IMPACT OF THE ACTION RESEARCH EXPERIENCE ON NOVICE LANGUAGE TEACHERS

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate how the novice teachers' experiences of conducting action research in a teacher education program affect their teaching in their individual classroom context and their ability for self-development. The M.A. Japanese language teacher education program at the institution, where the authors of this paper teach, requires students to conduct action research while they are engaged in a three-semester long teaching practicum. This requirement aims to equip students with, not only teaching skills, but also the abilities and attitudes necessary to continue growing professionally throughout their careers. We conducted in-depth interviews with the four graduates of the program, who have been engaged in Japanese language teaching either in Japan or abroad. The analysis of the data indicates that their action research experience still has an impact on their daily teaching, especially on their reflective practices. Even in an informal manner, all of them continue to reflect on their everyday teaching and think about ways to improve it. We tentatively concluded that once acquired, these reflective skills may remain and continue to be a powerful tool for their professional development in the long term.

1 Introduction

As the scope of second/foreign language education become more and more diversified, knowledge and skills that a second language teacher is required to possess also become more complex and diversified compared to that a few decades ago. This awareness among second language teacher educators has necessitated reexamination of what second/foreign language education can and should offer to trainee teachers. Freeman & Johnson (1998) argued for paradigm shift in language teacher education from traditional transmission or behaviorist approach to more constructivist approach. The authors of this paper are engaged in a MA Japanese language teacher preparation program which was established eight years ago in line with this new view and has adopted educational approaches to foster Japanese language teachers who are equipped with the abilities and attitudes to continue their professional development throughout their careers.

Since the beginning of the program, 70% of all our graduates got a teaching job in their first year after graduation, and 57% of them are still teaching three years after graduation, we felt it important to examine how their experiences in our program actually have impacted on their daily teaching. We are especially interested in the teaching practicum and action research requirements that we consider the most important elements in our curriculum, adopted to foster reflective teachers. By investigating their impact on our graduates' professional development, we hope to reexamine and improve our program and also contribute to the discussion in second language teacher education on what teacher preparation programs can and should offer for trainee students.

2 Literature review

2.1 Paradigm shift in second language teacher education

According to Freeman & Johnson's (1998) review of historical changes in language teacher education in the past few decades, up until 1980's, the majority of the classroom-based research on language teaching "sought to describe effective teaching behaviors, positive learner outcomes, and teacher-student interactions that were believed to lead to successful L2 learning" (p. 398). Accordingly, the dominant approach to teacher education was to equip teachers with those discrete skills and behaviors which were observable from outside (Borg, 2006).

By the mid-1980's, however, there was a growing awareness that teaching is more complex than just aggregation of discrete teacher behaviors and that "studies of teaching which examined individual teacher's work and cognitions in a more holistic and qualitative manner began to appear" (Borg, 2006, p. 6).

Teacher educators began to recognize that trainees enter teacher education programs not in the state of blank sheet waiting to be filled with new knowledge and skills, but they bring their personal beliefs, values shaped by their prior experiences, especially as learners, which have great impact on their learning in the programs (Freeman & Johnson, 1998). Freeman & Johnson go on to argue that the knowledge-base of language teacher education must account for how individuals learn to teach and for the complex factors, influences, and processes that contribute to learning and that "learning to teach is a long-term, complex, developmental process that operates through participation in the social practices and contexts associated with learning and teaching" (p. 402).

This constructivist approach now seems to be accepted by many language educators. Then how should a language teacher program that embraces this view be organized and what should it offer to its students?

2.2 Contents of second language teacher education and their educational impact

Kagan (1992) reviewed 40 studies on growth among preservice and novice teachers published between 1987-1991 to explore common sequences of developmental stages and processes by which teachers grow and to "infer the nature of teacher education programs most likely to

promote professional growth" (p. 130).

Kagan found that students' personal beliefs about teaching and good teachers, of self as teachers, shaped by their past experiences as pupils, generally remained unchanged by the teacher education programs they attended. This strong impact of the teachers' past experiences as learners on their teaching practices is also known as "apprenticeship of observation" (Lortie, 1975). Kagan argues that if teacher education programs are to help students grow professionally during their time in the programs, these personal beliefs must be challenged, modified and reconstructed. Kagan (1992, p. 155) suggests some elements that might promote learning-to-teach processes of student-teachers. For example:

- Programs should provide opportunities for students to reflect upon their own beliefs and images of teaching and teachers and to become aware of the limitations that their beliefs impose on their growth;
- Students should acquire and develop standardized classroom routines for handling and managing their classes. If these routines are established, student-teachers are able to shift their focus on their pupils rather than their own classroom behaviors;
- In order that to take place, practicums or internship should be sufficiently long and frequent and consistent with the information provided in courses they have taken; and
- Programs should provide opportunities for student teachers to conduct structured research projects which involve systematic observation on their students' learning and classroom interactions, which will serve as opportunities for them to examine and modify their prior beliefs and image of self as teacher.

Wright (2010) reviewed more recent research on second language teacher preparation programs and found that innovative pedagogy emerging in second language teacher education has common characteristics that include the following (p. 273):

Such programs

- place emphasis on the student teacher's learning-to-teach process;
- include activities encouraging reflection on student teachers' learning experiences such as journals and diaries writing;
- are committed to student teacher's inquiry into one's own beliefs and into the professional contexts of teaching and learning for which students teachers are being prepared is considered important; and
- are influenced by adult education whose central idea is learning from experience.

Farrell (2016) reported research findings on three novice ESL teachers who experienced difficulties coping with their classroom realities and felt that their pre-service teacher training had not prepared them adequately. To make the transition between the pre-service education program and real classrooms smoother, Farrell (2016, p. 106) proposes to include "reflective practice" course in the programs which can provide pre-service teachers with the tools for reflection so that they can prepare for the unknown and predictable realities of the classrooms they are to be in. The framework of reflective practice consists of five levels of reflection which can guide students to engage in systematic and structured reflection.

What we see from recent literature is the interest in and emphasis on teachers' learning to teach processes and recognition of the positive impact of reflective activities in teacher preparation programs on student teachers' development.

2.3 Reflective teaching and action research

As discussed above, many teacher educators advocate that reflection ("reflective practice" "reflective model" "reflective teaching") can provide trainees opportunities for professional development (e.g., Burton, 2009; Farrell, 2016; Richards & Lockhart, 1994; Wallace, 1991). Burton (2009) states "being reflective assists teachers' lifelong professional development, enabling them to critique teaching and make better-informed teacher decisions" (p. 298).

The concept of reflective teaching has been developed drawing on Dewey (1933) and Schön (1983, 1987). Traditionally, it is considered that research on teaching are conducted by researchers in universities and teachers are seen as passive consumers of such research findings and mere implementers. Wallace (1991) terms this approach the applied science model. The concept of reflective teaching, on the other hand, values teachers' experiences and knowledge gained from their teaching careers. Through reflection in action and on action (Schön, 1983), teachers build their personal theories. Systematic reflection can make these personal theories which are often tacit become explicit and shared with other people as well. Now we see the explosion of interest in the ideas of teachers as reflective practitioners. At the same time, there is confusion about what it means in practice. Some researchers express their concern that the term "reflective practice" is used just as a slogan or a motto. (Burton, 2009; Zeichner & Liston, 1996) Even so, if reflective activities are included effectively in a teacher education program, they seem to be a powerful pedagogical tool in the framework of constructivist view of teacher education.

Wallace's "reflective model" (1991) inspired us to create our curriculum. Wallace suggests that teacher education has two main dimensions; "received knowledge", that is, facts, data, theories etc. associated with the study of a particular profession gained from reading books or attending lectures. "Experiential knowledge", on the other hand, is developed during the teacher's on-going experience or action. In a more traditional transmission model of teacher education, knowledge gained in courses and experiences gained during student teaching or practicum are treated in isolation. Wallace claims that the relationships between the two knowledges should be reciprocal, so that the trainee can reflect on the "received knowledge" in the light of classroom experience, and so that classroom experience can feed back into the "received knowledge" sessions. This reciprocal cycle occurs throughout their learning experience and helps the trainees develop their professional competence as a teacher. The ability or disposition to conduct systematic reflection leads to action research.

Action research first began and developed in the1930s as researchers in the social sciences looked at employees improving their workplaces. It is now widely accepted in many other areas and is well developed especially in teaching (McNiff & Whitehead, 2011). In the field of second language teaching, the growing interest in learner-centered curriculum design, classroom-based research and the notion of the teacher as a reflective practitioner have all been conducive to its dissemination in 1980s (Burns, 2009). We see this surge in interest because the research is conducted by practitioners/teachers to improve their practice and

demonstrate their professional accountability. By conducting action research, teachers are given opportunities to examine problems/concerns/interests arising from their own classrooms and explore ways to improve them and implement them. Unlike traditional applied science models, teachers are both researchers and implementers of plans based on their own research findings (McNiff & Whitehead, 2011).

Burns (1999, p. 30) presents common features of action research by summarizing its definitions put forward by different researchers as follows.

1. Action research is contextual, small-scale and localised – it defines and investigates problems with in a specific situation.
2. It is evaluative and reflective as it aims to bring about change and improvement in practice.
3. It is participatory as it provides for collaborative investigation by teams of colleagues, practitioners and researchers.
4. Changes in practice are based on the collection of information or data which provides the impetus for change.

The most well-known model of action research is that proposed by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988), which involves four phases, Planning-Action-Observation-Reflection. This process is cyclic and Reflection in the first cycle leads to Planning in the second cycle and the process goes on. The researcher can continue this process to further improve the situation or to focus on a new issue or problem identified.

Action research in teacher education is now considered to be one method to help teachers continue to develop professionally by reflecting on interesting or problematic areas in their teaching contexts in a systematic and structured way. It is different from other traditional types of research in that it focuses on individual contexts and is not so concerned about making generalizations. Its primary focus is to improve the situation of the teacher-researcher. But as Burns summarizes, it is often conducted collaboratively with colleagues or students. It seems quite natural in a social constructivist view since the teacher is considered to develop not alone but in interaction with other participants in the situation and in each social context.

Action research is now regarded as a powerful tool to empower teachers. Burns (2009) states, however, that "there is still very little evidence to indicate the extent of actual action research practice in teacher education" (p. 292), and claims that it is not yet so well developed except for Australia and North America, where teachers receive more professional support.

In Japan, too, there is a growing interest in adoption of action research for professional development in many areas including language teacher education (e.g., Yokomizo, Sakoda, and Matsuzaki, 2004). At this point, however, not many research findings have been shared in an international forum, and we hope more experiences in areas other than Australia and North America will be shared with international colleagues.

3 The study

3.1 Purpose of the study

As was discussed, shifts in the language teacher education are no doubt moving toward more social constructivist views from the transmission approach and many language teacher educators have been strongly interested in the process of how teachers, both pre- and in-service learn to teach. Farrell (2016) argues:

> There is little agreement about what constitutes the knowledge base for the profession, language teacher education programs vary greatly both in length (from a weekend course to an MA degree) and in content, with some focusing exclusively on theory (such as second language acquisition theory or linguistics) and very few concerned with how teachers can put into practice what they have learned in these programs. (p. 2)

The program in which the authors teach aims to equip student teachers with the abilities and attitudes necessary to continue growing professionally throughout their careers.

The practice of reflective teachers is informed through the teaching practicums and experience in implementing action research. Future teachers engage in autonomous critical self-examination to address different teaching problems through systematic efforts for improving instruction.

As Wright (2010) maintains, if we are to evaluate a teacher preparation program, we need to examine "whether it has succeeded in meeting its own aims and demands, in the short term, and also, most importantly in the long term, whether the graduates of a program have the desired impact on the educational contexts where they teach" (p. 263). In this study, we attempted to evaluate the educational effect of our program in the long term. More specifically, we tried to investigate whether action research and other activities designed to foster our student teachers' reflectivity have actually had any impact on their everyday teaching in each of their teaching contexts. To explore this question, we conducted in-depth interviews with four graduates of our program.

3.2 Context of the study

We provide here some contexts for our program. The Japanese language teacher education program was established in 2008. It offers a two-year M.A. program whose curriculum consists of theory-oriented courses in the first year and practicum courses in the second.

The theory-oriented courses include indispensable subjects for Japanese language teaching such as introduction to Japanese language teaching, Japanese pedagogical grammar, SLA theories for Japanese language teaching, foreign language methodology, pedagogy for Japanese speech sounds and prosody, evaluation and testing in Japanese language teaching etc. These courses aim to provide essential knowledge and theories concerning Japanese language teaching, which are reported and outlined by relevant Japanese government offices such as the former Ministry of Education and the Agency for Cultural Affairs (Agency for Cultural Affairs, 2000; Ministry of Education, 2000). These documents provide the official expectation for college-level Japanese language teacher training programs.

These theory-oriented courses provide not only facts and theories but also opportunities for students to connect what they have learned with how that knowledge relates to actual teaching. For instance, in the Japanese pedagogical grammar course, students are asked to consider and discuss practical application of grammatical knowledge on teaching items, being followed by the instructor's practical comments or instructions through his teaching experiences. This course also provides an opportunity for students to present demo classes as a culminating project. Students are also encouraged to reflect on their beliefs on language teaching and learning, what they consider good teaching and what not in the methodology course, and on their language learning experiences in the SLA course. These activities are included in each course to connect the received knowledge to the experiential knowledge, to fill the gap between theory and practice, and to help students become aware of their own beliefs about language teaching and learning and the impact such beliefs might have on their learning in the program.

In the second year, students are required to take three practicum courses in three successive semesters. The three practicum courses are designed to equip them with teaching skills in the following step-by-step manner.

Step 1 (Fall Practicum): Each student teacher teaches eight to ten 25-minute long lessons during the semester. International students on campus are recruited for these lessons. In this practicum, student-teachers learn how to teach elementary level Japanese. Although grammar items and expressions are chosen from an elementary Japanese language textbook, the novices are encouraged to teach their lessons communicatively. Each class is followed by a reflection session in which supervising instructors and student-teachers exchange comments on the lesson. This practicum serves as the first step of their action research. At the end of the semester, student-teachers reflect on their teaching experience, reflect on what went well and what went wrong and explore ways to improve their teaching. Their reflection is written in their final papers.

Step 2 (Winter Practicum): Student teachers are required to organize a two-week intensive Japanese language program for short-term exchange students from a partner university. This is a practicum course for student teachers, but participants in the program are paying fees expecting fruitful experience in the program. Unlike the first practicum, classes in the program are task-based, and student teachers design the course based on the participants' needs and interests and incorporate cultural experience such as field trips in language teaching. Student teachers' responsibilities include not only teaching classes but also organizing and implementing the whole program. Although supervisors help them organize the program, student teachers are expected to take initiative to make the program successful. Naturally, they need to collaborate with their peers with whom they team-teach, and with all the administrative staff members involved to make this program successful. They are expected to improve their teaching skills and to learn course coordination skills in this practicum. At the end of the semester, they reflect on their experience and write another reflection report in which they reflect on their teaching in the program, identify problems in their teaching and explore ways to improve them.

Step 3 (Spring Practicum): As soon as the second practicum is completed, student teachers begin preparing for a two-week long teaching practicum at a partner university overseas.

Student teachers in a group of two or three go to a partner university abroad and offer a special course for students who volunteer to participate in the course. Like the second practicum, student teachers design the course themselves based on the needs and interests of the participants. Supervisors do not go with them. They are expected to be independent and collaborative with each other. They are also expected to communicate well with the professors and staff members at the host institution to make the course run smoothly. In the fall and winter practicums, student teachers have reflected on their teaching and explored ways to improve it. This practicum is the final opportunity for them to try out their ideas for improvement.

After completion of the third practicum, student teachers are required to write an action research paper, reflecting on all of their performances throughout the three sequential practicum courses and exploring ways to improve their teaching for their future careers.

3.3 Participants

We contacted graduates of our program who were engaged in Japanese Language teaching and were available for interview either in person or via skype and the following four graduates agreed to participate in this study. We did not include those who were not engaged in Japanese language teaching at the time of this study. Of the four participants, three were Japanese language instructors and one was an administrative staff member in a Japanese language school. They are all female. Their names are pseudonyms.

Table 1. List of Participants

Name	Information
Mika	• Position: Instructor at a university in Japan • Target Students: international exchange students. • No prior teaching experience before entering the MA program. Taught Japanese at a university in an East Asian country for one year after graduating from the program. • Total teaching experience: 4 years
Yumi	• Position: Instructor at a university in Japan • Target Students: international exchange students. • Taught Japanese at a university in an East Asian country for five years before entering the MA program. • Total teaching experience: 6 years
Reiko	• Position: Instructor at an institution which consists of primary and secondary education in a country in Southeast Asia. • Target students: Teaching Japanese to elementary, junior high and senior high school students. • Other responsibility: administrative duties as head teacher of the Japanese language section. • No prior teaching experience before entering the MA program. • Total teaching experience: 5 years at the current institution.
Hitomi	• Position: administrative staff member in the administrative office at a private Japanese language school in Japan • The institution has a Japanese language school for international students and a teacher preparation program. • No prior teaching experience before entering the MA program. Taught Japanese at a university in an East Asian country for one year after graduating the program.

	• Total teaching experience: one year

3.4 Data collection and analysis procedures

We chose ethnographic interviews as our main data collection method. As Ely (1991) argues, "the major purpose of an in-depth ethnographic interview is to learn to see the world from the eyes of the person interviewed" (p. 58). Since our aim was to discover how our former students make sense of their learning experience during their time in the program and in each of their teaching context now, the ethnographic interview method is appropriate.

The interviews were semi-structured in that, in addition to the set of questions we prepared in advance, we asked more impromptu questions depending on the responses. These interviews were conducted during the period of March to July 2016. Each interview lasted 60 to 90 minutes. Interviews with Mika, Yumi, and Hitomi were conducted in person but the interview with Reiko was done via skype because she was not available for an in-person interview. All interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. Written reports on their initial beliefs about teaching and learning languages which they wrote in their first semesters in the MA program and their action research papers were also used for triangulation.

Since both the authors and the participants were native speakers of Japanese, all the interviews were conducted in Japanese. Also all reports and papers mentioned above were written in Japanese. After all the analysis was completed, segments of the transcripts that were to be quoted in this paper were translated into English by the authors. When some words or sentences in a quoted segment were omitted by the authors, the omission was indicated by "…" Words in parentheses in quotes were added by the authors to help the reader better understand what was actually meant by the participants.

Each of the authors read and examined all the transcripts, then coded segments of data which seemed important or pertinent to our research question. This was done both inductively and deductively, in that some codes came from our research question and others emerged as we looked at our data closely. While coding, we attended to recurring and salient patterns. Then, we tried to organize the codes and to construct categories. In this process we searched for connections among and between the various categories (Seidman, 1991; Spradley, 1979).

4 Findings

Findings are presented in terms of two themes, which are emerged as we analyzed the interview data.

4.1 How are the participants' action research topics related to their current teaching?

All the participants commented that their action research experiences certainly have impact on their teaching practices now. For some, the topics of their action research now guided them as the teacher. The topic of Reiko's action research concerned her questioning behavior and its impact on classroom interactions, which she thought was beneficial for her even now. She said:

> Thinking of what kind of question I should ask students in my class, such as open questions or others, I can utilize my action research experience. Because I conducted my action research on this topic, I still have the awareness about making questions … Even if I don't have enough time to make a thorough teaching plan, I would not skip making and writing down questions which I am supposed to ask in the class. Questions are my compass. In that sense, the action research experience directly affects my current teaching. (Reiko)

Mika's action research was about learner-centeredness.

> I am still aware and always considering and understanding students' needs, and organizing the class to meet their needs. That was the theme of my action research. (Mika)

Yumi was interested in Task-Based Language Instruction because she had taught such classes at her prior school and had thought it was not successful. Therefore, she chose this topic for her action research and tried task-based lessons in her practicum.

> (In my former school) When I taught a task-based class before, I paid much attention to follow the schedule. I was too concerned about the schedule to observe my students. I tried to make students follow my schedule, and did not change my schedule to the pace of the students' pace of learning…I was not aware that I put my students in the framework I had created in advance without paying attention to what they can do and what they cannot do, and without helping them learn to do what they cannot do now. (Yumi)

Through her practicum experience in which she tried task-based teaching again and reflected on it, she realized what had gone wrong before and deepened her understanding of that approach.

For Hitomi, rather than the topic of her action research per se, the whole experience of the teaching practicum seemed to have great impact. Hitomi mentioned that her perspectives were broadened because of the challenge to run the short intensive program, which she experienced during the second stage of her teaching practicum. Her experience of not only teaching international students but also working cooperatively with people from different sections during that practicum made her realize the importance of coordination and cooperation skills.

> In the winter semester, we had to do all coordinating works of the program, which was challenging for us. There were so many things that we had to take care of during the program but because of the challenge, we could obtain coordinating skills, such as being sensitive with others. I know that teachers in the graduate school were so concerned whether we could do well, but they let us do it. Now, because of that experience, I understand what I should think and prepare in advance, but in those days, I did not. (Hitomi)

Now she was an administrative staff in a Japanese language school, working with colleagues in different sections. In that environment, she strongly felt the coordination skill she learned in that practicum was really important to make daily operation smooth.

4.2 How are the participants' reflective dispositions maintained?

As was explained in 3.2, reflective activities are built in the curriculum and participants were provided ample opportunities to reflect upon their teaching, which was the major component of their action research. Through this experience, reflection seemed to have become daily

routine for each of the participants.

> What I have been still doing is reflection, which I learned from conducting action research. I don't video-record my classes now.　But when I think that my class did not go well today, I just don't walk away…On the way back to my office, I start looking back at my class and thinking things, such as I should have done something this way, and I will try that way next time. I think this is because we did reflection after every class (in my graduate program). (Reiko)

> I want to continue my self-evaluation. I also want to receive students' evaluation. I guess that when I conducted action research, I could always receive comments about my teaching, and, based on the comments, I could reflect on it. I want to continue this cycle. Now I cannot receive comments from other teachers, but can get honest comments from my students. The awareness of self-evaluation and feedback from students has been formed during my teaching practicums. (Yumi)

> I always do reflection now. I know I should write it down (but I don't have time now). But if something happens in my class, I follow a reflective thinking cycle… When I write reports on my classes (at the end of each semester, which all the instructors are required to do), I reflect on my teaching. (Mika)

> I think that a habit of reflection was formed in my graduate days. It was hard for me to watch my teaching video because my teaching was so poor in those days. While watching, I felt depressed. But until then, I had not had the chance to watch myself objectively. I learned that I should not forget to observe myself. I learned that I should have objective eyes. (Hitomi)

Reflection also led to the development of meta-awareness as the teacher.

> When I watched my demo-teaching video, I found something absolutely unexpected about myself there. Then, I realized that my teachers' and my peers' critique was right. I definitely understood what they meant after watching my teaching. I realized the gap between myself that I imagined to be and myself that I discovered in the video. I realized how I looked in an objective way. (Hitomi)

> What I learned most in my graduate days was the skill of objectively watching my own teaching. I feel as if there were another 'myself' watching down on me calmly. I talk to myself while I am teaching, "This activity is not going well now," or "This questioning strategy was good." I have learned to observe myself that way. (Yumi)

Interestingly, meta-awareness could emerge later. Reiko described her experience of taking care of student teachers, which put her in the position of the supervising teacher. She compared her experience with the one she had with her supervisors when she was in the MA program.

> I don't remember anything that happened during my first two years here. I simply did not have time to look back. In my third year, I was put in a position to take care of student teachers who were college students from Japan. When I was observing their teaching, I remembered the time I was a student teacher myself conducting a teaching practicum in the graduate program. I began recalling what my teacher had said about my teaching … Now I am in my fifth year here, and have begun to see myself more objectively. I can now understand what my teachers in the graduate programs were talking about. (Reiko)

Reiko also talked about her colleague, who did not seem to reflect on her teaching as Reiko did and realized that being reflective is a skill that can be developed with training.

> When we had a teachers' meeting, that colleague would say, "My class did not go well today. My students did not learn that," and that's all. I wondered, "OK, so what would you do to help them learn?" Then I realized that now I am able to reflect on my teaching even if occasionally because I had experienced doing that when I was a graduate student and have learned to be reflective, and that we need practice to acquire that skill. Because I have done that I now can reflect on my teaching after my classes and think a little deeper about other options I could employ to teach better. (Reiko)

Being in a position to work with others or to take care of younger teachers could certainly be a stimulus for them to continue to develop their reflectivity in their teaching or working contexts.

5 Conclusion

In this study, we attempted to evaluate the educational effect of our program in the long term, specifically, the impact of action research and other activities on the teachers' current teaching practices.

All the participants seemed to maintain their reflective skills and reflective disposition even after they left the program and continued to reflect on their daily teaching. From our analysis, we can tentatively conclude that our action research requirement has had a positive impact on their development. The program's achievements share alignment with the researchers' descriptions of successful curricular innovations as discussed in Section 2 (Farrell, 2016; Kagan, 1992; Wallace, 1991; Wright, 2010).

- The curriculum provides both received and experiential knowledge, not in isolation but with an emphasis of their interconnectedness.
- The three practicum courses provide ample opportunities for student teachers to teach real students, first, develop basic routine as teachers, then reflect on their teaching, explore ways for improvement and implement them.
- The action research requirement provides opportunities for student teachers to conduct structured research projects involving systematic observation on their teaching practices and their students' learning.
- Many reflective activities leading to the action research requirement help the student teachers become aware of their tacit beliefs or assumptions about teaching and learning. These, then, become open to critical examination and shared with their peers.

Promoting reflection in a teacher preparation program is undoubtedly important. As one of the participants commented, however, it is a skill and disposition which can only be acquired through guidance and practice. Writing up reflection papers and an action research paper can help them raise their awareness about their beliefs that affect their teaching. These written requirements help the student teachers verbalize their beliefs and make their tacit beliefs explicit.

Although the impact of their action research experiences seems positive, two of the

participants mentioned later that there is tendency in the field of Japanese language education, especially in the higher education community, not to consider action research as academic achievement. They said that their action research papers may not be considered as "academic research" when they try to apply for a university position. Most of our graduates first get a part-time or adjunct teaching job, and if they hope to get a tenured position, they will be expected to produce "research". This is the dilemma the authors also face.

Language teacher educators agree that reflective skills are important for teachers' lifelong professional development, but not many specific templates, guidelines, or exemplar strategies regarding how such expertise can be actually inculcated in teacher preparation programs have been shared. Our findings indicate that our curriculum has been successful to some extent. As Murray (2009) noted, however, the evaluation of a teacher education program should be done in the long term by closely examining how its graduates develop professionally throughout their teaching careers. We believe it will be an important contribution to the research to continue to observe our graduates' professional development.

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Appendix

Interview Questions:
1. What was the theme of your action research? What do you think about the theme now?
2. Do you think that your action research experience has any impact on you/what you are now? If so, how?
3. Do you think that your beliefs about teaching and learning have changed? If so, how did they change?
4. In your current working place, do you feel any conflict between your beliefs and your working situation, such as your colleagues or staff members, your students, or class activities that you are required to do? If so, how do you deal with it?
5. In your current working place, how do you deal with/solve/overcome difficulties and problems you face with?
6. Do you want to improve your teaching skills? If so, what is it and how would you like to improve it?