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PERSPECTIVES

Fostering an Ideal Environment for Part-Time Teachers: A Wishlist from a Part-Time University Teacher

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Part-time English teachers are an ever present and integral part of tertiary education in Japan. As of 2016, there were 184,273 full-time faculty members and 162,040 part-time instructors at the university level (Maita, 2018). Universities have increasingly looked to these “hijokins” to manage costs, make up for a lack of funding, and mitigate the effects of the decreasing enrollment population (Itakura, 2021).

Unfortunately, while the current ecosystem of university English teaching gives part-timers equal footing in terms of numbers, it is profoundly unequal where it really matters. To provide a realistic alternative, it is critical to imagine a better environment, one in which part-timers are given the conditions to thrive. In this paper, I therefore relate my teaching experiences—the good, the bad, and the ugly—and propose solutions to address inequities from a part-time teacher perspective.

The Good: New Life

My teaching career began at two medium-sized *eikaiwa* (conversation school) chains in the Kansai area. It was here that I honed my teaching skills, familiarized myself with different types of students, and experienced Japanese work culture firsthand. I learned many lessons, but as enjoyable as the position was, I hit a ceiling and decided to move on to more lucrative and challenging opportunities. The choices were either elementary or post-secondary schools, and I chose the latter.

The next stage of my career proceeded with classes at a vocational aviation college. My first time with a large group of students was nerve-wracking. But I persevered and gained the necessary experience to apply for additional part-time work at universities. At the same time, I slowly discovered my identity and teaching style. I also felt that my contributions to the curriculum and efforts were being recognized. I was part of these students' lives as they thought about their futures and entry into society.

Later on, I found out how rare full-time university positions were. The competition was intense and I needed at least two to three publications. It was an employer's market and it was tough to stand out in a pool of well-qualified applicants. I reassessed my situation and rationalized the advantages part-timers have over full-timers:

- a flexible schedule that when properly arranged can result in earnings comparable or more than some full-time positions,
- exemption from attending meetings and handling administrative duties, and
- opportunities to teach students of different levels, majors, interests, and nationalities.

Eventually, I thus shifted my preference from becoming a full-timer to settling down as a part-timer at a rotation of schools.

The Bad: Elusive Contentment

Being a part-time teacher also has its downsides. For instance, when I caught the

flu, I had to fully pay into the Japanese healthcare system and cover the succeeding monthly payments. Other realities of part-time teaching also began to surface: difficult class assignments and the exhausting shuttling back and forth between universities started to take their toll.

Furthermore, many of the problems that plagued conversation schools also became apparent in tertiary education, such as bureaucratic inefficiency, a lack of benefits, and a high turnover. My dawning disillusion resonated with Cullen's (2021) experience of having a very different idea of what it meant to teach at the university level before entering it full-time and realizing that the teaching part of EFL in university was not that different in content and expectation from teaching in an eikaiwa.

It was during this time when one of my favorite classes was rescinded due to the pandemic. I realized a part-time teacher has to accept their place in the teacher hierarchy; full-timers come first. This means financial precarity and job uncertainty for part-timers, who are often left wondering if their classes will be renewed in the following year.

The Ugly: Dangers of Being Left Out

It is a grisly truism that if a teacher's basic needs are not met, their job motivation decreases and their stress increases to dangerous levels. Coombe (as cited in Murray, 2013) observes that the teacher might then deal with the situation by ending their career, changing their roles or giving up duties, or changing their self-identity or focus. In addition, if the needs of teachers are marginalized, it can lead to disastrous consequences such as poor job performance and staff turnover (Tehseen & Ul Hadi, 2015), and even mental issues (Nagai et al., 2007). Part-time teachers also sometimes complain of stress due to forced use of paid holidays, even though these are purportedly at the teacher's discretion to use.

In my circle of part-timers, some have apparently given up on the system, returning

to their home countries due to insufficient job opportunities or frustrations with the additional demands of online teaching. Contracts are not being renewed, and even for the lucky ones, a recurring theme for university academics is seeing their salaries barely increasing, even to match inflation (Itakura, 2021). Added to this precarious situation is the weak safety net for teachers brought about by the recent COVID-19 epidemic (Osumi, 2020). It is not a stretch to say that teachers, full- and part-timers alike, have reached a tipping point with the recent string of world events. It is unfortunate that the situation has reached this alarming point.

Six-Item Wishlist

I have been fortunate enough to come out of the COVID-19 pandemic relatively unscathed; however, these past few years have given cause to reflect on my experiences and reevaluate the state of my working conditions. I began to see my potential role as a part-time teacher who might move the discourse toward making things better for other part-timers. Some of these suggestions may seem excessive or too idealistic; nevertheless, they are worth exploring.

Small Monetary and Non-Monetary Benefits

Despite the ongoing financial straits, nickel and diming teachers' expenses is pointless, and institutions should try to be more generous for their own long-term preservation. In addition to covering transportation expenses, schools could leverage their user base to offer better subscription deals to part-time teachers for services such as the Adobe Suite and Microsoft Office or discounts on hardware as well. Holding financial planning seminars could help teachers manage their budgets. These suggestions, although not entirely free, are cost effective and would have a positive impact on teaching output.

Small conveniences in the workplace can sometimes be more important than

monetary compensation. Keeping the office stocked with snacks, beverages, and the latest periodicals would be appreciated. Greeting teachers on their birthdays or personally handing teachers their pay slips may seem trivial, but these gestures can mean a lot and show that part-timers are being thought of. Other unconventional ideas include offering part-timers lapel pins or other school merchandise to show school support.

Meaningful Online Communication

Regular communication and feedback among colleagues ensure a productive workplace and a prosperous career. I recommend two methods: online conferencing and message app groups. With online conference software such as Zoom or Google Meet, convenient weekly or monthly teacher gatherings can be held. These meetings could be formal or informal and include a variety of topics. These meetings could benefit a part-timer's knowledge and expand their network of contacts, which could prove useful for transitioning into full-time work.

LINE is Japan's most popular messaging service, and I have had positive experiences with teacher groups formed using this app. During my time in the groups, content has ranged from announcements, class management techniques, career guidance, and problem-solving advice. Interactions in the group have provided much needed stress release and convenient support from peers outside of the formal channels and office hours in school.

Mental Health Support

Mental health is an overlooked aspect of a teacher's well-being. This is especially true for teachers who are young or female (Kataoka et al., 2014). A pilot study of a stress-intervention program found that counseling improved coping skills, especially for newer and less experienced teachers (Shimazu et al., 2003). Institutions must

consider this and have staff available that specialize in mental support. Schools should also promote physical health by giving free access to the campus gym, which would mitigate the problems of busy schedules and expensive gym fees.

Some teachers may also want to take more active roles as counselors, even unofficially. At the international college I work at, there is a teacher who excels in taking care of the well-being of the part-time teachers. She often asks how we are and goes the extra mile to check on our classes. She provides an immeasurable boost in self-esteem, which is crucial in crunch-time situations such as finals week or difficult-to-manage classes.

Mentorship Programs and Events

Socializing and networking opportunities onsite are a rare occurrence for part-time teachers. The tendency of part-timers to keep to themselves and leave quickly after class makes it difficult to socialize. Having said that, there is nothing stopping us from joining a teaching network organization such as JALT (Japanese Association of Language Teachers). However, it is a wasted opportunity to have people of similar interests and talent that share a workplace not to somehow be connected into a mutually beneficial relationship.

It would be preferable if schools take the initiative and help nurture relationships with an inhouse training program where full and part-timers are paired for a semester. Brown (1995) has talked about full-time teachers orienting part-timers, and a guest lecture option might build relationships and improve the reputation of the senior teacher (Porcaro, 2018). Feedback through classroom observations, lesson plans, or curriculum content will sharpen one's teaching skills. Furthermore, self-improvement adds to a teacher's self-confidence and skills and ultimately improves the quality of teaching and student experience.

Anonymous Evaluation Surveys

Schools at the end of each semester often ask students about the quality of teaching but rarely ask teachers about the quality of the administration. Moreover, teachers usually hold back their true feelings about their administration, mainly because of the potential workplace consequences. Therefore, schools must offer the opportunity for teachers to voice their concerns anonymously. Additionally, these surveys should include questions about compensation and working conditions along with requests for suggestions. Teachers' responses could prove invaluable for school management.

Collecting and discussing the survey results would give the administration an updated state of affairs and a great way to gauge the current sentiment of part-time teachers as it would likely include more opinions of the less vocal participants. The school could then address complaints and stem any potential problems before they became serious. Publicly releasing the results would provide transparency, and even if the feedback put the administration in a negative light, it would create an atmosphere of trust and accountability.

Publishing In-house and Access to Research Grants

Part-timers seeking to self-improve and become full-timers often face "publish or perish" pressures. Publishing proves arduous as many part-timers either lack the motivation or the tools when it comes to getting funding or guidance for publication work. In the midst of this problem, I suggest a new attitude, a "publish and cherish" mindset where teachers would look forward to writing and sharing their institutional knowledge and experiences with their fellow educators.

To accomplish this, schools should promote cooperation between teachers, both full- and part-time alike, to contribute to and produce academic literature. This

cooperation could be assisted by introducing co-authoring teams, especially for teachers who are just starting out. In-house publications are a great starting point, and institutions could promote the sharing of research grants, or *kakenhi*, which provide the necessary financial resources to see research through. Any published work results in adding to the reputation of the university the part-timer is associated with, so this collaboration would likely be a win-win.

Conclusion

Japan's educational institutions will continue to face pressures on multiple fronts. According to the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research (2012), Japan's total population, including foreign nationals, is expected to reach 124 million in 2025 and then decrease to 107 million in 2040. At the same time, the Japanese government and higher education institutions are also expected to improve student learning experiences in order to develop globally competitive human resources in the global economy.

As a result of dwindling school enrollments, Japanese universities will continue to downsize, so more part-timers are expected to join the ranks, comprising a bigger stake and having a greater influence. With more institutions increasingly relying on these types of teachers, part-timers will soon be shouldering half or more of the teaching responsibilities. It is crucial to make sure that they are satisfied with their working environment and conditions. Turnovers and mass departures could spell disaster for institutions who are already struggling with maintaining workplace morale and educational standards.

Part-time teachers are susceptible to disenfranchisement. Sooner or later universities will need to address this vulnerability. But when part-time teachers' needs are taken care of, they can find purpose and motivation, solidify their identity, and become indispensable to the

organization. A progressive and proactive approach toward changing certain aspects of the teaching workplace would have an immediate and transformative effect for both part-timers and full-timers.

In order to spark this change, I have attempted to share several suggestions in this article. My hope is such a transformation will eventually lead to a better quality of life for teachers and a better quality of education for students.

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