TEFL Praxis

Teaching English in Japanese Elementary Schools: Experiences From a Practice-Based Teacher Education Course

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Abstract: *This paper outlines a university course designed to prepare pre-service elementary school teachers in Japan to teach English under the 2020 curriculum reform, which made English compulsory from grades 3 to 6. This pedagogical account explains the rationale for a practice-oriented course aligned with the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) guidelines and centred on sound-based and communicative approaches. Trainee teachers experience immersion activities, phonics, chants, songs, picture books, interactional routines, and collaboration with Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs). Reflections written as part of regular coursework offer insight into how pre-service teachers interpreted these approaches and which elements they considered valuable for future teaching. Pre-service teachers highlighted the importance of clear modelling, repetition, interaction, and classroom English, while noting areas where they felt less confident, such as pronunciation and spontaneous communication. The paper argues that reflective, experience-based preparation can strengthen both competence and confidence among generalist teachers.*

Keywords: elementary English education; pre-service teacher preparation; sound-based instruction; phonics; reflective teaching practice; immersion activities; children's literature; ALT collaboration

Introduction

English became a compulsory subject in Japanese elementary schools in 2020, following a decade of piloting and staged implementation under the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). Under the 2020 Course of Study, pupils in grades 3–4 receive 35 hours of English annually, and pupils in grades 5–6 receive 70 hours. The aim at this stage is *nareshitashimu* ("becoming accustomed to it") and *onsei kara* ("starting with sound"), focusing

on listening, speaking, rhythm, stress, and the gradual introduction of reading and writing. Young learners engage with English primarily through songs, chants, communicative activities, interaction, and short presentations such as *Small Talk* (MEXT, 2020). This emphasis reflects global research indicating that early exposure to comprehensible, meaningful language input can support learners' phonological awareness, listening fluency, and confidence in oral participation (Garton & Copland, 2019).

A major challenge in the Japanese context is that elementary school teachers are generalists, licensed to teach all subjects but not typically trained in English language pedagogy. According to a 2013 MEXT survey, 4.7% of elementary school teachers held a formal English-teaching licence (MEXT, 2014). However, two later MEXT reports have indicated that the rate increased to 5.9% in 2017 and had risen to 7.1% in 2024.

Although many schools conducted English activities before the reform, these were often facilitated by Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) or "foreign language activities" specialists rather than classroom teachers themselves. Consequently, universities have sought to provide targeted preparation for future elementary teachers, equipping them with the skills and confidence needed to deliver sound-based, activity-oriented English lessons.

The Faculty of Education at this university responded to these needs by developing a practical course called *Elementary School English* to help pre-service teachers experience English learning from the perspective of young beginners, understand key principles of the Course of Study, and gain hands-on practice with activities such as immersion, phonics, chants, songs, picture books, classroom English, and collaboration with ALTs. Enrolment rose sharply after English became compulsory in 2020, with over 100 pre-service teachers per year now taking the course. These trainee teachers represent a wide range of subject majors, most of whom have limited prior experience with language-teaching methodologies.

To better understand how trainee teachers engaged with the course, pre-service teachers completed end-of-semester reflections identifying the activities and concepts they considered most useful for their future teaching. These reflections highlighted both perceived strengths, such as sound-based learning, interaction, and chants, and areas where pre-service teachers felt less confident, particularly phonics and spontaneous communication with ALTs.

Literature Review

To explain the rationale behind the approaches used in the course, the literature review below draws on studies in young learner English education and generalist teacher preparation. These sources help clarify why sound-based activities, interaction, phonics, and picture books were chosen as central components of the pre-service teachers' learning.

Teaching English to Young Learners in EFL Contexts

Research on young learner EFL education emphasises the importance of rich, comprehensible input, meaningful interaction, and opportunities for playful engagement with sounds and language forms (Garton & Copland, 2019; Pinter, 2017). Unlike ESL environments, EFL contexts such as Japan provide limited exposure outside the classroom, making teacher-provided modelling and interaction especially important (Butler, 2015). Studies highlight that successful early English programmes depend less on early start age and more on instructional quality, including clear

modelling of pronunciation, rhythm, and stress along with frequent opportunities for repetition and communicative use (Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2019).

Preparing Generalist Teachers for Elementary English

International research on primary English education consistently identifies the preparedness of generalist teachers as a central challenge (Copland et al., 2020; Enever, 2018). Generalist teachers often feel under-confident in teaching pronunciation, responding to spontaneous language use, and managing pair- or group-based interaction, especially when they have limited proficiency or training (Garton, Copland, & Burns, 2011). Japanese studies similarly report that many elementary teachers lack confidence in English, particularly oral communication and classroom English (Matsumura, 2022). More recent evidence indicates that reflective practice is becoming an important tool for improving elementary English teaching; a 2024 case study (Anggrainy, Matsumiya, & Watanabe, 2024) shows that Japanese homeroom teachers used structured self-reflection to improve their English lessons and refine their team-teaching practices with ALTs. These findings underscore the need for university courses that offer concrete teaching techniques, opportunities to experience language learning as beginners, and structured reflection on teaching practices, an approach taken in the course.

The Role of Sound-Based Pedagogy: Phonological Awareness and Prosody

The 2020 Course of Study's emphasis on *onsei kara* (start from sound) aligns with evidence that phonological awareness and prosody support early comprehension and later reading development (Miller & Schwanenflugel, 2008). English and Japanese differ phonologically. English is stress-timed, but Japanese is syllable- or mora-timed, where rhythm is based on evenly-timed mora units rather than stress patterns. Consequently, generalist teachers need explicit experience with English rhythm to model accurate pronunciation (Trofimovich & Baker, 2006). Activities such as rhythmic chants, songs, and dialogues can help learners internalize stress patterns and improve listening fluency (Cason et al., 2020). This aligns with trainee teachers' strong valuation of chants, phonics, and "starting with sound" in their reflections.

Chants and Rhythm in EFL

Although Graham's *Jazz Chants* (1978) is an older resource, current studies consistently show that rhythmic chanting remains a highly effective component of young-learner EFL instruction. Recent studies show that rhythmic competence is strongly associated with learners' ability to imitate L2 prosody (Cason et al., 2020) and that chants can enhance vocabulary retention, confidence, and classroom participation (Cedeño & Santos, 2021). Research with Japanese pre-service teachers demonstrates that jazz chants improve prosodic awareness and pronunciation (Akagi, 2016), while very recent work in Japanese elementary schools indicates that music-integrated rhythmic activities can strengthen interactional competence (Watashima, 2025). Together, this emerging literature underscores the continued value of chants as effective sound-based instructional tools for young learners.

In addition to Graham's original materials, the course also incorporates more recent online resources, including the British Council's collection of jazz chants, which offers updated examples, classroom-ready audio, and child-friendly rhythmic activities. Using a combination of classic and contemporary chants allowed trainees to see how rhythmic, patterned language can be adapted

and applied flexibly in modern young-learner classrooms. Chants can reinforce lexical chunks, sentence rhythm, and pronunciation through formulaic, rhythmic repetition (Kung, 2013; Cedeño and Santos, 2021). Studies with young learners show that choral rhythmic activities increase motivation and support oral fluency by lowering affective barriers (Akagi, 2016). Importantly, recent work in Japan demonstrates that music-based rhythmic activities continue to be effective in contemporary elementary EFL classrooms, further validating their inclusion in teacher-training courses (Watashima, 2025). Incorporating chants, therefore, provides generalist teachers with a structured, low-anxiety way to model natural-sounding English.

Picture Books and Children's Literature in EFL Teacher Education

Children's literature has long been valued in early language classrooms for supporting vocabulary development, narrative awareness, and engagement (Oktarina et al., 2020). However, scholars such as Macalister and Webb (2019) and Webb (2015) caution that picture books must be selected and mediated carefully, especially in EFL contexts where text difficulty may exceed learners' independent decoding ability and comprehension. Effective use requires scaffolding, visual support, simplified language, prediction questions, and attention to rhythm and repeated phrases. This aligns with the course's modelling of picture book presentation. Used well, picture books give generalist teachers accessible, meaning-rich tools for interactive storytelling.

Interaction, Classroom English, and Working with ALTs

Studies highlight that interaction, including learner-to-learner, teacher-to-learner, and teacher-to-ALT, is key to effective young learner classrooms (Carless, 2006; Nishino & Watanabe, 2008). Classroom English routines and simple interactional frames support classroom management and provide predictable input (Walsh & Mann, 2015). Research on JTE–ALT collaboration suggests that many Japanese teachers are uncertain about how to coordinate roles, provide instructions in English, or engage in spontaneous communication with ALTs (Mahoney, 2020). The trainee reflections from the course mirrored these challenges, with many identifying ALT collaboration as both valuable and anxiety-provoking. Teacher education programmes that explicitly model co-teaching practices and teach communication strategies can help address these concerns.

Building a Course for Future Elementary English Teachers

The Elementary School English course has been offered in the Faculty of Education since 2012. Its primary aim is to prepare pre-service teachers, most of whom are generalists rather than English specialists, to understand the goals of the 2020 Course of Study and gain practical experience with sound-based, communicative approaches to English teaching. Class sizes initially ranged from 9 to 44 pre-service teachers, but enrolments increased significantly after English became a compulsory subject in 2020. From 2021 onwards, the course became required for all second-year pre-service teachers in the elementary teacher training programme, with annual enrolments exceeding 100 pre-service teachers.

Table 1. *Student enrolment in courses preparing pre-service elementary teachers to teach English (2010–2024)*

Academic Year	No. of Pre-service Teachers Enrolled	Course Name
2024	151	Elementary School English
2023	112	"
2022	122	"
2021	141	"
2020	97	"
2019*	not offered this year	
2018	31	Elementary School English Methodology
2017	44	"
2016	8	"
2015	33	"
2014	13	"
2013	9	"
2012	24	"

* This class was not offered in the 2019 academic year, as it was intended for second-year pre-service teachers enrolling from the 2019 academic year.

The course was designed to familiarise pre-service teachers with the rationale for teaching English in elementary schools and to help them experience English learning first-hand from the perspective of young beginners. Because generalist teachers often draw heavily on their own experiences as learners (Takagi, 2022), the course emphasises modelling, trying out activities, and reflecting on their effectiveness. Furthermore, since most pre-service teachers major in non-language subjects, such as social studies, mathematics, physical education, music, home science, and technology, the course serves as an introduction not only to teaching English but also to understanding how young learners engage with unfamiliar language input.

The fifteen 90-minute lessons cover a range of topics aligned with the Course of Study: starting with sound, immersion experiences, phonics, chants, songs, and picture books (see appendix). In addition, the course covered interactional routines, classroom English, and collaboration with ALTs. These components aim to build both confidence and competence by allowing pre-service teachers to teach, observe, discuss, and reflect on practical activities they may later use in elementary classrooms. This course was also designed to help them understand why another language is taught to young learners, and for them to understand how such learners experience new language input, and to positively reinforce successful teaching methods. The syllabus has the following *tōtatsu mokuhyō,* 'attainment objectives':

1 to be able to explain the difference between English and Japanese language stress patterns
2 to be able to define and teach phonics
3 to be able to use classroom English
4 to be able to teach songs, chants, poems, and other activities

These aim to encourage pre-service teachers to collaborate in thinking about the best practices for them when teaching English classes in their futures.

Start with Sound – The Differences Between Japanese and English

The course begins by asking pre-service teachers to reflect on why another language is taught to young learners and what benefits early exposure may bring. These reflections are compared, discussed, and then connected to the Course of Study's emphasis on onsei kara ("start with sound"). The benefits of providing language exposure to young learners from the Critical Period Hypothesis perspective (Lenneberg, 1967) are then discussed. There is a common misconception that "the younger, the better" trumps all in language instruction, but research, for example, Butler (2008), has shown that unless a competent model of the language is provided together with copious chances to use the language in meaningful exchanges, results can be disappointing. Rather than focusing on grammar explanation, MEXT encourages introducing learners to English through rhythm, stress, and communicative activities.

To illustrate why English prosody matters, the instructor introduces pre-service teachers to the contrast between English and Japanese stress patterns. English is a stress-timed language, while Japanese is syllable- or mora-timed. Understanding this difference is crucial for teachers who will model pronunciation and rhythm for young learners (Trofimovich & Baker, 2006; Dunn, 2023). Pre-service teachers examine familiar words in both languages, count syllables, and compare stress placement (Table 2). This exercise helps them recognise how natural stress and rhythm contribute to comprehensible spoken English and why early exposure can support long-term listening development (Miller & Schwanenflugel, 2008).

Table 2. *Simple introduction to English and Japanese stress patterns in the same words*

word	English (stress-timed)	no. of syllables	Japanese (syllable-timed)	no. of syllables
tomato	/təˈmɑːtəʊ/ or /təˈmeɪ.doʊ/	3	/to̞mäto̞/	3
McDonald's	/məkˈdɒnəldz/	3	/mäkɯᵝdo̞näɾɯᵝdo̞/	6

Immersion: Experiencing "Starting from Sound"

A distinctive feature of the course is a short immersion experience in an unfamiliar language. The instructor conducts the class in Thai, using gestures, modelling, repetition, and interaction, without any first language explanation. Thai was chosen because few pre-service teachers have encountered the language or script before, allowing them to experience genuine beginner-level listening and speaking challenges.

Pre-service teachers are presented with simple greetings and question-and-answer exchanges modelled repeatedly through choral practice, pairwork, and teacher-student interaction. They quickly begin to infer meaning through context and pattern noticing, demonstrating how young learners can acquire new language without explicit explanation when supported by comprehensible input (Suzuki, 2017; Garton and Copland, 2019).

The immersion lesson also encourages empathy. Since many pre-service teachers have studied English for over ten years, English can no longer serve as a "new" language through which to understand the confusion, excitement, and uncertainty of beginning learners. The Thai activity enables them to reflect on the emotional experience of starting from sound and consider how to create supportive, low-anxiety environments for the children they will teach.

Learning Through Deduction and Cooperation

Gender-based language use in Thai was first demonstrated through gestures and natural interaction. Pre-service teachers were encouraged to notice the difference themselves: men say *Sawat dii krap* and women say *Sawat dii ka* when greeting someone. No explanation was provided, but the phrases were modelled repeatedly, and most pre-service teachers were able to infer the distinction on their own.

A simple dialogue, similar to those found in elementary school English textbooks ("Hello, my name is…", "What's your name?", "Nice to meet you", "Do you like cats?", "Yes, I do", "No, I don't"), was then demonstrated and practised entirely through immersion. This allowed pre-service teachers to experience what young learners often feel when encountering a new language for the first time. They quickly realised that when language models are shown clearly and repeatedly, learners can understand and begin to use new expressions without explicit grammar explanation, relying instead on guessing, noticing, and inference. As Suzuki (2017) notes, "learning formal grammatical rules and structures is not the primary goal; the goal is to acquire the ability to understand the arguments of others and to convey one's own thoughts and ideas to others in real-life communication situations" (p. 7). Simple dialogues, therefore, play an important role in helping learners acquire new language naturally.

After the oral demonstrations, pre-service teachers were encouraged to deduce the meaning of key phrases and identify any grammar points they had noticed. It was interesting to see that many also picked up praising expressions such as *dii maak maak* ("very good") and everyday yes/no forms like *chai* and *mai chai*. Following this initial introduction to speaking and listening through immersion, Thai written forms were introduced, mirroring the progression typically used in elementary school English classes.

Introduction to Phonics – With a New Language's Script

Thai was also used to demonstrate another focus of the class – an introduction to reading and writing using phonics. Pre-service teachers were shown some of the Thai words used in the immersion activities and introduced to some letters in these words. By carefully providing patterns to recognize sounds, approximating the basic concept of phonics (as well as the general introduction to reading and writing in the Course of Study), pre-service teachers were able to recognize these words and some of the letters in the words.

The key point was that there was no L1 explanation. The pre-service teachers were asked to think about the letters from modelling (reading, pointing, repeating) of 'familiar' phrases and words and to notice the patterns. Through this, they could experience learning through deduction, checking together, and modelling. Above all, the goal was for pre-service teachers to experience the effectiveness of "starting from the sound" rather than "starting from the explanation." When introducing Thai written words, two letters from the Thai alphabet, S and W, used in the greeting "Sawat dii ka/krap", ("Hello"), the letters S (ส) and W (ว), were introduced. The instructor first modelled the sounds orally, allowing pre-service teachers to hear the pronunciation repeatedly while simultaneously showing the letters visually. It was demonstrated to pre-service teachers that the Thai letter S(ส) is pronounced as 's' as at the beginning of words, but as 't' when in the final position. Several words were introduced, and pre-service teachers were asked to first circle the letter S, as below.

สวัสดีครับ

สบายสบาย

Next, pre-service teachers were asked to circle the letter when pronounced as "t", as below sawat.

สวัส

They were also asked to underline the two words *sawat* and *sabai* in the phrases and words below.

สวัสดีครับ

สบาย

Most pre-service teachers circled and underlined the target letters and words correctly. This activity allowed them to experience how beginning learners make sense of unfamiliar scripts by linking what they hear to what they see, using simple sound–letter rules introduced through modelling. By inferring patterns and checking them collaboratively, pre-service teachers were able to appreciate how a phonics-based approach supports early decoding in an unfamiliar language. Following this Thai example, the class transitioned to phonics for reading in English. The lessons were also supplemented with online videos from MEXT on reading and writing to support the central concepts of teaching reading and writing at the elementary school level. The key point was for pre-service teachers to experience some of the difficulty, as well as a sense of accomplishment, in working out new sounds and letters in another language through graded and level-appropriate introduction and practice. This experience provides pre-service teachers with an accessible introduction to the principles behind phonics without invoking metalanguage. By learning to decode unfamiliar script, pre-service teachers gain insight into the challenges young learners face during the transition from oral to written English, as well as the value of explicitly linking sound-letter correspondences in age-appropriate ways (Miller & Schwanenflugel, 2008). The class then transitions to English phonics, supported by MEXT-produced videos on early literacy instruction.

The goal is not to turn generalist teachers into phonics specialists, but to help them understand why phonics is included and how carefully scaffolded practice can support learners' confidence.

Chants

Chants are introduced as a practical way to help learners internalise English rhythm, stress, and lexical chunks. The instructor models Graham's "Tall Trees" chant, dividing the class into two groups to highlight stress and contrastive emphasis. Although Graham's original work dates back several decades, more recent research confirms that rhythmic activities can support listening fluency, pronunciation, and motivation among young learners (Kung, 2013; Akagi, 2016; Cedeño & Santos, 2021).

Pre-service teachers practise the chant together, discuss why it works pedagogically, and then complete homework in which they select a chant and prepare an activity to present to their peers. This process encourages them to link theory with practice and to consider how chants can make input more memorable and enjoyable for children.

Interaction (Yaritori)

Midway through the course, pre-service teachers are introduced to interactional routines for young learners. Building on Batten's (2020) B-M-E framework, Beginning, Middle, Ending, the class examines how meaning is exchanged, checked, and extended. The instructor also introduces the R-R-R-R framework (rapport, reflection, reaction, response) as seen in a MEXT video lesson, and the L-R-C approach (Listen, Repeat, Comment) as a way of encouraging learners to confirm understanding before adding their own ideas.

Pre-service teachers practise these routines in pairs, learning how to model interactional patterns that are predictable, supportive, and age-appropriate. Many pre-service teachers comment in their reflections that they had not previously considered how structured interaction can help young learners participate more confidently.

Songs

Pre-service teachers learn several Japanese children's songs or lullabies and teach them to the instructor, who attempts to repeat the lyrics and gestures. This reverse-role exercise demonstrates how songs can make new language input both challenging and enjoyable. The following week, the class revisits the songs to highlight the importance of repetition for memory and confidence.

The instructor then introduces English songs commonly used in elementary classes, along with demonstrations of gesture use, pacing, and opportunities for simple call-and-response. Pre-service teachers work in groups to practise introducing these songs and to discuss how repeated singing can reinforce vocabulary and prosody.

Picture Books

Next, trainee teachers explore the use of children's picture books in English classes. The instructor models how to introduce a book, such as *No, David!,* by asking prediction questions, drawing attention to visual cues, and adjusting language as needed. This is followed by a discussion of when and why translanguaging, appropriate movement between English and Japanese to support meaning-making, may be appropriate when introducing picture books. Pre-service teachers are encouraged to consider how strategic use of both languages can scaffold comprehension, maintain engagement, and model natural classroom communication.

Pre-service teachers then select a picture book from a given list and prepare a short introduction or reading. Recent scholarship suggests that picture books can effectively support vocabulary learning, engagement, and narrative competence, though they must be carefully chosen and scaffolded in EFL contexts (Oktarina et al., 2020; Macalister & Webb, 2019; Webb, 2015). The modelling and group practice aim to help pre-service teachers develop both the skills and the confidence to use picture books well.

Classroom English and Working with ALTs

Finally, pre-service teachers examine classroom English through selected MEXT videos, including scenes from an elementary lesson taught by an ALT and a Japanese teacher. They identify common phrases and words, notice how instructions are delivered, and reflect on the classroom roles of both teachers.

The instructor also draws on personal experience as a former ALT to discuss cross-cultural communication, role division, preparation, and strategies for smooth collaboration. Since many

pre-service teachers report limited confidence in interacting with ALTs, this part of the course emphasises how clear, polite communication can support better lesson flow and provide learners with improved language models (Mahoney, 2004; Nishino & Watanabe, 2008).

Pre-service teachers practise short exchanges in English that might be used before, during, or after lessons, building familiarity with the kinds of communication their future roles may require.

Student Reflections and Evaluation Method

As part of the final evaluation for the Elementary School English course, pre-service teachers submitted a one-page report written in English in which they selected four or five key points from the class that they believed would be important for their future teaching. They were asked to describe each point in detail and explain why they felt it was significant for effective elementary English instruction. As part of an ongoing focus on reflective teaching practice and to better meet the needs of university pre-service teachers, an analysis of pre-service teachers' final reports (n = 76) was conducted in 2022 to provide insights into what the pre-service teachers themselves considered useful in this course. It was hoped that this analysis would provide insights into pre-service teachers' uptake of the class content and how this was reflected in their own visions of themselves as future English teachers. This article will first describe the content of the classes, then look at the results of the pre-service teachers' reports and discuss these.

For the analysis, the headings and themes identified in the 76 submitted reports were compiled and grouped into common categories. These categories were then tabulated and ranked according to frequency to gain an overview of the activities, concepts, and teaching methods that pre-service teachers valued. This descriptive analysis provides insight into the areas where pre-service teachers felt most confident, the activities they found memorable or meaningful, and the aspects of English teaching that they believed would be particularly relevant when they become classroom teachers.

The results of the ranking are presented below:

Table 3. *Key points of elementary school English as selected by the pre-service teachers*

rank	%	topic (n: 76)
1.	53%	use of chants (40)
2.	39%	use of phonics (30)
3.	30%	interacting and speaking together (23)
4=	26%	working with ALTs (20)
4=	26%	cross-cultural aspects of classes (20)
6.	25%	'starting from sound' (19)
7.	24%	importance of review, recycling (18)
8.	17%	use of songs (13)
9=	16%	use of gestures (12)
9=	16%	Japanese/English stress (12)
11=	14%	starting with familiar things (11)
11=	14%	use of classroom English (11)
13.	13%	use of pairwork (10)
14.	12%	use of modelling (9)
15.	11%	importance of 'fun' classes (8)
16=	8%	creating an encouraging atmosphere (6)
16=	8%	use of picture books (6)
18=	7%	Critical Period Hypothesis (5)
18=	7%	tolerance of mistakes (5)
20.	5%	structure in conversation (4)

The table shows that pre-service teachers most frequently highlighted chants, phonics, and interaction as key elements of the course. These practical, sound-based activities were memorable for many pre-service teachers, possibly because they experienced them both as learners and as novice teachers during micro-teaching sessions. Working with ALTs and noticing cross-cultural aspects of team-taught lessons were also ranked highly, suggesting that pre-service teachers appreciated opportunities to reflect on real-world classroom communication.

By contrast, more theoretical points, such as English/Japanese prosodic differences, the Critical Period Hypothesis, or the structure of conversations, were mentioned less often. This is understandable given that most pre-service teachers are generalists rather than language specialists; their reflections naturally gravitated toward concrete, experience-based components of the course that they could easily imagine using in their own future classrooms, while more theoretical aspects (including stress patterns, CPH, structure of conversations) were ranked lower.

To interpret these patterns more clearly, it is helpful to consider how the pre-service teachers' selections group into four broader pedagogical domains: Input/Sound, Output/Sound, Structure, and Theory. The strong preference for sound-based, hands-on activities suggests that generalist pre-service teachers gravitate toward material they can see, hear, and experience directly, especially when it is modelled clearly and linked to classroom use. In contrast, more abstract concepts appear less accessible without substantial scaffolding. This hierarchy reflects the learning needs of generalist teachers, who may have limited linguistic training and therefore benefit most from concrete, practice-oriented experiences. Recognising this tendency helps inform course design by highlighting the need for sustained modelling and guided reflection, while ensuring that theoretical principles are made relevant through explicit links to practice.

Table 4. *Summary of pre-service teachers' rankings across pedagogical categories*

INPUT/SOUND → OUTPUT/SOUND → STRUCTURE → THEORY

Table 4 shows how students' reflections align with these four domains. Items in the Input/Sound and Output/Sound categories, chants, phonics, interaction, and pair work, were selected most frequently, reinforcing the observation that trainees respond particularly well to concrete and practice-oriented experiences. In contrast, fewer students selected items classified under Structure or Theory, indicating that these areas may require additional scaffolding and clearer links to classroom application. This distribution highlights where the course currently succeeds and where further support could help pre-service teachers integrate theoretical concepts into their developing practice.

Taken together, these reflections provide a helpful indication of which areas of the course were most impactful and where further support may be beneficial, particularly in strengthening confidence with classroom English, phonics, and spontaneous communication.

Discussion

The purpose of this course has always been to provide pre-service elementary teachers with opportunities to experience, practise, and reflect on a range of teaching approaches aligned with the 2020 Course of Study. The emphasis throughout the classes is on practical exposure to key concepts, *starting with sound,* interaction, phonics, chants, songs, and picture books, and on helping trainee teachers gain confidence in using English with young learners. As generalist teachers, many of whom have not specialised in language education, they benefit from trying out the kinds of activities they will later model for their own pupils and from experiencing the challenges that young beginners face when encountering a new language.

The pre-service teachers' end-of-course reflections, while not collected as part of a formal research design, nevertheless serve a valuable pedagogical purpose. Gathering feedback in this way is a form of reflective teaching practice, helping the instructor understand which aspects of the course were most accessible, engaging, or memorable for pre-service teachers. It also highlights areas where pre-service teachers may need additional support. In this sense, the reflections act as a mirror for the course itself: they reveal what pre-service teachers have internalised, what they feel confident about, and where they see room for growth. This kind of feedback is useful for any teacher seeking to refine a course over time.

The high ranking of chants, phonics, and interaction suggests that pre-service teachers found sound-based and communicative approaches both meaningful and manageable. These are methods that they experienced directly during the course, often from the perspective of young learners, through immersion activities, repetition, and collaborative practice. Many pre-service teachers had not previously encountered phonics or the concept of English as a stress-timed language, and the combination of demonstration and hands-on practice seems to have helped them understand why these elements are important in the elementary classroom. Their responses indicate that activities involving rhythm, repetition, and clear modelling are particularly effective in supporting their developing instructional confidence.

Similarly, the strong interest in working with ALTs and the cross-cultural aspects of English lessons reflects the realities of many Japanese elementary schools. For many pre-service teachers, the ALT is not only a source of English input but also a partner with whom they will need to communicate clearly and cooperatively. The reflections show that pre-service teachers value opportunities to think about team-teaching dynamics and to practise simple exchanges in English that they may use when preparing or conducting lessons. Strengthening this component of the course may therefore further support pre-service teachers as they prepare for real classroom environments.

At the same time, the lower ranking of more theoretical topics, such as prosody, the Critical Period Hypothesis, or the structure of conversations, suggests that these areas may require more guided support or clearer links to practical application. While such concepts are important for understanding the rationale behind elementary English education, pre-service teachers may benefit from additional examples, demonstrations, or scaffolded activities that help them connect theory to classroom practice.

Overall, the reflections indicate that trainee teachers respond positively to practical, experience-based approaches that allow them to participate actively, observe language modelling, and consider how learners might feel in similar situations. The course's focus on immersing pre-service teachers in unfamiliar language input, providing hands-on experience with chants and phonics, and modelling effective use of picture books and classroom English seems to have helped many develop both awareness and confidence. As the course continues to evolve, ongoing attention to student feedback, both formal and informal, can play a key role in refining and improving its content so that it remains responsive to the needs of future generalist teachers.

Conclusions

This course was designed to prepare future elementary school teachers, most of whom are generalists with limited training in English language pedagogy, for the practical realities of teaching English under the 2020 Course of Study. By experiencing activities such as immersion, phonics, chants, interactional routines, songs, picture books, and communication with ALTs, pre-service teachers were able to observe how young learners encounter new language and how sound-based, communicative approaches can support confidence and comprehension.

The pre-service teachers' reflections, submitted as part of the final assignment, provided valuable insight into which aspects of the course were most meaningful for them. Their strong emphasis on sound-based learning, interaction, and clear modelling suggests that practical, experience-oriented lessons are particularly effective for developing pre-service teachers' awareness and readiness. At the same time, the reflections highlighted areas where additional support may be useful, such as classroom English, pronunciation, and ALT collaboration.

Although this course was designed with the needs of Japanese pre-service elementary teachers in mind, the underlying approach is not restricted to the Japanese context. Many teacher-education programmes worldwide face similar challenges in preparing generalist pre-service teachers to teach an additional language with confidence, particularly when their own linguistic background is limited. The course's blend of modelling, hands-on practice, sound-based activities, and structured reflection provides a transferable framework that can be adapted to a wide range of institutional and curricular settings. In this sense, the principles of the course have broader applicability for universities seeking to strengthen the pedagogical readiness and confidence of future teachers.

 While not collected for research purposes, these reflections form an important component of reflective teaching practice. They help the instructor understand how pre-service teachers are interpreting the course content and offer guidance for future refinement. As elementary English education continues to evolve, courses that combine practical experience, clear rationale, and learner-centred reflection can play an essential role in enhancing the preparedness and confidence of the next generation of generalist teachers.

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Appendix

List of Chants, Children's Literature and Videos used in Class
Chants

British Council. (n.d.). *Grammar chants.* LearnEnglish Kids. https://learnenglishkids.britishcouncil.org/grammar-chants

Graham, C. (n.d.). *Baby's Sleeping* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5UMFa5NcSoI

Graham, C. (n.d.). *Tall Trees* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ARK7nPjaOEw

Matsuka Phonics Institute Official Channel. (n.d.). *Banana ja nakute banana chants* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g_Ecdl5c9y8

Super Simple Songs. (n.d.). *Do You Like Broccoli Ice Cream?* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=frN3nvhIHUk&t=1s

Children's Literature

Bemelmans, L. (1964). *Madeleine.* Puffin Books.

Carle, E. (1969). *The Very Hungry Caterpillar.* Penguin.

Graham, J. (1996). *Opo, Te Aihe Harikoa.* Golden Press.

Kay, S. (2024). *The Pohutukawa Christmas Tree.* Bateman Books.

McBratney, S. (1994). *Guess How Much I Love You.* Walker Books.

Nakagawa, R., & Yamawaki, Y. (1963). *Guri and Gura.* Fukuinkan Shoten.

Shannon, D. (1998). *No, David!* Scholastic International.

Wallwark, A. (1993). *No More Dodos.* Ragged Bears.

YouTube / Online Video Read-Alouds

le Bas, T. (n.d.). *The Fish of Maui* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ZVKu4p
RWqw&list=PLnX_2S89PeoLlq82nu-2tqlnHsGQF8gol&index=2

Scholastic International. (n.d.). *No, David!* (Animated read-aloud) [Video]. YouTube.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vHUeJCaUjxE

Yume Aru Channeru. (2018). *Momotaro / Old stories of Japan* [Video]. YouTube.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YlDLVWKiNqs