacher by copying past teachers; 3) Learning and teaching are non-problematic; 4) If I can manage the class, that is

enough for the students to learn. Rather than arguing against those beliefs, they designed a course in educational psychology with specific exercises to reveal preconceptions and to allow the student-teachers to entertain alternate realities. Qualitative change in the beliefs of 53 pre-service teachers was measured by a pre-course and post-course questionnaire asking the students to explain whether they perceived their own beliefs as having changed. Results suggest that the pre-service teachers' perceptions of change in beliefs were indeed accompanied by actual, but limited, change. This study shows that belief change must be approached from the bottom-up rather than top-down, and that this requires research, patience, and commitment rather than confrontation.

When the reflection occurs may be important. In the Netherlands, in a quantitative study on the changes in beliefs of 36 pre-service teachers regarding the concept of self-directed learning, Tillema (2000) challenged the idea of reflection before practice, finding instead that reflection after practice has a positive effect on belief change. I think it is important to understand the context of this study: the Netherlands has a 3-year pre-service training period, so that providing reflection after practice might be feasible. But when the training period is much shorter (as in Japan), there is not such luxury; providing *any* time for reflection is difficult.

Learning to reflect

Liou (2001) investigated whether the reflexive practice of 20 pre-service student teachers of English in Taiwan increased during their practicum. During the six-week observation/practicum session, they submitted a written report on their observation and a report about their practice teaching. The reports were coded according to topic and level

of reflection. 652 topics were coded into 7 categories, with about twice as many instances of critical reflection as of descriptive reflection. However, as to the development of critical reflection, Liou found progress in only three of seven traits: being more able to reflect through teaching experience, being better able to evaluate both positively and negatively, and being a better problem-solver. The author concludes that intervention for reflection is needed. This supports Joram and Gabriele's (1998) findings: reflection and resultant change do not spontaneously occur but depend on thoughtful programs.

In Japan, Hatano (2003) considers the possibility of encouraging reflection during a teach-and-reteach cycle of micro-teaching during pre-service education. Hatano regards micro-teaching not as a behaviour-shaping technique to give trainees control over specific teaching skills, but as an opportunity for them to critically reflect on decision-making and to "develop a schematic repertoire of decision-making tactics" (p. 43).

Finally, some of the research summarized in this paper illustrates other ways of encouraging reflection depending on the particular context and on language proficiency:

— pre- and post-practicum concept maps (Farrell, 2001)

— reflective writing before and after the practicum (Farrell, 1999)

— audiotaped oral reflection while viewing the videotaped practicum lesson (Yonesaka, 2001, 2002, 2003)

— videotaped discussion of beliefs, evaluation of activities and reflection after the practicum (Miller & Aldred, 2000)

— specific activities designed to reveal mistaken beliefs (Joram and Gabriele, 1998)

CONCLUSION

I have shown that research suggests that, with appropriate interventions that engage student-teachers in reflective thinking, it is possible to uncover and change some of their false beliefs. I have also summarized some interventions that may be practical in the Japanese context. Finally, I have shown that much more research is needed on the cognitions of pre-service EFL teachers in Japan.

There must be a body of research, probably action-research written in Japanese by Japanese teacher study-groups, which is not easily accessible to the wider community. I hope that Japanese teacher-trainers will endeavour to add their insights on pre-service teacher cognitions to those of their colleagues in Asia. By helping future teachers to explore their own thinking, these trainers can empower them to be sources of positive change in ELT in Japan.

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