

From Teacher to Teacher Trainer: The Rewards of Training and Professional Development

Alison K. Nemoto

Miyagi University of Education

Contact: alison@staff.miyakyo-u.ac.jp

Introduction

When teaching EFL classes with the theme of holiday plans or travel, I always ask students to define the words “travel” and “journey,” which are translated as “ryoko” and “tabi” in Japanese, and it always seems difficult for them. What is your definition?

In this report on the presentation I gave at the JALT Teacher Journeys Conference in June, I’d like to reflect on my journey as a teacher and now teacher trainer, with the hope of sharing my experiences with others, who may already be on their teaching journey, or just starting out.

My personal definition of “travel” is something very concrete, that we plan with a beginning, a middle and an end. I set up a programme 3 years ago, to take about 20 university students each year to the U.K. to study at Leeds Beckett University. It is a great responsibility and travel has to be very organized. But I get great satisfaction, when everything, especially international transfers and immigration, go like clockwork. Whereas on the other hand, a “journey” may have a beginning and a goal or destination, but the time taken to get there, the route and other details are left open to be altered or adapted according to events. The destination itself may even change too, depending on the circumstances, events or people met on the way. For example, I travelled to a conference in Hiroshima this July and had two free days in the city to look around the monuments in the Peace Park and the castle, but on the last day, I also visited Miyajima island just on a whim. I meandered with no schedule and my unplanned solo journey was also very satisfying.

Moving back to the theme of teacher development, the first step on my journey to be a teacher was my pre-service training, which was a four year B.Ed. (Hons) course, majoring in the Creative Arts in primary education at Leeds Polytechnic. This is the same institution I take my students to every summer now, but in those days, of course, I had no idea what I would be doing 30 years later. Journeys have surprises, sometimes pleasant and fulfilling, and sometimes not so pleasant and disappointing, but this is just one example of the elements of a journey, which later sometimes cause connections we never imagined, just like little chemical reactions or unformed circles joining up.

From the UK to Fukushima (1989-2011)

Rather than applying to become a primary school teacher in Leeds or other places in the U.K. after graduation from university, as my classmates did, an exciting summer job working in Pennsylvania and travelling solo all over the U.S. by Greyhound bus, had sparked an urge in me to travel and search for work abroad instead. But this time, my sights were much further away from travelling just, “over the pond,” as we Brits say, and for longer than just a summer.

I applied and was accepted on to the JET (Japan Exchange and Teaching) Programme in its third year in 1989, with the aim of challenging myself to living and working in a very foreign environment. I hoped to develop as an adult, as well as an educator through this experience, travel and learn more about the world, to then pass on to children back in Yorkshire when I returned there.

With just a few days orientation in Tokyo at the Keiyo Plaza Hotel, we all travelled to Fukushima and then later, with my supervisor and his wife, we travelled on to my placement as the first AET (Assistant English Teacher) in Haramachi City. There was little information on Japan available in those days and no Internet of course, so I had imagined teaching English to children in a small mountain village, living in a thatched house and cycling round on my bicycle, which they had told me, by hand-written letter, they had bought for me. The reality was a large apartment with modern amenities, in a very smart white-tiled apartment building, which even had a tennis court. To me this was very disappointing and far too western for the “culture vulture” from Yorkshire seeking the real Japanese experience. The only excitement was sleeping in a futon, which they apologized for by saying: “So sorry Alison, there was not enough money to buy a bed.”

As an AET, I was based in four junior high schools and we were doing a new form of instruction called “team-teaching,” so teachers came from far and wide to watch the foreign AET and the Japanese teacher working together in class. We really were pioneers! I set up teacher training for the Japanese Teachers of English (JTEs) and we met once a month at the city hall to discuss each new unit in the textbook and how we would teach it. There, we shared ideas, tried out games or brought in realia we could use in the classroom. I also worked on meeting them socially, to get to know them and work better as a team, to help improve their English too, but mostly just to boost their confidence in English. As the sub-representative for Fukushima JET in my second year, I started a monthly teaching ideas newsletter which I posted out to all the JETs, as a way of sharing our ideas and assisting other AETs who had no teaching background.

After three years, the maximum on the JET programme at that time, rather than going back to Yorkshire and teach in primary school as I had planned, my life in Japan continued. I married and we built a house in the small rural town of Odaka, which is right next to Haramachi and later became part of Minamisoma City in 2006. As there was an AET already at the junior high school, I was employed as the town’s CIR (Coordinator for International Relations) teaching at the four kindergarten and four primary schools, but also creating international events and managing exchange trips. I had been studying Japanese hard in my first three years, so in my fourth year, was able to do translation of town pamphlets and interpretation during the visits from foreigners. However, I decided to leave full-time work after having my first daughter, Emily, in 1993.

For me, teaching is like breathing, so while Emily was still a small baby, I enjoyed teaching children and adults at my home and classes at the local community centers. Then in 1995 I was asked to teach part-time at a newly established two year technical college in Haramachi and while doing this I had my second daughter Liana in 1996. I taught there for four years, but what really surprised me teaching at this level was that these students at 18, who had already had six years of English education still couldn’t really converse with me naturally in English at all. So from this period I really felt the necessity for beginning English at a much younger age, in primary school as I had been doing in Odaka, for example, as a way to improve this situation.

In 1998, I had the opportunity to go back to full time teaching in the small coastal town of Okuma. First as an ALT (Assistant Language Teacher) in junior high school for four years, during which time I had my third daughter, Naomi. But then in April 2001, as soon as it was made possible to teach English under the banner of General Studies or “Sogoteki Gakushu,” I was transferred by my Board of Education, to set up the primary English programme for 700 pupils in grades 1-6 at the two Okuma primary schools. There was another ALT at the junior high school, so I was to work solo as a native English instructor in the primary schools, rather than as an ALT

This new position was an opportunity to do what I had felt necessary, begin English instruction earlier, but it was an enormous challenge and despite my pre-service training as a primary teacher and experience of teaching English in various contexts from kindergarten to further education for 12 years already, it was a great responsibility to be establishing a 500 hour a year programme in a state primary school. No other schools in the area were doing this and it made me feel like an educational pioneer all over again.

My way to deal with the new challenge was to go back to school, and I went back to the U.K. to do the 4 week CELTA (Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults) programme at my old university, which changed its name to Leeds Metropolitan University by then. Later, I took the Young Learner Extension to CELTA certificate course in Brighton.

I had three young children and many people, even family and friends, couldn’t understand why I would spend time and money in my holidays, going back to the UK to do courses that did not lead to any kind of rise in pay or promotion, but I felt the need for input and professional development for my own sake and that of my pupils. I was also a designated teacher trainer for Fukushima Prefecture, regularly doing workshops and speaking at conferences, so I wanted not only to get the training for myself, but also to see how teachers were being trained in the UK at that time.

It has always seemed natural to me, to keep learning, listening, writing, and sharing, as well as teaching. At this time, we started a local study group for teachers wanting to share ideas and practices for teaching English in primary school. I also started travelling to Tokyo to work for a publishing company on their texts for children and write articles for their newsletters. This was made possible through recommendations to the company from university professors I had met and worked with at local meetings and conferences in Fukushima, not from any vision of working with a publisher myself, and this just shows one of the unexpected developments I have enjoyed from positive professional development.

Fukushima, 3.11. Onwards

As most people reading this far will have probably realized, on March 11 2011, at 14:46, I lost my job, my home and my community was shattered. The damage from the tsunami was devastating and then there was evacuation due to nuclear fallout. My nine years of building the primary English education programme in the Okuma schools was lost in the shake that lasted just 6 minutes and the children of Okuma evacuated inland to the Aizu area of Fukushima. They restarted classes in late April in unused school buildings there without me, because my family had to start life over again in a different area. We found a home in Soma and from July 2011, just 4 months after the quake, thankfully, I was employed as the sole ALT to teach English in the Minamisoma primary schools just 30kms from the Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant.

People who work full-time for a substantial amount of time usually dream of a sabbatical or long holiday, but for me, being out of work was unbearable. Without a job, it was as though a part of me had been lost in the tsunami. I was a wife, a mother and a daughter-in-law, I went and volunteered in Soma every day, but the “Alison Sensei,” with a real purpose in life and a big smile, no longer existed.

Happily, I was sent to teach English on the very first day I was employed in Minamisoma, even though I was in a suit and only had my handbag rather than a bag of picture cards and CDs. All 16 schools had been moved to six locations in the northern-most part of the city (Kashima Ward) furthest away from the plant. The children were bussed in from places all over the city, wore masks constantly and couldn't play outside. Some of these schools overlooked the tsunami-stricken coastline. As I taught, I could see this from the classroom window and many of the children were those who had just lost loved ones. One school had even been struck by the tsunami, but luckily there were no fatalities and it was operating out of a local community centre. It was chaos, there were no resources, but the teachers pulled together amazingly, and I went in to teach with what I could buy, make myself on weekends or was sent from kind people abroad.

Many ex-ALTs had contacted me asking how they could help and sent books, pens, stickers and toys. My schedule was solid 25 lessons a week, from the beginning, and I went in within the main aim of helping the children forget, even for 45 minutes, what had happened. I wanted them to smile, sing, laugh and play through English, and these were the skills and techniques I had perfected during my nine years in Okuma. I came to think that maybe all that time was training and preparation for me to walk into a disaster zone and put my energy into teaching English to these displaced and disturbed children. This was another experience of the rewards of continued professional development that I refer to in my title. Before 3.11, I have to admit I sometimes wondered where my career path was going. I loved teaching children, but was I going to be doing this in a small coastal town for the rest of my working life? Just before the disaster I had been approached by a university in Sendai to teach part-time on their primary English teacher training course, but that was over 90 kilometers away. I had three children aged 17, 15 and 10. I turned them down.

Then in August 2011, they contacted me again and because of our evacuation I was now living in Soma, much nearer to Sendai. Many other ALTs were returning to Minamisoma and the schools too were gradually moving back to their original locations. Things were settling down and I decided to go for an interview.

From Fukushima to Sendai

I am now in my fourth year teaching at the Miyagi University of Education in Sendai. I teach English conversation, writing and western culture courses, but my main responsibility is to train undergraduates who will become primary school English teachers. After my first year here, I began a distance MA course with the University of York in Teaching English to Young Learners, which I successfully completed in July this year. In my classes at our university I am able to draw on my creative and artistic background, from my own graduate course in Leeds, to inspire students to use drama, dance, art, and movement in their English classes, write poetry and perform plays, both at their own level of English and in simple English for children to enjoy.

I got this amazing job, not only through my experience of teaching in public schools for over 20 years, but also because of those courses I did, conferences I spoke at, publications and textbooks I was involved in and workshops I did with no goal or dream of working at a university in the future. So this is yet another example of discovering the hidden benefits of continued training, taking the time and spending the money to do courses and always continuing your professional development in some way. We never know what situations or contexts we will be thrown into next, so continued personal development which JALT also facilitates in an amazing way at local and national levels, is always worthwhile, even if it doesn't seem so at the time. Sometimes it's a small step, a presentation, or a workshop you attend, that inspires you to present yourself or write an article, that not only adds another line to your own CV, but which is real personal development too and helps you grow and evolve, as you go onwards in your career.

Currently, I am taking the TESOL Certificate in Teaching English to Young Learners in Tokyo, working on the team to create the new MEXT approved textbook for primary English, for when it becomes a subject in 2020 and I am excited to have recently become a committee member of Sendai JALT allowing me to plan and assist in events to expand teacher development and help support fellow teachers in my local area too.

Unfortunately, I didn't get to teach children in Yorkshire about Japan, which was one of my goals when I set out on my journey, but I have had plenty of opportunities to teach Japanese people about the UK and its culture. I have the great responsibility of training undergraduates, most of whom were in some way affected by the disaster of 3.11 themselves, and who will go out to become teachers in schools all over the Tohoku area, helping children every day through English and other subjects, to overcome their past and strive on into the future. Through my personal experience in Fukushima I can try and communicate the importance to them of being flexible in any situation, understanding and creating lessons from nothing when resources are limited. I believe if we have creativity and imagination, we can make lessons from anything.

As for the Okuma children, in the last four years, I have been able to take over 100 students from my university on six trips, to volunteer for about a week each time, in the temporary schools they are still using in the Aizu area of Fukushima. My students go with the aim of helping the children, but actually learn much more from these children who lost their hometown to nuclear fallout. They later reflect on the importance of being as positive as you can be and carrying on under adverse circumstances. I hope these

experiences, as well as visiting the U.K. and what I can pass onto them in the classroom will help them when they start their own journeys as teachers.

Finally, I'd like to thank the Teacher Development and Education Special Interest Group members for first accepting my presentation proposal and then allowing me to contribute this article. It has been a very worthwhile and healing process for me personally to look back and take stock of my journey, and now look forward to what else I can do for Tohoku and English education in Japan.