Insights from Students' Critical Incidents in the English Department Teaching Methodology Courses: Acknowledging the contributions of Professor Tomoko Yamazaki

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to show insights about English teaching and learning that students in the English Teaching Methodology (ETM) courses at the Iwate University Faculty of Education have provided in their critical incident writing. The second purpose is to acknowledge the contributions that Professor Tomoko Yamazaki has made to the English Education Department's teacher education program. In this paper, I will first give an overview of the English Teaching Methodology curriculum developed by Professor Tomoko Yamazaki and then myself. Next, I will describe the kind of teacher development the ETM courses attempt to foster. Lastly, I will show CI reports which show the types of insights that can be derived from the experiential learning students undergo in the our ETM program.

2. The ETM curriculum: Raising the reflective practitioner

This section will begin with a brief history of the Faculty of Education English Teaching Methodology curriculum. When Professor Tomoko Yamazaki began her tenure at the Iwate University Faculty of Education, she soon introduced a new innovation into the ETM program. That was to introduce a one-class teaching practice at Nakano Elementary School in two ETM courses (ETM 1 and 2, respectively) with the purpose of developing student-teachers' practical and professional knowledge at the same time (Yamazaki & Hall, 2006; 山崎 & ホール, 2006). Furthermore, in 2003, Professor Yamazaki began the Puean Program (Unher, Yamazaki, & Hall, 2008), an English teaching internship in Thailand. This provided students with even more opportunity to develop both their professional and practical knowledge. Relating one's professional knowledge (i.e. what one learns in the university classroom about English teaching and learning) with one's teaching experiences has been the foundation of the ETM curriculum since Professor

Yamazaki joined the English Department.

In 2013, Professor Yamazaki and I reflected that student-teachers were often unable to teach junior high school (JHS) English classes with a communicative element. More specifically, student-teachers struggled to teach a class which encouraged learners to use English, and they could not sufficiently use English in their own instruction at the JHS level. Therefore, we sought to further enhance the ETM curriculum to enable student-teachers to teach a form of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). CLT is a set of broad principles about teaching and learning a foreign language whose goal is that students learn to use English for their communicative needs (Littlewood, 2011). The kinds of techniques, methods, activities, and instruction teachers give will depend on what is appropriate for their students. Therefore, effective practitioners of CLT are able to theorize their own type of effective practice for a particular class (Johnson & Golombek, 2016).

In 2013 and 2014, we set out to research the nature of "ecologically appropriate CLT" collaborating with Junichi Yoshikado, an English teacher at the Iwate University Faculty of Education Affiliated Junior High School (Hereafter, Fuzoku JHS) and two graduates of the English Department who were newly-employed teachers, Rie Yamakage and Ryohei Takahashi (Hall, Yamazaki, Yoshikado, & Takahashi, 2014; Yamazaki, Hall, Yoshikado, & Yamakage, 2013). Yamakage and Takahashi demonstrated to us that effective practitioners of CLT are able to identify and attempt to resolve issues they experience when teaching. Research in reflective practice (Mann & Walsh, 2017; Schön, 1983) and exploratory practice (Hanks, 2017) has also found that competent teachers are ones who have a deep understanding of the issues they face. They cannot always resolve these issues, but the acts of understanding the nature of a problem and attempting to improve the underlying circumstances will foster teacher development.

Together, Professor Yamazaki and I developed an ETM program that we hoped would help student-teachers mature into reflective practitioners. That is, teachers who, through the lenses of their professional knowledge and practical knowledge. would strive to understand the nature of an issue experienced in their classrooms and continuously attempt to resolve it.

The ETM courses we developed focus on the following areas: Area 1:

knowledge of schools and society, Area 2: *teaching skills*, and Area 3: *subject matter knowledge*. Area 1 includes knowledge of the Course of Study for Foreign languages, school education in Japan, and globalization and its potential impact. English teachers should be intellectually curious people with an interest in their own locality and the larger world. Area 2, *teaching skills*, refers to techniques and activities that teachers use in the classroom such as planning and carrying out a lesson, student management (pair/group work), using the blackboard, etc. Area 3, *subject matter knowledge*, refers to teaching methodologies such as CLT, Task Based Language Teaching (TBLT), teaching and learning the four skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing), second language acquisition (SLA), assessment, and knowledge about the English language itself. These areas represent a consolidated version of Richard's (2012) more elaborate taxonomy of foreign language teacher skills.

Figure 1 shows the outline of the Iwate University Faculty of Education ETM curriculum which was developed after our research in 2013 and 2014. It shows the classes students take each semester and the content covered in these classes. The curriculum consists of 4 compulsory ETM classes (ETM1 – ETM 4) for JHS English majors as well as 2 supplementary classes (ETM Plus and ETM Advanced). In addition to this, students are required to take a class on international understanding and can participate in the Puean
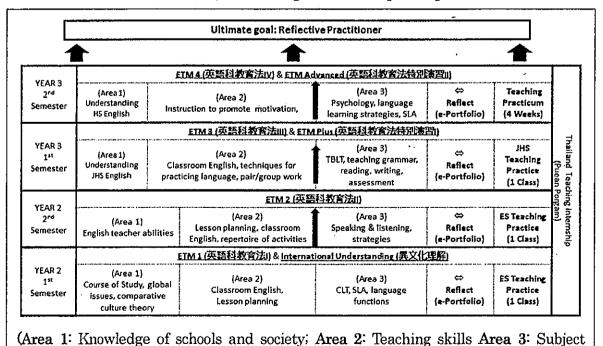
	Ultimate goal: Reflective Practitioner				
YEAR 3 2nd Semester	ETM 4 (英語科教育法IV) & ETM Advanced (英語科教育法特別演習II)				
	(Area 1) Understanding HS English	(Area 2) Instruction to promote motivation,	(Area 3) Psychology, language learning strategies, SLA	⇔ Reflect (e-Portfolio)	Teaching Practicum (4 Weeks)
YEAR 3 1st Semester	ETM 3 (英語科教育法III) & ETM Plus (英語科教育法特別演習I)				
	(Area 1) Understanding JHS English	(Area 2) Classroom English, techniques for practicing language, pair/group work	(Area 3) TBLT, teaching grammar, reading, writing, assessment	⇔ Reflect (e-Portfolio)	JHS Teaching Practice (1 Class)
YEAR 2 2nd Semester	ETM 2 (英語科教育法II)				
	(Area 1) English teacher abilities	(Area 2) Lesson planning, classroom English, repertoire of activities	(Area 3) Speaking & listening, strategies	⇔ Reflect (e-Portfolio)	ES Teaching Practice (1 Class)
YEAR 2 1st Semester	ETM 1 (英語科教育法I) & International Understanding (異文化理解)				
	(Area 1) Course of Study, global issues, comparative culture theory	(Area 2) Classroom English, Lesson planning	(Area 3) CLT, SLA, language functions	⇔ Reflect (e-Portfolio)	ES Teaching Practice (1 Class)

Thailand Teaching Internship (Puean Porgram)

(Area 1: Knowledge of schools and society; Area 2: Teaching skills Area 3: Subject matter knowledge)

Figure 1. The Iwate University Faculty of Education ETM curriculum

Program. The ETM classes span two years and begin the first semester of students' second year at the university.

3. Using ePortfolios and critical-incident writing to develop the reflective practitioner

Returning to Figure 1, one can see that for ETM 1 to ETM 3, students have an opportunity to teach at an elementary school twice (ETM 1 & 2) and JHS once (ETM3). In ETM 4, students reflect on their 4-week practicum they previously underwent for their teaching license. In 2013, we implemented a technological innovation to encourage students to link the theory learned in the ETM classes with their teaching experiences, ePortfolios (Hall, Kudo, Tanaka, & Yamazaki, 2016). In their ePortfolio, students write critical incidents (CIs) that occurred in their teaching practice. A CI is an unexpected event which happened in the classroom that challenges a teacher's concept about how English is taught or learned. CIs are employed in teacher education to help student-teachers use their experiences to devise their own theory of practice (Brookfield, 1995; Farrell, 2015, 2017; Hall, 2014). Based on frameworks from Farrell (2013) and Tripp (1993), we designed CI writing with the following components:

> **Orientation:** Provide the reader with the necessary background information to understand the CI.
> **Complication:** Something unexpected that happened in the class.
> **Interpretation:** How the complication altered the teacher's understanding of English teaching and learning.

Figure 2, on the next page, shows that the accumulation of CIs on an ePortfolio over the span of the ETM classes can offer a view of students' evolving theory of practice.
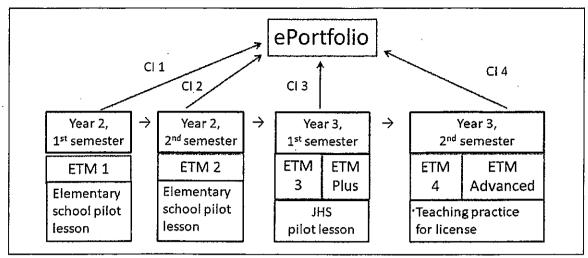
Figure 2. CI writing on theory and practice in the ETM classes

4. Insights provided by ETM students' critical incidents

In this section, I present CIs which serve as good examples of students effectively articulating their own theory of practice. I chose examples from each ETM class shown in Figure 2 as well as the Puean Program. Furthermore, I describe how the insights from each CI are related to the three areas: *knowledge of schools and society, teaching skills,* and *subject matter knowledge.* The CIs are extracted exactly as they were written in the EP. I have fixed some errors or abbreviated some parts for the sake of clarity.

4.1 ETM 1 CI written by Hiyori (2016)

The CI below is an example of the student developing *teaching skills* and articulating what she learned effectively. In this CI, Hiyori learned to make flashcards to facilitate the practice of new words. We have found in our research that in ETM 1, most students tend to write CIs about teaching skills, or techniques they learned in their one-class teaching practice, and rarely relate their experiences to any broader educational theory (Hall, Yamazaki, & Townsend, 2017). Hiyori summarizes concisely what happened and what she learned from the CI; she provides a practical technique that can be a good reference for other ETM students.

> ### Critical Incident 1: Teaching new vocabulary
>
> **Keywords:** Developing Teaching Skills in Student Teachers
>
> **Orientation**
> Nakano ES Teaching Practice was my first experience of teaching English. It was difficult for me to make a lesson plan. However, my group members proposed good ideas. I think our group made every possible effort for creating a good class.
>
> **Incident**
> We made a lesson plan for the unit " Turn right." The goal is to lead the way. We taught new vocabulary by showing the new word cards. The cards only had the written words. The students could repeat the new words after us. However, when we asked the meaning of the words, they couldn't answer.
>
> **Interpretation**
> We were advised by the homeroom teacher to write the spelling with illustrations on the new word cards, because the students can predict the meaning of the words easily. I realized the meaning of the words linger on the students with illustrations. I want to make use of this advice next time.

4.2 ETM 2 CI written by Kai (2017)

The CI by Kai covers both *teaching skills* and *subject matter knowledge*. In his CI, Kai used the term "internalize" which I have underlined. This is a concept we studied in ETM 2 and signifies the process of learners incorporating new language into their existing knowledge. In this CI, Kai ponders what he could have done differently to help students internalize words that he would use in a game, "Aisatsu Basket." (Based on the popular game "Fruit Basket.") Interestingly, his conclusion seems to contradict that of Hiyori, he felt he should show the learners the written form of the target words!

This CI needs more discussion between Kai and other ETM members to determine the best course of action. Furthermore, the issue raised in the CI needs to be considered at a deeper level. Did the students' lack of understanding lie in the presentation of the words? Was there something about the nature or language practice that was not conducive to

internalization?

This CI is good because it presents an opportunity for further discussion. Furthermore, it successfully explores how an ETM concept of language learning might manifest itself in the classroom. Lastly, it shows how issues experienced in students' learning are complex and cannot be quickly solved.

Critical Incident 2: Teaching practice at Nakano ES

Keywords: How to internalize the words

Orientation
My group taught the 4-4 class about "How are you?" Our goal was for students to express their own feelings or conditions. [Abbreviated]

Complication
I had a critical incident in the "Aisatu Basket." First, we taught nine words (hungry, tired, cold, sad, happy, great, good, ok, fine) repeating each word five times using power-point slides with pictures and words. When we taught these words, students pronounced with their loud voice, so we thought that they could internalize regularly.

Also, we had students practice every word three times. To sum it all up, we taught each word a total of nine times. That's why we thought that we could do well in the *Aisatu Basket*. In the *Aisatu Basket*, however, after we passed the cards to each student (there were five kinds: sad, tired, good, happy, fine), had students study it for five seconds and collected them, they said, "I don't know how to pronounce this." We noticed that they couldn't internalize the words at that time. [Abbreviated]

Interpretation
After the class, I thought that the reason for the failure was that students saw only illustrations in the slides during Watch & Listen. As a consequence, they couldn't input the words, I thought. So, in my opinion, we should have added effect of animation to the words in the slides. If we did it, probably students could see not only the illustration but also the words. [Abbreviated]

This experience made me think about internalizing. So, I'll study about the good way to make students internalize class contents. In this way, I'll be trying to turn this experience into something positive.

4.3 ETM 3 CI written by Ryo (2017)

This CI for ETM 3 written by Ryo can be classified as both *teaching skills* and *subject matter knowledge*. At Fuzoku JHS, Mr. Yoshikado's advice helped Ryo conduct a communicative lesson. However, the complication he experienced made him rethink the positive aspects and shortcomings of CLT.

In my opinion, however, it would be worth exploring more reasons to explain students' mistakes. SLA theory tells us that errors are a part of learner language. Are student errors caused because of a lack of instruction? There are two kinds of grammar instruction, proactive (before an activity) and reactive (after an activity) (Ellis, 2005). In this situation, could reactive teaching be just as effective? Like the previous CI, this issue should be further investigated.

Critical Incident 3: Fuzoku JHS 7/12/2017

Keywords: Teaching grammar

Orientation
I taught the students how to use "have to." Our goal was, "Let's make a conversation using *have to.*" [Abbreviated]

Complication
[Abbreviated]
  (3) When we asked the students to make a conversation about what they have to do, a certain student answered, "She has to washes dishes." This is because we put emphasis more on speaking rather than grammar so this mistake happened.

Interpretation
I think complication (3) is very common for English teachers and also the magnificent thing because, especially, this time's [textbook's] Unit's name is "Let's Talk." At first, we thought we will just make the students repeat, however, Yoshikado sensei told us it's not enough to make them repeat, this topic is "talk." That's why we made a chance for them to think of a conversation by themselves. Some students might ask us about something we can't answer. So CLT is very effective, but if students think out their own sentences, we have to pay attention to what they want to say. One more thing, it is often said that teachers don't have to teach grammatically, however, I don't think that is true. I would rather think teachers have to teach grammar because if we don't teach students grammar, they can't use or speak correctly. Or even they might remember incorrectly.

4.4 ETM 4 CI written by Sakura (2016)

This CI for ETM 4, written by Sakura, is classified in *teaching skills* and *knowledge of schools and society*. Sakura demonstrates very high-level teaching skills; she has developed her own theory of practice for encouraging student learning through pattern practice, review, and feedback on handouts. This theory of practice was formulated through her keen observation of the students, thus showing her understanding of the learners. For this reason, I also classified this CI under *knowledge of schools and society*. Lastly, although Sakura does not explicitly mention any theories learned in the ETM classes, her tips on grammar instruction can be incorporated into discussion about how to encourage internalization.

Critical Incident 4: Teaching practice at Ueda Junior High School

Keywords
- Make the classes that all the students can understand
- When the students make same mistakes on handouts

Orientation
In teaching practice at Ueda junior high school, I did lessons of Program 5-1,2,3 and Program 6-1,2,3 of Sunshine new course.

Complications
[Author's note: I significantly condensed both the *complications* and *interpretation* of this CI.]
1. In program 5-3, the main point of this unit is an indirect question. I had thought that this grammar might be difficult for students and I made the lesson plan which has many exercises. Before doing this lesson, I had thought that a few students might raise their hands when I asked the answer of the exercises. But in fact, many students raised their hands even the students never have raised their hands in before classes.
2. In every class, I reviewed the previous class's main point. And in the 6-1 lesson, the students who had never raised their hands tried to answer the review question. This was a big critical incident that I had in the teaching practice.
3. In every lesson, I made handouts which have many exercises. And in one of the lessons I did, I saw that certain questions were frequently answered incorrectly in the same way by students. For this critical incident, I picked up the same wrong answer during the lesson and

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wrote it on the black board. Some students noticed what was wrong and told to the class, and students who made this mistake on the handout could correct it.

Interpretation
From these critical incidents, I learned many things. First of all, pattern practice is an effective way to teach grammar. Of course, there are many ways to teach grammar effectively, but in the teaching practice I learned this way of teaching grammar.

Second, I thought that reviewing the previous lesson at the beginning of class is helpful for students and also for the teacher. Because students can check if they really understand what they have learned and also the teacher can check if students understand.

Third, I learned one way to correct students' mistakes on the handout during the lesson; showing the wrong answer to the students. There are some students can notice what is wrong and correct it. Not just teaching what is wrong, but noticing by students is important.

4.5 Puean Program CI written by Chiaki (2017)

This CI written by Chiaki in Thailand summarizes a common discovery made by Puean Program participants, Thai English is different from Japanese English! The CI was classified as *knowledge of schools and society*. Every year in Thailand, I am told by Thai teachers that it can be difficult to understand Japanese English and vice-versa. This CI represents a dilemma, as English teachers, we want to teach "correct pronunciation." However, considering that people throughout the world speak English differently, how do we define correct pronunciation? Personally, when I first started to visit Thailand on the Puean Program, I struggled to understand Thai English. However, as I became accustomed to the linguistic tendencies of some Thai English speakers (e.g. abbreviating the sound /s/ in words), I could understand people easily. This leads to the question as to whether or not we should consider "non-native" varieties of English such as *katakana* English to be acceptable.

Critical Incident: There are a lot of kinds of English in the world

Keywords: Language Proficiency

Orientation
When I was teaching in Thailand, I had some trouble because the pronunciation of some words by Thai people was different from the pronunciation I learned in Japan. The pronunciation of "F" and " R", in particular, were quite different.

Complication
Sometimes my English was not understood. For example, I asked students, "Is it difficult?" they couldn't understand the word "difficult." Also, when I said the word, "friend," the Thai students could not understand.

Interpretation
In the class, I explained the word, "friend" by using gestures. I tried to explain the word "difficult" using the word "hard". English is a common language but the pronunciation is different in each country. I should have learned about it before going to Thailand. In addition to differences in pronunciation, we should also understand the English curriculum of the other country so we know what kinds of words they are likely to know.

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5. Conclusion

The CIs that I have presented raise more questions than they answer. Teaching, like counseling or nursing, is dependent on dealing with different kinds of people in different circumstances. For this reason, there exists no manual that can tell us what to do in every situation. I have found that we can improve our teaching by making sense of our experiences through the lens of academic theory (*subject matter knowledge*), micro and macro factors of the social context (*knowledge of schools and society*), and the examination of teaching techniques and exercises used (*teaching skills*). Some of the reasons I personally enjoy teaching are its unpredictability and its challenging nature.

Over the years, the ETM students have provided valuable insights in teaching and learning issues on their EPs. This was made possible by Professor Yamazaki's original contributions to the ETM program. To ensure that students can further benefit from Professor Yamazaki's contributions and one another's insights, I will continue to provide opportunities for students to

present and discuss debate the interpretation of their CIs as this paper has attempted to do.

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