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An Exploration of the Mentoring System for Novice English Teachers in a Japanese University during the Pandemic

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Abstract

This case study explored the challenges and support that two novice English teachers had experienced in their first year of teaching at a Japanese university during the pandemic. The previous literature indicated how challenging the first year of teaching could be for any ESOL teachers and how helpful their mentors and colleagues could be for the novices. However, as mentoring is not usually offered at the tertiary level in a Japanese context, research on mentoring in this context is scarce. Fortunately, the university that the participants and I work for offers a mentoring system. To investigate the participants' first-year experience and perceptions of the mentoring system, semi-structured interviews were conducted. The study found that both teachers faced similar difficulties but different challenges, originating in their different backgrounds. It was also found that their perceptions of the mentoring system were very positive, although they also suggested making it more systematic by requiring class observations. Furthermore, they reported that they received various kinds of support. Particularly, they stressed that the existence of *douki*, a teacher who started teaching the same course around the same time, greatly supported their first year pragmatically and affectively.

Novice teachers' first year can be very challenging. Farrell (2012) argues that the reason it is challenging for novice ESOL teachers lies in the situation that they suddenly start facing the same challenges as other experienced teachers also face. He also explains that the attrition rate of the novices is high and stresses that the key to supporting novice teachers is a comfortable and supportive working environment. Whereas several studies have been conducted on novice teachers in the field of general education, a few studies exist in the field of TESOL (Farrell, 2008).

When researchers investigate novice teacher development, they use slightly different definitions. Farrell (2006) defines novice teachers as "those who are sometimes called newly qualified teachers, who have completed their language teacher education program (including teaching practice [TP]), and have commenced teaching English in an educational institution (usually within 3 years of completing their teacher education program)" (p. 437). He emphasizes that age does not matter when defining who novices are. In addition, he notes that

when teachers start instructing a new teaching method, they can also be considered novices. Considering his explanations, novice teachers can be those who have newly finished their teacher education program and started working in a very unfamiliar environment with limited teaching experience in terms of their students and the teaching method used at their new location.

The present study investigated what kind of challenges novice English teachers faced in their first year of teaching at a Japanese university during the pandemic. The study also explored their perceptions of the support systems they received, particularly the mentoring system.

Literature Review

Mentoring has been seen as an effective way to promote novice teachers' professional development. Johnson (2022) defined mentoring as "*a process through which novice teachers are supported in their learning and professional development through individual/group activities from a more experienced colleague, mentor teacher, or teacher educator*" (p. 3, emphasis in original). There are a limited number of studies that investigated the impact of mentoring on novice teachers. For example, in the field of general education, a positive impact of mentoring on novice teacher retention was reported by Maready et al.'s (2021) quantitative study. They analyzed the survey responses of about 1,990 public and private school teachers in the U.S. by using multinomial logistic regression. They found that there were seven factors that could predict new teachers continuing teaching in their second and fifth years. For instance, having a mentor teaching the same subject during their first year helped new teachers stay. Additionally, receiving support from a mentor frequently in terms of classroom management and discipline as well as selecting and adapting curriculum, instructional methods, and writing lesson plans contributed to teacher retention.

The topic of mentoring has also been researched qualitatively. Mann and Tang's (2012) one-year longitudinal study in Hong Kong targeted two primary and two secondary novice English teachers who all started working in a different school that had a different school culture. They used interviews as the primary data collection tool and collected data from these mentees and their mentors. Although they found that there were individual differences among the mentees' mentoring experiences, their findings indicated that physical proximity (e.g., mentors and mentees can easily communicate with each other by sitting close to each other in the same staff room) and timetabling (e.g., mentors and mentees' teaching schedules allow them to observe each other's lessons) are crucial for successful mentoring. Another interesting finding was that when a mentor had limited teaching experience, such as one year longer than the mentees, they were able to feel empathy with the mentees. Therefore, they concluded that both experienced and less experienced mentors can function well in different ways.

As in Mann and Tang's (2012) research, researchers tended to focus on primary or secondary novice English teachers, so there have been few studies on mentoring that targeted novice university English teachers. One such study is Brannan and Bleistein's (2012) mixed-methods research. In their study, the majority of the participants (i.e., novice English teachers) taught in higher education; out of 46 participants, 26 worked at university and 11 taught in adult schools. They examined how novice teachers were supported. In their qualitative analysis using an open-ended questionnaire, they found that these novice teachers were supported by their mentors and their colleagues in the two domains. The first domain is the pragmatic domain,

including sharing opinions about teaching, school policies, and classroom management. The second domain is the affective domain, such as listening to novices' stories, providing encouragement, and sharing experiences. In another qualitative study on mentoring, Nguyen (2008) employed a questionnaire with a five-point Likert scale targeting 31 novice English teachers in four Vietnamese universities. She found that none of the universities offered a formal mentoring system for novices. In other words, the novices were mentored only when they asked for the experienced teachers' help and seldom experienced class observations or mentor modeling. She claims that the programs should take the initiative to make the mentoring system more meaningful for novices.

Similar to Vietnam, in Japan it is rare to find a university English program that offers a formal mentoring system for novice teachers. Due to this situation, there have been no studies on this topic in this context. Therefore, the mentoring system for novice university English teachers in Japan is the focus of this study.

Methods

Considering these gaps in the literature, this case study seeks to explore novice English teachers' experience and thoughts about mentoring and other support at their university during the pandemic. In other words, this research investigates the participants' actions and perceptions, which are complex and require careful in-depth analysis. Thus, qualitative research designs were employed, following qualitative research principles and guidelines (e.g., Friedman, 2012; Hatch, 2002; Holliday, 2015).

Context

The research was conducted in an English program at a Japanese university where the participants and I work. In this program, there are approximately 11 tenured instructors, about 20 full-time non-tenured instructors, and several part-time instructors. Full-time native English-speaking teachers teach one of the core courses on academic reading and writing, whereas full-time native Japanese-speaking teachers of English teach the other core course on intensive reading. When new instructors are hired, they are paired with one of the experienced teachers as their mentor. Usually, a mentor and a mentee teach the same core course. Being a mentor is a non-teaching duty assigned by the program director, and the program has been offering this formal mentoring system for more than 10 years. Although there are no fixed rules about mentoring, mentees are encouraged to ask their mentor any questions about their teaching and the program, and mentors are asked to support the new teachers. In addition to the core course, all full-time instructors usually teach some elective courses and a research writing course for sophomores. All the courses are coordinated by the course coordinator(s).

The university employs a trimester system beginning in April, and all the classes were taught online during the spring term in 2020 due to the pandemic. From the autumn term in 2020 to the winter term in 2021, students chose whether they would like to take the class online or face-to-face, and they could easily change their preferences. Similarly, each instructor was able to choose the mode of teaching: online or mixed (i.e., the teacher and some students go to the same classroom with their laptop and headset, and both online students and those who are in the classroom could take the same lesson together on Zoom). Although it depended on the

terms and days of teaching, half of the instructors taught online and the other half chose the mixed mode in 2021.

Participants

Two Japanese teachers of English participated in this study: Chika and Saori (all the names in this paper are pseudonyms). As full-time instructors, they were assigned to teach a core intensive reading class for intermediate students whose average TOEFL ITP score was 517. In addition to this core class, they also taught some elective courses in all terms and one research writing course in the winter term. They were chosen as the participants because they fit the definition of novice teachers: both had finished their master's program within 3 years before they were hired and were unfamiliar with teaching a semester-long academic English course at a university. I was a mentor to Chika, and another experienced teacher, Hiroko was a mentor to Saori. The fact that I was Chika's mentor helped me understand her situation clearly, but I acknowledge that this might have made her avoid offering some negative comments about the mentoring system.

The first participant, Chika, grew up in Japan and took English lessons during junior high and high school. She is a graduate of the university where she teaches. She studied abroad for a year when she was a college student. After graduation, she taught English as a high school English teacher for 3 years. She then studied abroad and completed her master's degree in TESOL in the U.S. She had never taught English at a university in Japan. She was hired in April 2021 and had completed three terms when the interviews were conducted. She chose the mixed mode to teach her students as I did.

The second participant is Saori, who joined this program in September 2021. She grew up in Japan and studied abroad when she became a high school student. She finished her high school and university in the U.S. and taught English at two language schools in Japan for many years. In the first language school, she taught mainly groups of various students, such as adults or students in elementary school and university. In the second language school, she gave private lessons mostly for adults. She taught a short-term intensive English course at a university for her second school, but her current job was her first time teaching a semester-long English course for university students. She completed her master's degree in TESOL through a U.S. online program. She had finished two terms when I interviewed her. She also chose the mixed mode as her mentor, Hiroko, did.

Their Mentoring Experience in This Program

Chika and I had a study session every time we started a new reading text in the core reading class, which took one to two hours each time. There were six texts, so we had this study session six times. To explain the important points, I created lesson plans and shared the previous year's online materials I had used. In 2020, due to the pandemic, teachers could not distribute any handouts or use a blackboard. Thus, the students shared their analyses on Google Docs. Therefore, the online materials included the previous year's students' text analyses and my responses. This lesson plan and the online materials were made available for other teachers who teach the core intensive reading class, including Saori. Chika was asked to talk to me whenever she had any problems or questions, and she sometimes visited my office for support. In addition to these informal face-to-face meetings, she occasionally emailed me or we met on Zoom. We

did not have a fixed time slot to discuss her teaching. In the spring term, although she tried to observe my core reading class, she could not because our timetables conflicted.

Saori and Hiroko also had study sessions where Hiroko explained the important points to teach about each text used in the core reading class. Hiroko did not have online materials because of her sabbatical leave in 2020. Instead, she shared her supplementary teaching materials with Saori by email, and when she did so, she also forwarded them to Chika. Like Chika, Saori was encouraged to talk to Hiroko whenever she had any problems or questions. They also did not decide on a specific time slot to meet each other, but they often met during the third period on Wednesdays. When one of them had to teach online and could not come to school, they sometimes met on Zoom. Saori did not have a chance to observe Hiroko's lessons.

Data Collection and Data Analysis

To collect data, a semi-structured interview was conducted with each of the participants twice on Zoom in order to adhere to social distancing guidelines at that time. The first interviews were conducted at the beginning of March 2022, and one week after the interviews, the second interview was carried out. The first interviews took approximately 45 minutes, and the second interviews took a little over an hour. The data were collected in Japanese so that we could express our thoughts freely. All the interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent, and I took notes while interviewing them. The data were transcribed, and I read the transcripts and listened to the audio files multiple times to code, using thematic coding methods (Saldaña, 2015).

Findings and Discussion

Novice Teachers' Struggles and Difficulties

Both Chika and Saori said that although they had a valuable experience and enjoyed teaching, their first year was extremely tough. For example, in their first interview, Chika described that her first-year survival was *kiseki* (a miracle), and Saori said that her first year was *gekidou* (tumultuous). The sources of their struggles were mostly similar but slightly different.

Content Difficulties

When Chika and Saori were asked about what was challenging during their first year, they immediately pointed out the difficulty of comprehending the texts in their core reading class. In this class, authentic academic materials are used, covering various topics and genres. Although the focus of the class is on teaching reading strategies rather than the content of the text, both expressed their struggles with understanding the texts.

Unlike other experienced teachers who taught the same texts for many years, these novice teachers suffered from the lack of their content knowledge. Both of them did not feel confident about their comprehension of the texts and felt uneasy. In contrast, they did not feel such content difficulties in elective classes where they taught more practical skills, such as discussion skills.

Pedagogical Difficulties

Both novice teachers faced difficulties in terms of how to teach students in this program. For instance, Saori talked about her difficulty in knowing the expected pace to cover the content in the core reading class. Chika also felt pedagogical difficulties; however, her difficulty was rather with how to give spontaneous feedback during the class. Thus, both participants felt pedagogical difficulties, but the area of their pedagogical difficulties varied.

Difficulties Caused by the Pandemic

Both participants mentioned that they had difficulty having daily conversations with their colleagues due to the pandemic and felt isolated. For instance, Saori expressed how difficult it was for her to communicate with her colleagues as follows:

> I personally think it's important to communicate with my coworkers, but it was difficult to find such an opportunity because of COVID-19. I think I was isolated … Gradually more people started to come to their office and Hiroko was also there, but this was not a normal environment … Especially when I had to teach online, I felt isolated … I could have emailed my coworkers, but [I wish I had had more opportunities to visit their office or casually talk to my colleagues in the hallway]. (Saori, first interview)

Difficulties Caused by the Lack of Background Knowledge

Saori commented on her difficulty in understanding the characteristics of this university's students.

> [In the course we taught,] there were a few returnee students, and the majority of the students [grew up in Japan and] went through the typical Japanese entrance system and studied hard for that. So, these students were often keen to earn high scores on the assignments. I wasn't familiar with this context. (Saori, first interview)

She also acknowledged her difficulty in understanding the whole curriculum, though she told me that she gradually understood what kind of skills were taught in the previous term.

Unlike Saori, Chika did not struggle with the lack of background knowledge about the students and this university. In the second interview, when I asked what was not challenging during the first year, she stated that although the program changed and there were some new classes she did not take when she was a college student, she knew the process that the students would need to follow thanks to her experience as a student in the same English program.

Difficulties Caused by Problem Students

Chika talked about her struggles with how to handle some problem students. For example, she talked about her past experience related to problem students in one of her core reading classes.

> In the spring term, I emailed you about a problematic class [that a particular student had an issue with another student about a private matter], and you talked about your past experience of handling problem students. Then, you suggested that I should ask for the director's help about this issue. It was very helpful. (Chika, second interview)

Similarly, Chika talked about her struggles with the students who did not submit their assignments in her research writing class. She also shared her anxiety about a research writing student who failed the class due to their poor performance. She was a bit worried that although she emailed that student and explained why they failed, they might contact her about the grade and complain about their grade.

Like Chika, Saori indicated that she had difficulties with how to handle the students who did not complete their assignments. However, it seems that she struggled with problem students less than Chika thanks to her profound teaching experience in the private language schools. In the second interview, when I asked her about what was not difficult in the first year, she pointed out that she could offer various support to her students because of her long teaching career as an English teacher.

To sum up, the first year for both participants was very challenging, and they faced various difficulties: content difficulties, pedagogical difficulties, and difficulties caused by COVID-19, the lack of background knowledge, and problem students. Some of these struggles originated in the lack of their professional knowledge as novice university teachers, but even experienced teachers also face many of these problems. As Farrell (2012) states, the reason why novice teachers' first-year experience is challenging is because they suddenly begin facing the same problems as other experienced instructors. Also, in terms of their difficulties caused by the lack of background knowledge and problem students, Chika and Saori had different areas and degrees of difficulties owing to their backgrounds. Furthermore, they had different strengths; Chika was a graduate of this university, whereas Saori was an experienced teacher in private language institutes. Their strengths helped them mitigate their difficulties.

Novice Teachers' Perceptions of the Mentoring System

The participants talked about their perceptions of the mentoring system. Although their perceptions were positive, their comments implied some possible problems with the present mentoring system. In addition, they delineated who should be a mentor.

The Positive Aspects of the Mentoring System

When the participants were asked about their perceptions of the mentoring system, both said it was a very helpful system for the first-year teachers in this program. For example, Chika appreciated the mentoring system as follows:

> You said, "Please ask me if you have any questions," which made me think I could ask questions other than the lessons. I sometimes had a situation where I was not sure who I should talk to when I had a problem. For instance, when I had a student who never showed up in the spring term, I was not sure if I should talk to the administrative staff or director. So, I talked to you first, and you helped me understand who I should talk to. You served as a cushion in a sense. (Chika, second interview)

In this way, Chika appreciated the mentor's pragmatic and affective support. Similarly, Saori appreciated Hiroko's support in the same way.

The Possible Issues of the Mentoring System

When both participants were pushed to think of a possible way to improve the mentoring system, they offered a point to improve based on their previous experience as a mentee or a mentor. For example, Chika referred to her experience when she was a high school English teacher. The school provided a formal mentoring system. She had to observe her mentor's lessons and her mentor also needed to observe her lessons a few times a year. Moreover, her lessons were observed by other subject teachers three times a year and she received feedback from them. She said such observation opportunities between a mentee and a mentor and/or other teachers as a required system would be useful. She added that if other teachers also observed new teachers' lessons, there would be more communication between new teachers and their colleagues.

In a similar vein, Saori told me about her experience as a mentor in one of the language schools where she worked and talked about the possibility of having a class observation as a part of the mentoring system at this university. In that school, the school created the observation schedules, and a mentee had a chance to observe a mentor's class. Furthermore, a mentee's lesson was recorded so that a mentor could access the recorded lesson and give advice. She also underscored the importance of making a mentoring system more systematic. To do so, she suggested creating a checklist and manual for mentors.

Thus, both participants stated it would be beneficial to require class observations and make the mentoring system more systematic. To make such required observations possible, as Mann and Tang (2012) stressed the importance of timetabling, teaching schedules that allow a mentor and a mentee to observe each other's lessons would be crucial.

Who Should Be a Mentor

When the participants were asked who should mentor a mentee, both said the most important quality is the mentor's personality. For instance, Chika stated that a person with whom she can feel *shinkinkan* (a feeling of closeness), and that a person who she can easily share her worries with should be a mentor. Likewise, Saori told me that a mentor who can create an environment where she can easily ask questions is her ideal. She also commented that a person with whom a mentee can honestly confess that they do not understand something should be a mentor. Chika and Saori told me gender or age does not matter. As for whether a mentor should be a tenured instructor, both participants stated that as long as mentors have adequate teaching experience in the program, they should be able to become mentors. Regarding the physical proximity, as Mann and Tang (2012) reported, both agreed that a mentor's office should be located close to the mentee's office.

All in all, the participants greatly appreciated the mentoring system in that it provided pragmatic and affective support for them as Brannan and Bleistein (2012) illustrated. As for the points to improve, based on their previous mentoring experience, they suggested that the mentoring should be more systematic. Particularly, they believe that requiring class observations between a mentor and a mentee can make the system better. To do so, as Mann and Tang (2012) pointed out, timetabling, which is friendly for a mentor and a mentee, is essential. Additionally, an approachable person who can offer necessary support and show empathy with the mentees should be a mentor. Finally, as Mann and Tang indicated, physical proximity seems to be significant.

Other Support for Novice Teachers

In addition to the mentoring system, Chika and Saori were supported in various ways. For instance, they were helped by various meetings organized by the program that provided social interaction with their colleagues and support from their colleagues who were not their mentors. In particular, prepared lesson plans as well as online materials and communication with their *douki* (a colleague who was hired around the same time) were regarded as essential.

Prepared Lesson Plans and Online Materials

Both participants commented that they were helped by the lesson plans and online materials shared by their colleagues. In this program, for all the elective classes, course coordinators prepare the lesson plans and lesson materials and share them with those who teach these classes because these classes are unified. Although they recognized that these lesson plans were not perfect, Chika and Saori appreciated these lesson plans.

As a part of mentoring during the core intensive reading class, I shared my lesson plans and online materials with Chika and Saori. It seems that these materials helped them a lot. Saori, for instance, said she would not have survived without these materials and that she was able to understand the lesson flow and pace and use the materials selectively. Chika, who struggled with how to give feedback to her students' responses, remarked on the usefulness of these materials as follows:

> Both the shared lesson plans and Google Docs really helped me. By looking at the lesson plans, I was able to understand the big picture … then, I checked the lesson details, which helped me understand how this lesson was actually taught and get a concrete image of the lesson … I could see what kind of text analyses my students would share in class. By knowing the students' possible responses beforehand, I was able to feel mentally prepared … Also, I could see how you responded to the students, so I was able to imagine how I should give feedback to the students. (Chika, second interview)

Because the course was taught either with the mixed or online mode during the pandemic, all the class materials were saved digitally. Although the pandemic negatively affected their first-year teaching experience in this program, the creation of online sharable documents could be an unexpected positive outcome.

Interaction with Douki

Both participants commented that having douki was very helpful. Chika started teaching in the spring term, and Saori began teaching in the autumn term in 2021. They recognized each other as douki and appreciated having douki in this program. For instance, Saori described how she was helped by Chika as follows:

> I think I was very lucky because Chika, who was also kind of new, was here … Her situation was basically the same as mine, so we could have *hanseikai* (a reflection session) and consoled each other. This was how I got emotional support … We shared which part of the lesson we couldn't teach well. I realized that we often had the same problems. When I struggled with a particular part, she also struggled with the same part. … We supported each other and had a great time. (Saori, first interview)

In this way, they obtained not only pragmatic but also affective support from each other. Mann and Tang (2012) reported that having a relatively less experienced mentor can also be effective because such a mentor can empathize with the mentee. Mann and Tang even suggested having two mentors: an experienced mentor and a mentor with limited teaching experience. In this study, although the participants had only one experienced mentor, having douki seems to function as the second type of mentor, who they could feel empathy with.

Conclusion

This study explored two novice university English teachers' first-year experience in Japan and how they were supported by their mentors and their colleagues during the pandemic. The pandemic affected their first-year experience negatively due to the difficulty in communicating with their colleagues, as well as positively owing to the online materials that included my students' analyses and my responses. Nevertheless, the study is not free from limitations. For example, although the participants' in-depth opinions were collected and analyzed, the data were collected through interviews only. As a case study, triangulating other data from the participants' journals, for example, could have increased credibility. In addition, as Johnson (2022) documented the process of how a Chinese pre-service teacher's concepts changed over time through mentoring in the MA TESL program, interviews should have been conducted multiple times throughout the year. Moreover, even though this program also offers a mentoring system for native English-speaking teachers, it was not focused on in the present study. Mentoring can be culturally different (Bright, 2006), so it is worth investigating their perceptions and experience of the mentoring system.

Despite these limitations, this study succeeded in describing the novice teachers' experience and perceptions of the mentoring system in detail. Furthermore, because no studies on mentoring for novice teachers have been conducted in a Japanese university context, I hope that this study can contribute to other researchers' further investigation on this topic.

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