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# CELE
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**New VFMs Adapting to CELE: Teaching Approaches, Japanese Use, and Challenges**

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Abstract

This study examines how a cohort of newly appointed Visiting Faculty Members (VFMs) at Asia University's Center for English Language Education (CELE) formed their teaching approaches and the challenges that they encountered during their first semester. Five of the nine new teachers were observed for one lesson each and interviewed about their classroom practices and onboarding experiences. Findings show considerable variation in teachers' use of the students' L1, as some utilized Japanese for classroom management and teaching language items while others preferred English-only instruction. Some participants also reported challenges in adapting to the formal aspects of the curriculum and adjusting to teaching elementary-level classes. Meanwhile, the teachers described developing strategies that align their practice with their new curriculum and students while preserving aspects of their professional identities. The study contributes to research on teacher cognition by illustrating how prior experience interacts with new institutional settings and how teachers negotiate curricular and organizational constraints in Japanese higher education. The study also produces suggestions for improvements to CELE's hiring and onboarding practices that would better facilitate new VFMs' adjustment.

## Introduction

Like many universities in Japan, Asia University (AU) provides an English as a foreign language curriculum for its students. Most of these courses are delivered by the Center for English Language Education (CELE), which presently employs 28 English language instructors known as Visiting Faculty Members (VFMs). These teachers are subject to term-limited employment of up to five years, meaning that faculty turnover is high. In 2025, nine VFMs left CELE and were replaced by new hires, representing a change in almost a third of the faculty. Despite this high turnover, little academic attention has been paid to teacher adjustment in this setting, with a search of the *CELE Journal* returning no articles to date which focus on the experiences of new VFMs. Given CELE's prescribed and evolving curriculum, as well as the variety of experience and training that new VFMs are likely to have, these new teachers face adjustment challenges that are worthy of research.

Prior research on teacher cognition indicates that teachers' beliefs and practices are shaped by their experiences as language learners, their education, their professional practice, and contextual factors (Borg, 2003; Çetin, 2023; Öztürk & Gürbüz, 2017), suggesting that teachers undergo a renegotiation of their cognition when entering new contexts. This study explores how new VFMs at CELE developed their teaching approaches and what challenges they faced. Five new hires were observed in-class and interviewed about their experience at CELE in their first semester. I, also in my first year as a VFM, observed and interviewed the participants as a peer. This article argues that newly appointed VFMs adapt their practices according to their experience when encountering new students and curricula and that understanding this process can inform improvements to CELE's hiring, onboarding, and curriculum design.

## Literature Review

This section reviews the literature on teacher cognition and how use of students' first language (L1) in instruction relates to teacher cognition. It finishes with an overview of possible institutional challenges that new VFMs may face during their onboarding at CELE before introducing the present study's research questions.

### Teacher cognition

Teacher cognition has emerged as a central concern in applied linguistics because it illuminates how teachers' knowledge, beliefs, and decision-making are formed. Borg (2006) defines teacher cognition as encompassing "what language teachers think, know and believe

and of its relationship to teachers' classroom practices" (p. 1). Research shows that these cognitions continue to be shaped throughout teachers' careers. Öztürk and Gürbüz (2017) identify the key influences on cognition as prior language learning, pre-service education, institutional contexts, and novice teacher experience. Through the negotiation of these influences, teachers develop their individual beliefs about teaching and establish their classroom routines.

Research shows that teachers' "apprenticeship of observation" (Lortie, 1975, p. 61) – their exposure to teaching role models in their time as students – exerts a powerful and lasting effect on their cognition as teachers (Golombek, 1998; Numrich, 1996). While pre-service and academic training also play a role, their effects are less consistent. Öztürk and Gürbüz's (2017) study finds that teacher education is where foundational beliefs are established or enforced. However, Borg's (2003) review of the literature suggests that there are unclear links between pre- and in-service training and long-term cognition. As Farrell (2009) observes, "ideals that novice teachers may have formed during the teacher education programme are often replaced by the realities of the social and the political contexts of the school" (p. 182). In contrast, experience throughout a career has a clearer effect on teacher cognition. Studies suggest that teachers accumulate a repertoire of beliefs and practices through contact with students (Woods, 1996) and both their professional and personal encounters with language (Breen et al., 2001; Öztürk & Gürbüz, 2017).

Öztürk and Gürbüz (2017) identify three contextual factors that further influence teacher practice: the learner profile of students (including their proficiency and motivation), institutional context (including organizational atmosphere and curriculum and testing policies), and improvisational teaching, or the ability of teachers to make spontaneous classroom decisions. Additional factors may include time constraints in both the curriculum and lesson length, exam preparation, planning time, resource availability, and classroom facilities (Çetin, 2023). Such constraints may explain the gap between what teachers believe about effective language teaching and what they are able to do in practice.

In the case of CELE VFMs, prior research suggests that experience, both as students and as teachers, together with contextual constraints, such as the mandated curriculum and prescribed textbooks, are likely to exert the strongest influence on cognition. Yet, as Çetin (2023) observes:

> It is evident that because language teacher cognition is a highly personalized concept, conducting research in this area with participation of new in-service and pre-service

> teachers in different local contexts contributes to our knowledge on understanding how teachers' practices are affected by their cognition. (p. 180)

Building on this observation, the present study investigates the cognition of new VFMs at CELE to extend the literature on language teacher adjustment in Japanese higher education while aiming to identify ways in which institutional practices at CELE might better support teacher development by minimizing negative contextual pressures.

**Use of L1 in the language classroom**

The use of learners' L1 in foreign language instruction remains a controversial topic in Japanese ELT. While some scholars advocate for the inclusion of L1 to support teaching (Cook, 2001), research in Japan has also highlighted its affective benefits for learners (Klevberg, 2000; McMillan & Rivers, 2011). Despite these findings, negative connotations persist, and English-only instruction continues to dominate, particularly in contexts such as *eikaiwa*: commercial language schools for children and adults to practice conversational English and prepare for tests (Hooper & Hashimoto, 2020). Here, monolingual policies are often promoted as a marketing tool, drawing on the popular belief that a second language is best acquired through maximum exposure (Yphantides, 2013). Because many non-Japanese teachers of English begin their careers in such settings, these early experiences can strongly affect their professional cognition (Hooper, 2019).

Research shows that both Japanese and non-Japanese teachers incorporate some L1 in their classes, typically to build rapport or aid instruction, yet many report feeling a sense of guilt for taking what is perceived as a shortcut (Hawkins, 2015). At the same time, teachers recognize the benefits of both L1-supported and L2-only instruction. McMillan and Rivers (2011) find that L1 is used for translation, checking comprehension, and rapport building, while English-only instruction is favored for creating an immersive environment. Although English-only instruction remains the dominant paradigm in Japanese ELT, teachers' classroom practices suggest a pragmatic approach, with decisions about L1 use informed by their professional cognition (Yphantides, 2013).

At CELE, VFMs are granted autonomy in setting classroom language policies (CELE, 2025a), meaning that their choices about L1 use are formed by a negotiation between established beliefs and the demands of their new teaching environment. Given that VFMs arrive with varied professional backgrounds, including *eikaiwa*, assistant language teaching in schools through the JET Program, university teaching, and teaching in non-Japanese

contexts, as well as diverse experiences as language learners, their cognition regarding L1 use is likely to be equally varied.

**Challenges of the Japanese university context**

Limited-term contracts necessitate that university ELTs in Japan frequently change institutions. However, there is currently little research on how teacher cognition responds to such changes. Murray (2013) provides an overview of the institutional stressors that English instructors commonly face in Japan, including administrative duties, difficult students, and heavy teaching loads. Suemori's (2025) study similarly identifies lack of confidence in teaching ability, prescribed textbooks, and student behavior as significant challenges for university teachers. These factors are likely to contribute to the contextual pressures on teacher cognition. AU may be a challenging environment to adapt to for new teachers for five reasons:

- Most VFMs have contact with each class of Freshman English students four or five times per week, requiring a considerable amount of lesson preparation. However, some Freshman English classes meet twice a week, and all are set to change to twice a week from the 2026 academic year.
- They teach 50-minute Freshman English lessons rather than the 90- or 100-minute lessons common at other universities (Butler, 2019), possibly necessitating extra planning.
- The assigned textbooks may be unfamiliar or follow methodologies with which teachers disagree.
- Many teachers also have schedules that require teaching from several different textbooks in a semester, presenting challenges to lesson planning.
- Students may have a lower level of English ability than teachers are used to, as new instructors are typically assigned to CEFR A1- or A2-level Freshman English classes.

These factors, among others, may make onboarding a challenging experience for new VFMs. Moreover, the large cohort of nine new VFMs that joined CELE in 2025 provides an opportunity to examine the cognition of several teachers as they adapt to a new teaching context. This study therefore focuses on the following two research questions:

- How have new CELE VFMs formed their teaching beliefs and practices, including those about their use of Japanese in class?
- What challenges do new CELE VFMs face in adapting to their new teaching context?

## Methods

This study employs a mix of qualitative approaches: observations of teachers and audio-recorded and transcribed follow-up interviews. Observations would give me a firsthand awareness of how the participants conduct their classes and provide context for discussions of their teaching approaches. However, observations alone would provide only a narrow view of teacher cognition, with interviews providing the teachers with an opportunity to talk about their teaching beliefs free from the constraints of the classroom (Baker, 2011, as cited in Çetin, 2023). The interviews would furthermore provide the bulk of data for analysis as well as reveal any differences between the teachers' expressed beliefs and their actual practice at CELE.

### Participants

Participants were sampled from among the other new VFMs at CELE. As one of the study's aims was to explore how new teachers were adapting to this new environment, only VFMs who were new to CELE were considered. Four of the five participants had made known through the Peer Observation Committee that they were willing to be observed by other teachers. One further teacher was recruited to provide more data for the study. All participants gave written consent after being made aware of the aims of the study.

The participants were from a variety of inner-circle (Kachru, 1985), English-speaking countries. Four participants were men, and one was a woman, roughly reflecting the gender balance of the nine CELE teachers in the 2025 intake. However, to obscure the identity of the only female participant, all participants are given the personal pronoun *they* in the sections that follow. Pertinent participant background information, including the length of their teaching career, sectors of English teaching they had experienced prior to CELE, their previous institutions' language policies (English-only or otherwise), and their education is summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Participant Background Information*

| **Participant** | **Length of teaching career** | **Previous teaching contexts** | **Previous institutional language policies** | **Highest level of education** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 28 years | Language schools (outside Japan), *eikaiwa*, corporate, university, IELTS training and examining | English-only | MA human geography, MA Japanese language and society, MBA international human resource management |
| 2 | 26 years | *Eikaiwa*, corporate, university | Mostly English-only | MA history, MA applied linguistics |
| 3 | 15 years | JET Program, university | Mostly English-only | MA TESOL |
| 4 | 6 years | University (part-time) | Mostly no explicit policy or oversight | MA applied linguistics, PhD Education (all but dissertation) |
| 5 | 15 years | Language schools (outside Japan), university (part-time, in Japan and abroad), IELTS training and examining | Mostly no explicit policy | MA English language teaching |

**Data collection**

All instructors were observed for one 50-minute Freshman English lesson based on a unit of either *Four Corners 1* (Richards & Bohlke, 2019a) or *Four Corners 2* (Richards & Bohlke, 2019b), which are aimed at CEFR A1 and A2 learners, respectively. As *Four Corners* represents a large part of all CELE teachers' teaching load and provides some scope for adaptation, it was both easy to schedule an observation and reasonably representative of the instructors' day-to-day teaching. No teachers in the 2025 intake were assigned to Freshman English classes above A2 level, meaning that the sample was representative of the levels taught by the cohort. Observations were conducted in the second half of the first semester after the instructors had had a chance to establish routines and rapport with their students but while they were still adapting to their new environment and curriculum.

The lessons were observed to identify any interesting themes that might be explored further in the interviews. Therefore, analytical notes were recorded inductively rather than on a predetermined template. The notes highlight classroom management approaches, materials, activities, use of classroom resources, and use of Japanese. The observations were not recorded due to concerns that doing so would be unnecessarily intrusive. Moreover, observations served largely to provide context for the interviews, making recording less important.

The individual follow-up interviews were semi-structured, following a similar design to Clark (2025), and conducted within a week of the observation. Semi-structured interviews allow the interviewer to preserve consistency without limiting the depth and breadth of the interviewee's responses (Dörnyei, 2007). The interviewees were firstly reminded of the purpose of the study. Then, they were asked to report what they did in class. The following questions focused on how the participants developed their teaching approach, especially their use of L1 in class as there was considerable variation between the teachers in this regard. They were then asked what challenges they have had adapting to their new environment. Finally, they were given an opportunity to add any other thoughts they had before the interview was concluded. The interview questions can be found in the Appendix. Interviewees were asked follow-up questions based on their responses to fully explore their experiences. Interviews ranged from approximately 14 to 31 minutes in length for a total of 114 minutes of data. As I was also new to CELE, peer interviewing advantages were leveraged, including a shared context and an established rapport. As Garton and Copland (2010) state, in acquaintance interviews, "the shared worlds of the participants can be invoked and made relevant" (p. 547).

**Data analysis**

Interview data were transcribed automatically by the iOS Voice Memos application and manually reviewed and corrected. The transcriptions were then transferred to a spreadsheet and underwent a process of inductive pattern coding (Saldaña, 2016). Similar to Clark (2025), broad themes were identified, coded, reviewed, and refined. These themes included talk about teaching methods, use and non-use of Japanese, thoughts regarding students, and thoughts on the CELE curriculum. Subcategories were developed and refined. For example, the category *curriculum* was subdivided into talk about specific textbooks, the length of classes, and necessary preparation as these issues were raised by the participants. If the interviewee gave a reason for their opinions or approaches, this was also coded, as was any positive or negative sentiment. Through this process, the data became easier to navigate, and key themes could emerge.

## Results

The results of the study are divided into three subsections: teaching approaches, use and non-use of Japanese, and challenges adapting to CELE. Each subsection except the third begins with a short summary of what was observed in class, which is followed by the results of the follow-up interviews.

**Teaching approaches**

The instructors all based their classes on the assigned Four Corners material, largely sticking closely to the presentation-practice-production flow of the observed unit. Participants 2 and 4 used the textbook's presentation tool, while the other three had adapted the textbook into a slideshow. Most participants had students seated, facing forwards, either allowing students to decide where to sit (P1 and P2) or assigning seating (P3 and P4). P5 arranged students into tables of three or four and randomly assigned seating. P1 and P2 incorporated standing mingles for speaking activities. Although all the participants provided opportunities for students to practice speaking, P1, P2, and P5 allowed the most time for student-to-student communication. P3 highlighted in their follow-up interview that they had intended to include an additional speaking activity, which they used in later versions of the same lesson.

In the follow-up interviews, the participants generally focused on their prior experience as having influenced their techniques, including their use of visuals, approach to language presentation, and choice of activities. P5 described how their teaching approach was

influenced by their workplaces, saying they had learned "a lot through observations and feedback and just general chatting in the staff room." P4 talked about their use of visuals as having been developed through teaching in other university settings. P3, placing a similar emphasis on their use of visuals, said that they started teaching this way due to working online during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the participants made little mention of how they had changed their general approach in this new environment, instead focusing more on their pre-CELE experience.

P1 talked about their experience of teaching Japanese learners, framing their student-centered teaching approach as a refreshing change of paradigm from students' more teacher-centered experience in school:

> From my experience that kind of way of teaching works for the students, especially the student-centered. Because going into junior high school, there's a lot of teacher-centered teaching […] I think that […] the students just really appreciate being given the […] autonomy to go and do tasks and actually just to use English […] and not to be corrected for every single mistake that they're making.

P2 and P3, who had previously had to follow strictly structured lessons, remarked that they had been influenced by that experience. P2 mentioned reusing activities from the prescribed lesson format, saying "for that job, we had kind of a set lesson structure we had to follow, and that was always part of it. So, I kind of picked it up." P3 similarly commented on the influence of their experience:

> I come from a background of conversational English. Not conversational like *eikaiwa*, but my first university job in Japan was [institution name redacted], and we… 100% of our classes, which was 13 [periods] a week of 100-minute lessons, six days a week, 13 lessons is discussion, and we did the same lesson over and over and over again. So, I'm super drilled.

The teachers did not make much mention of formal education and training, despite the majority being in possession of master's degrees in TESOL-related fields. Only P2 and P4 mentioned their education but downplayed its pedagogical value. P2 commented that "in my master's, I tended to avoid anything related to teaching at all. Critical discourse analysis, corpus linguistics…" P4, meanwhile, mentioned that they "pretty much hadn't a clue" what they were doing until undergoing in-service training. The results reflect prior research indicating that workplace experiences tend to have the most salient effect on teacher cognition (Borg, 2003).

**Use and non-use of Japanese**

Participants 1, 2, and 5 used Japanese very little in the observed lessons, largely only to assist when using advanced vocabulary. P3 used the most Japanese, using it frequently during instruction, especially when dealing with metalanguage. P4 used Japanese both to support vocabulary teaching and to clarify instructions, although instructions were still largely given in English. In their interview, P4 mentioned awareness of being observed and the early morning as reasons why they used Japanese less than they usually would in class, making it clear that they tend to use more in class than was observed. As there was significant disparity in the amount of Japanese that the instructors used in their observed lessons, the participants were asked to share their thoughts on using or not using their students' L1 in class.

Among even the instructors who used minimal Japanese in class, there was a general acceptance that it serves the purpose of teaching vocabulary or as a time saving device, as P5 explained:

> I'm not against it. If it's a case of it'll take me ten minutes to explain something or a direct translation is going to take five seconds to understand, then I just get on, move on with the lesson, then I'm all for using Japanese.

P5 also claimed that they had researched students' preferences, saying that they found that "students wanted to use some Japanese in class." Similarly, P2 acknowledged that Japanese is often necessary for explaining language points, saying that "if it's easier to explain a point in Japanese, I will, especially with lower-level students." Nonetheless, these two teachers used very little Japanese in the observed class, indicating a gap between their beliefs and practices.

The teachers who used more Japanese in their lesson (P3 and P4) gave a variety of additional reasons for using the students' L1. P3 stated their beliefs that students at AU need more support than students in their previous environment and that the teacher can provide a model of a good language learner:

> There's a few reasons in there, but one is there are lots of students who have no clue what's going on at all. Like, I've tried… I started with English only, and it's… they have no idea, so they need some help. […] But I think it also helps them know that I'm not a native Japanese speaker and I'm making a ton of mistakes, but they can understand me. So, like, it's a model for how to be a good communicator, regardless of the language you're learning and regardless of how good you think you are.

P3 later remarked that their favorite Japanese teacher had been a non-native speaker, indicating that they had been influenced by this teaching role model.

P4 gave several further justifications for using the L1 more heavily in class, including rapport building and ineffectiveness of L2-only instruction, especially when it comes to explaining grammar points:

> I'm aware of the goals of CELE, so I try not to use all Japanese, but I think rapport, because once the students are comfortable with me, knowing me as a person, then there's no language barrier […] I think it makes teaching easier. So even though yeah, I mean, formal time should be in English, but I think there is… because of the limit of their English means it's not very effective. So, some things, if it were a grammar lesson, I would use more grammar […] I'll explain that maybe in Japanese.

Like P3, P4 furthermore justified the use of L1 based on their own experience of learning languages and preferences as a language learner. P4 also cited the value of demonstrating L1 ability for classroom management and cutting down on students' L1 chatter: "If you speak Japanese then they're aware that you […] understand everything they say. […] it actually stops them from talking in class." Much like their teaching approaches, the participants' cognition regarding L1 instruction was therefore grounded in experience and pragmatic needs related to the learner profiles of their students.

There seemed to be a general belief that the primary classroom language should be the target language, even among the teachers who used Japanese more heavily in class. Participants 3 and 4 acknowledged that comprehensible input should be in English, with P3 referencing Krashen's input hypothesis as their guide on whether to use L1 or L2. Similarly, P4 explained why they used English rather than Japanese to set up an activity in the observed lesson: "if I set up an activity like the gesture game, they've done it before, they know what to do, so I didn't need to explain everything in Japanese." Although P3 was generally supportive of L1 instruction, that support was hedged with concern that they may be over-using Japanese, commenting that in some cases it has led to students disengaging during L2 instruction:

> I think I do need to dial it back a bit in some of my classes, but because they are starting to rely on the Japanese knowing it's coming. […] they kind of know I'm going to say it in Japanese anyway. So, they just turn off when I speak English. So, I actually stopped using Japanese in that class.

Among the three participants who used less Japanese in their classes, P2 and P5 both cited their own limited Japanese ability as a reason, with P2 explaining, "I wouldn't get up there and explain some difficult grammar point in Japanese, because I'm sure I'd get it wrong." Most of the participants also used the commonsense justification that the primary

language of an English class should be English. P1, despite having a background in Japanese language learning, had the strongest opinions against the use of L1, citing pedagogical reasons for L2-based instruction:

> The language for setting up activities is also useful for the students. And that gets them used to listening to the instructions in English. […] not to kind of offend anybody, but my own personal view is, if you do have to use a lot of Japanese in the classroom, I think you're failing somewhere. I think […] the activity is too difficult for the students, or you haven't […] scaffolded the lessons sufficiently, you haven't thought sufficiently through maybe using models on the board.

P1 also explained that keeping instructions in graded L2 helps to restrict teacher talking time and simplify instructions. In contrast to participants 3 and 4, P1 furthermore used their language learning experience to justify the limited use of students' L1, recalling frustration that their Japanese teachers would talk too much in English rather than allow for more Japanese practice.

Both P1 and P2 cited their prior workplaces' restrictions on Japanese use as additional reasons why they prefer to instruct in L2, with P2 explaining that "it's become natural" to avoid L1 use. Indeed, these experiences may explain the difference in preference and attitude among the teachers. P1 and P2's early teaching experience was in monolingual institutions. Meanwhile, P3 began their career in the JET Program, meaning that although they were required to speak English only in class, they were teaching in a bilingual environment alongside a Japanese teacher of English. P4 began by teaching part-time at Japanese universities, where there was little oversight regarding the language of instruction. These early restrictions or lack thereof on teaching practice seem to have had a long-term influence on the participants' teaching approaches regarding L1 use.

Overall, although the participants occasionally couched their reasons for use or non-use of L1 in language learning theory, as with other aspects of their teaching practice, they broadly framed their cognition in their practical experiences of language learning and teaching. One of the participants reported using the L1 more in their classes at AU due to the lower language level of their students. However, the participants largely spoke in general terms about how they had adapted their approach to L1 use prior to joining CELE.

**Challenges adapting to CELE**

The teachers reported challenges to adapting to CELE that were broadly related to the curriculum and schedule and teaching elementary-level students. Besides these two areas,

teachers also mentioned difficulties related to classroom facilities, but not in great enough depth to warrant specific attention in the results.

Largely, the participants focused on the challenges presented by adapting to a new curriculum and teaching schedule. Participants 1 and 5 expressed some frustration with the workload presented by their schedule with regards to the amount of preparation required for their classes. P1 commented on their difficulty planning several courses while keeping things fresh:

> I don't think it's easy here, to be honest with you. I think the schedules might not look particularly busy, but […] you teach them every day of the week. To have kind of good content, keeping your students meaningfully […] engaged. The afternoon classes, the Market Leader, the Speaking of Speech, the presentations… those courses are not easy to teach. You've got to have good solid content.

The unusually short 50-minute Freshman English classes were also raised as a challenge compared with the 90 or 100-minute classes in other institutions. P5 commented on how they necessitate additional planning:

> It's not like it's double planning, but it's double thinking about warm-ups and production activities and it just seems to be never ending thinking about that sort of stuff. Because you want to start the class with something like a game or something like that. That's what I find tiring.

On the other hand, although recalling that the short classes were challenging at first, P4 claimed to now prefer the shorter lessons, noting that they find it less tiring to teach than a standard period:

> A 90-minute lesson is long, and you also, I think a lot of people don't understand that teaching is quite a tiring job because you're not just teaching something. You're also monitoring everyone's facial expressions, everyone's body language, everyone's output… is very cognitively tiring as the teacher.

P3 raised other issues with the curriculum, in particular the greater focus on formal language content in the CELE curriculum than their previous institution's communication-focused curriculum:

> I guess TOEIC is my problem. But specifically at Asia, there are students who have no interest in learning any of this anyway. And when it gives you spoon fed, "this is the grammar point we're studying right now, and this is how you do it, and if you don't do it that way, it's wrong." And students get turned off because they're like,

> "Well, I'm making so many mistakes. I keep getting it wrong. What's the point of studying?"

P1 had similar criticisms of the TOEIC component of Freshman English, finding that it leads to very little spoken English being used. In contrast, P4 noted how the project-based side of the Sociology Freshman English course results in significantly better student engagement.

There were, therefore, some indications that the formal nature of the Freshman English curriculum clashes with teacher preferences for communicative teaching, as well as student interest. However, there were also indications that the planned replacement of the TOEIC component of the course with project-based learning for all Freshman English courses in 2026 will be more satisfactory to both teachers and students.

Participants 2 and 5 noted that adapting to the overall motivation and English ability of their students has been difficult. P2 commented on the need for more detailed instruction than at their previous institution:

> I just have to get used to not expecting them to talk as long and maybe setting up things more clearly and giving lots of examples and scaffolding and so on. Because my last job, I could just say, "okay, we're going to do this. Okay, go." And, you know, they would do it and they were fine.

P5 similarly noted that they are less able to allow students to draw on existing language and infer the target language required for task completion than other students that they have experience with, necessitating explicit instruction.

As might be expected, the difference in student level was felt most acutely by those with experience in high-ranking universities where student ability tends to be strongest, including Participants 2, 3, and 5. P4's experience of the transition from their previous institutions had been smoother:

> […] generally, this university has been very similar to my previous universities. I've taught at basically low-ranking private universities. […] I've not taught above B1. And I've taught at two women's universities and two mixed universities. So yeah, it hasn't been too much of a shock for me.

Overall, experiences of CELE as a new teaching environment, much like the instructors' teaching approaches and use of L1, seemed to depend on previous work experience. Those teachers who experienced the greatest challenges to their prior cognition were those teachers coming from institutions with vastly different curricula and students.

## Discussion

This study sought to uncover how the new CELE teachers developed their cognition and practice, especially with regards to L1 use. It also sought to explore how the new teachers had adapted to their new environment. The results revealed that the participants relied more on their previous work experience than education and that attitudes towards L1 use and the curriculum varied widely depending on that experience. The results also revealed that the teachers struggled more to adapt to AU when coming from previous institutions with significantly different curricula and students.

### Experience over education

One of the findings of this study is that teachers were more likely to report that their cognition has been influenced by their prior workplaces than their teacher training and education. This finding aligns with previous research that finds unclear links between education and training and cognition in the long term (Borg, 2003). This does not necessarily mean that the VFMs interviewed have not been influenced by their education at all, however. They may have been influenced by it subconsciously or found their more recent experiences easier to draw on when talking about their current practice. It is also important to note that only P4 had started teaching in the past few years, while the other participants had been teaching for over a decade, meaning that their work experience may have begun to eclipse their education in influence. Nonetheless, comments from P2 and P5 indicated that their master's degrees either did not prepare them well for the realities of teaching or had little pedagogical content. This finding may have implications for CELE's hiring practices.

Firstly, the finding raises questions about the relevance of academic degrees as qualifications for teaching university EFL courses. Possessing a postgraduate degree is a requirement for faculty employment in Japan (MEXT, n.d.), which is reasonable for staff hired primarily to conduct research or teach disciplinary content. However, the rationale is less clear in the case of instructors whose main role is to deliver skills-based language courses such as at CELE. While ministry policy is unlikely to change to reflect this distinction, CELE could place greater weight on how the content of prospective VFMs' academic backgrounds align with classroom practice. In turn, this might encourage TESOL and applied linguistics programs to integrate more explicit workplace preparation into their curricula in addition to preparing teachers to engage with research and academic literature. Indeed, Papageorgiou et al. (2019) found that out of the 141 UK ELT master's courses surveyed, only 34 provided practical teaching experience.

Secondly, greater emphasis could be put on practical training and workplace achievements than on academic degrees when making hiring decisions. Current job listings already note that candidates must have at least one year of university teaching experience and that those with master's degrees in non-TESOL fields may be considered (CELE, 2025b). This indicates that hiring decisions balance academic and non-academic achievements. CELE's allowance for VFMs to undertake non-academic projects for their yearly project (CELE, 2025a, p. 35) further indicates a recognition that practical contributions hold equal value to academic research. These practices seem well aligned with the needs of CELE, although future hiring policies may place even greater weight on teaching experience and workplace accomplishments.

**L1 use**

Another finding of the study was that there is a wide spectrum of beliefs and practices about the appropriate use of L1 in class among the new VFMs. Although none of the participants were strict adherents of English-only, there was nonetheless a notable difference in the amount of Japanese used by the teachers in their classes. Furthermore, there were detectable mismatches between the beliefs and behavior of the teachers when it came to L1 use. Although P2 and P5 were supportive of L1 use in theory, they did not use it much in the observed lessons, seemingly because of their concerns about their own Japanese ability and their experience teaching in English-only environments. On the other hand, although P3 seemed to prefer to use English as the default mode of instruction, they used Japanese in the observed class partly because they had found that their students struggled to engage with English-only instruction. Furthermore, P4 reported using less Japanese than usual because they were being observed. Aligning with the findings of prior research (Yphantides, 2013), these contextual factors, including experiences of English-only contexts, taboos around L1 use, and personal Japanese ability, appear to be highly influential when it comes to teacher cognition and behavior.

There is no official institutional guidance as to desirable levels of L1 use, with the CELE Handbook's only ruling on the subject being a statement that teachers do not need to have an English-only policy (CELE, 2025a, p. 33). Furthermore, there are no hiring requirements regarding Japanese language ability for VFMs (CELE, 2025b). Instead, CELE language policies are formed through a negotiation between teachers' cognition and Japanese ability on the one hand and their perceptions of student motivation and English ability on the

other. These are considerable variables that are likely to lead to vastly different student experiences depending on which VFM is assigned to teach the class.

Perhaps this degree of variation in language policy is a desirable consequence of an emphasis on faculty autonomy. However, dramatic differences may be jarring to students who take English courses with multiple VFMs in their time at AU. With such a wide degree of variation, it may be worthwhile to conduct faculty workshops on L1 use. That would allow VFMs to consider their language policy in relation to academic research, which broadly supports judicious L1 use (McMillan & Rivers, 2011), as well as the policies of other CELE faculty members. Given that English-only instruction seems to be considered the default by some instructors, taboos around L1 use may need to be broken, and concerns about its over-use may need to be discussed to find a considered and balanced approach.

**Institutional constraints and teacher onboarding**

The CELE curriculum seems to be causing adjustment difficulties for some of the new VFMs. Two participants (P1 and P3) expressed frustration with the TOEIC component of the Freshman English course, suggesting that it was incompatible with their general communicative teaching philosophies. P1, who was dealing with large numbers of textbooks, also expressed how difficult it was to keep up with planning, and P1 and P5 said that they find it difficult to keep things fresh for groups they see several times per week. P2 and P5 commented that they find that their previously established approaches to teaching higher-level learners do not tend to work well with their learners at AU. Only P4, who was less experienced as a teacher, seemed positive overall about the assigned textbooks and comfortable teaching their students, who were of a similar level to those taught at previous universities. Therefore, there are suggestions that the adjustment to CELE's constraints is felt most acutely by VFMs with experience with looser, more communicative curricula or higher-level students.

The upcoming changes to the curriculum in 2026, including a shift purely to 105-minute lessons and the replacement of the TOEIC component of Freshmen English with project-based learning, may alleviate some of the burdens felt by new VFMs. With most universities in Japan using 90- or 100-minute formats for periods (Butler, 2019) and trends towards communicative styles of teaching (Underwood & Glasgow, 2019), the changes are likely to bring CELE's curriculum into closer alignment with new VFMs' prior experience. Since the VFM position is a temporary one, changes that make transitions between institutions smoother are likely to be welcome. It remains to be seen whether the introduction

of project-based learning brings new difficulties, but research has found teachers to be supportive of using naturalistic methodology in Japanese EFL contexts (Harris, 2016). It would be instructive to conduct a follow-up study examining how these curricular changes are experienced by the CELE faculty.

A further concern raised by the study is how several of the instructors (Participants 2, 3, and 5) seemed to struggle with the language and motivation level of their students, apparently because they were used to higher-level students with greater learner autonomy. Presently, new VFMs are assigned to lines in the schedule that other VFMs have vacated, either because those VFMs have left CELE or because they have chosen to move to a higher-level line in their second or subsequent year. Vacated lines for new VFMs are therefore likely to be on the lower end of the scale, containing A1 or A2 classes. This scheduling system was most likely set up to motivate and retain VFMs. However, matching new VFMs with class profiles that better fit their prior experience and skills would be likely to make the onboarding experience less onerous. The findings of this study indicate that greater care may be necessary in balancing these competing interests.

A potential positive development regarding scheduling is that the shift to 105-minute classes necessitates a redrawing of schedules. This reshuffle may address issues that were raised by some participants about being overburdened with lesson planning. These changes, too, necessitate a follow-up study to examine their effects.

**Implications of the peer observation and interviewing instruments**

The findings of this study, although they may provide useful data to researchers outside of CELE, are not generalizable due to the small sample size and focus on a single context. Furthermore, my own role in this study as both a researcher and a peer in the 2025 VFM intake has both positive and negative implications for its reliability and value. An outsider to CELE would not have had access to the contextual information that I did, while a superior at CELE may not have received the candid answers that I did as a sympathetic equal. On the other hand, the sensitive nature of discussing teaching philosophies and adjustment difficulties may sometimes have led participants to give socially acceptable answers. Although the participants' identities were obscured, they may have been concerned about their anonymity as the study focused on a limited group of CELE teachers. Nonetheless, because of its focused nature, the findings of the study make a more useful contribution to the development of the CELE curriculum and its future hiring and onboarding process than a broader study would have.

Furthermore, this study provided me with an opportunity to reflect on my own onboarding experience and the renegotiation that my own cognition has undergone upon entering CELE. During the observations, interviews, and subsequent data analysis, I came to a better understanding of my colleagues' cognition and was challenged when their methods and thinking differed from my own. Through this process, I was led to reexamine my own beliefs about effective teaching and consider changes that my practice may yet need to undergo, particularly forming a more considered, needs-based approach to L1 use in my classroom talk. The study therefore had value to my own development as a teacher due to the use of the peer observation and interviewing instruments.

**Suggestions for further research**

Future studies could expand on this research in the following ways:

Revisiting the same group of VFMs later in their careers at CELE to see how their cognition has been reshaped by longer experience, especially as the participants of this study tended to focus on how pre-CELE experience had influenced their cognition.

Repeating the study in future years with new cohorts to see if curriculum and scheduling changes have improved the onboarding process.

Focusing specifically on how VFMs are influenced by their teacher training and education. The present study suggests that such training has little influence on long-term cognition, but, as the participants were not directly asked about the subject, further research is needed.

## Conclusion

This study investigated the cognition of a cohort of new VFMs at CELE. It found that the teachers had developed their teaching practice, including their use of L1, through a combination of beliefs about effective instruction based on prior language learning and workplace experience. It also found that adapting to CELE came with challenges depending on how widely prior experience differed from CELE's curriculum and students. These findings reveal that the teachers' attempts to preserve aspects of their professional identities in their new environment have led to varying degrees of acceptance of and resistance to CELE's institutional conditions.

There are several implications for CELE. The focus on experience rather than education in the participants' self-reported cognition suggests that this likely has a greater

bearing on their practice than their education. Therefore, placing a greater emphasis on workplace experience when recruiting new VFMs may help to identify the most suitable candidates. Considering their experience more deeply may also help to match new VFMs with classes that suit their strengths rather than place them in lines that happen to be available. Finally, it remains to be seen whether the adjustment difficulties that some of the participants had with unusual lesson lengths, planning workloads, and the TOEIC component of the course are addressed by the upcoming curriculum and scheduling changes. This topic should be revisited in a future study.

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## Appendix

*Interview questions*

1. Could you take me through what you did in the lesson that I observed you conduct?
2. How have you developed your approach to teaching?
3. What is your reasoning for how you use Japanese in class?
4. Have you found adjusting to teaching at this university challenging in any way?
5. Do you have anything else to add on the topics we discussed today, including what you did in the observed lesson, your teaching approaches, your use of Japanese or any challenges that you have had?

**Exploring Beginner-Level Japanese University EFL Students' Engagement with Shakespeare and Iambic Pentameter: An Action Research Study**

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Abstract

This initial action research study examines the engagement of A1–A2 level Japanese university EFL students with Shakespeare and iambic pentameter. While rhythm is central to any language, learners from syllable-timed languages such as Japanese often find the rhythm of English difficult. As a result, the teaching of iambic pentameter and literature topics have typically been confined to advanced literature students and/or elective English classes. In this study, students participated in an introductory lesson on iambic pentameter using Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* balcony scene (Shakespeare, 1597/2008) and completed a post-lesson survey. The survey results indicate that beginner-level learners could meaningfully engage with the rhythm of iambic pentameter. The results also showed that although students found listening for and speaking with iambic pentameter difficult, there was an increase in overall awareness of English rhythm and interest in literature. These results suggest that content-focused curricula, including the integration of literature and the arts, are possible at lower proficiency levels. The study also challenges the assumption that such topics should be reserved for advanced learners or English-focused majors and provides data for instructors, administrators, and curriculum developers in Japan seeking to incorporate more content-focused curriculum in their university English language programs.

## Introduction

Understanding the rhythm of English helps learners appreciate its musicality and expressive potential. Songs, poems, and plays have been preserved across generations not only for their creativity but also for their careful use of language. Rhythm and meter form the foundation of a language's characteristics, and learning English without attention to these features can limit cultural and communicative understanding (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010). Iambic pentameter, a classic English poetic meter, is central to many plays and poetry (Halle & Keyser, 1981; Kiparsky, 1977; Tarlinskaja, 1987). It reflects natural English stress patterns and provides structural and artistic cues that aid comprehension and performance. EFL learners can engage with such plays, specifically those of Shakespeare, and the use of iambic pentameter to improve rhythm, pronunciation, fluency, and expressive communicative language skills.

Although research on teaching classical English drama and poetry in Japanese EFL classrooms exists, it is still limited in investigating student engagement, especially for non-English majors and lower-level learners. Scholars have also noted the widespread assumption that Shakespeare and poetic elements are ill-suited for lower-level classrooms as they may be considered too challenging or misaligned with the practical language skills needed in the EFL classroom (Addison, 2013; Morinaga, 2018; Uchimaru, 2020). Challenging this assumption is important as it opens opportunities for broader language development, strengthens linguistic awareness, and informs the design of more inclusive and engaging curricula for learners across proficiency and motivation levels. By investigating how beginner-level students interact with Shakespearean texts, this action research study provides evidence on whether these students can meaningfully interact with Shakespearean texts, develop an awareness of English rhythm, and engage with literary content in a communication-focused curriculum. This study also offers practical implications for curriculum design in lower-level EFL classrooms.

## Literature Review

### Background

Every language possesses its unique rhythm, and developing students' awareness of the target language's rhythm can benefit language learning. Iambic pentameter is traditionally regarded as the most recognized meter of English poetry and verse drama (Halle & Keyser, 1981; Kiparsky, 1977; Tarlinskaja, 1987). It is commonly used in classical English poetry and verse drama, with rhythm measured in small groups of syllables called "feet." In English

metrics, an “iamb” typically refers to an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed one (e.g., “reflect”: da-DUM), and “pentameter” indicates five feet per line. For example, a line from Shakespeare’s *Venus and Adonis* (1593/2007, line 49) demonstrates iambic pentameter:

He burns with bashful shame; she with her tears.

( × / × / × / × / × / )

In English, iambic rhythm is based on the alternating change of unstressed and stressed syllables, unlike the meter in German or Italian, which contrasts short and long syllables. Understanding rhythmic patterns such as iambic pentameter can enhance learners’ listening and speaking skills by increasing their awareness of English stress and intonation (Halle & Keyser, 1981; Kiparsky, 1977; Tarlinskaja, 1987). Studying Shakespearean works and their inherent poetic elements also exposes learners to English literary and cultural heritage (Addison, 2013; Morinaga, 2018). Classical poetry and drama vividly illustrate expressive qualities that are intrinsic to the language. While some scholars have pointed out that teachers, curriculum designers, and administrators may assume that Shakespearean verse and its poetic elements like meter and rhyme are unappealing or too difficult for lower-level students or students in non-English focused programs, pedagogical experience and observations suggest otherwise (Addison, 2013; Morinaga, 2018; Uchimaru, 2020). EFL learners can benefit from performative exercises, which may reduce their inhibition and encourage a more expressive use of English.

Integrating iambic pentameter and Shakespearean texts in the English language classroom can promote active, student-centered learning. For example, Fellowes (2001) argues that linking spoken language to activities and encouraging the exploration of stylistic differences enables learners to engage with Shakespeare on their own terms (p. 6). Gibson (2001) emphasizes that Shakespearean texts are not just literary works but scripts meant to be spoken and performed socially (p. vii). Through performance-based activities, students can develop both communicative competence and opportunities for self-expression.

By introducing iambic pentameter alongside Shakespearean plays, students gain exposure to English rhythm, cultural heritage, and performative practices. This foundation prepares them for meaningful engagement with English language and literature, enhancing both interpersonal communication and creative expression.

**Shakespeare and iambic pentameter in the Japanese university EFL classroom**

Introducing Shakespearean plays, iambic pentameter, and other poetic elements into the English language classroom is not a new or unique approach. Over the years, researchers

and practitioners in the fields of applied linguistics, EFL/ESL, and literature have integrated many of these elements into their classrooms and reported on their observations (see Addison, 2013; Eisenmann, 2018; Kaiser, 2015; McIlroy, 2020; Morinaga, 2018; Smith, 2013; Uchimaru, 2020). For learners whose L1 is a syllable-timed language, like Japanese, there is a greater hurdle to speaking English in its natural rhythm. Thus, teaching practices that effectively integrate classic English plays and literary/poetic concepts into the foreign- or second-language classroom need to be designed with care.

McIlroy (2020) conducted an in-depth study on English poetic engagement of university students in Japan. In this study, the author used a full 15-week semester schedule with student questionnaire and interview data from an elective English poetry class, with one lesson of this class focusing on iambic pentameter. The study found that 1) Japanese students already have schemata and appreciation for Japanese poetry, 2) poems have the potential to help create engagement and English fluency, and 3) English poetry could be utilized more effectively in the foreign language classroom (McIlroy, 2020). Although this study has shed some light on Japanese university students' engagement with poetry in the English L2 classroom, the findings were limited to a specific demographic of students: English communication undergraduate majors who were already enrolled in an advanced elective poetry class. Further, these students also had a high average Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) score of 737.5, which corresponds to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) levels B1 (intermediate) to C2 (proficient) (McIlroy, 2020).

In an elective English reading class, Addison (2013) approached teaching Shakespearean plays to Japanese EFL university students through selections of famous works and the utilization of audio-visuals and graded readers. He writes that for teaching the famous balcony scene from *Romeo and Juliet* (1597/2008), he invited students to read the authentic text first and then discuss what was happening in the scene. This was followed by introducing a graded reader of the famous scene that allowed for more scaffolding of the language and for further discussion on the meaning of Juliet's speech. Addison (2013) noted that students often recognized the balcony scene imagery from films or animation, which helped scaffold their understanding of the play.

In a different yet related approach, Smith (2013) incorporated poetry and creative writing into the Japanese EFL environment. Specifically with iambic pentameter, Smith (2013) introduced the concept by having students first write *haiku*. After this, students created and wrote iambic pentameter lines to bring attention to its stress-based rhythm.

Through examining student work, Smith (2013) observed that many students tried to be interesting, thought-provoking, moving, or funny and suggested that weaving poetry and creative writing into language classes offers both practical skill-building and creative opportunities for expression (p. 14). Further, Smith (2013) highlights the positive effect this practice had on increasing student motivation (p. 17).

Finally, Uchimaru (2020) provides another insightful take on introducing Shakespearean plays into the less-advanced Japanese EFL university classroom. First, learner-centered instructional practices should be utilized to increase student engagement (Uchimaru, 2020). This includes focusing first on Shakespeare's storylines before the language focus and making Shakespearean language more accessible through short comparison extracts of both the original language and its modern versions (Uchimaru, 2020), a method echoing that used by Addison (2013). Regarding teaching iambic pentameter, Uchimaru (2020) suggests that activities should be carefully designed with visualizations to show the structure (stressed and unstressed syllables) and provide opportunities for students to read verses aloud in chorus or individually (p. 77).

**The broader context**

Beyond Japan, studies in EFL and ESL contexts suggest that incorporating literature and poetry can foster motivation, sharpen awareness of rhythm, and contribute to broader language development (Lazar, 1993; Maley & Duff, 1989). In Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) and content-based instruction, integrating subject content with language learning promotes engagement, critical thinking, and deeper understanding, and literary content can serve as meaningful material for learners across proficiency levels. Furthermore, second language acquisition research highlights the importance of rhythm and stress patterns in English, underscoring the potential benefits of introducing iambic pentameter to learners whose L1 is syllable-timed.

While prior studies provide valuable insights into the engagement of poetry and theatrical writings – especially Shakespearean plays – among advanced learners or those who are in English-focused programs or elective English classes, there is limited research on understanding the level of engagement among lower-level, non-English-major students in required first-year English classes at Japanese universities. The present study addresses this gap by investigating whether these learners can meaningfully engage with Shakespeare and iambic pentameter. By targeting this less specialized demographic, the study challenges the assumption that literary and poetic content should only be reserved for advanced English

language learners or those in English-focused programs and elective English courses. The findings also have implications for curriculum design, suggesting that content-focused approaches can introduce literary and poetic elements to lower-level students without compromising engagement or comprehension.

## Method

This study employed an action research-based approach. Action research provides a practical framework for bridging classroom practice and research by enabling teachers to investigate and improve their pedagogy in context (Cohen et al., 2018; Dosemagen & Schwalbach, 2019; Mills, 2018). It is especially appropriate in university EFL settings, where teachers aim to adapt instruction to learners' needs while also contributing reflective insights to the broader teaching community. As Cohen et al. (2018) note, action research addresses real, practitioner-identified problems, is collaborative, involves planning and implementing inventions, evaluates their effectiveness, and generates solutions.

Following the action research cycle described by Cohen et al. (2018) and Moroni (2011), this study (1) identified a pedagogical challenge: how to meaningfully engage beginner-level, non-English-major students with Shakespearean works, language, and rhythm; (2) planned and designed an instructional intervention introducing iambic pentameter through short, accessible excerpts from Shakespeare; (3) implemented this lesson within a communicative English focused curriculum; (4) collected and analyzed data through a brief post-lesson survey measuring student engagement, perceived difficulty, and interest; and (5) reflected on the findings to inform course and curriculum development and classroom applications.

To ensure rigor, the study followed key action research principles, including systematic data collection, clear alignment between research questions and teaching goals, and reflection on how results can inform practice (Cohen et al., 2018; Dosemagen & Schwalbach, 2019; Mills, 2018). While the data are not generalizable, they provide evidence-based reflection on the practicability and value of introducing Shakespeare and poetic rhythm into lower-level, non-English major EFL classrooms, contributing to the discussion on expanding the use of literary focused content into English language teaching.

### Participants

Seventy first-year Japanese university students (N = 70) across six freshman English classes at a private university in Tokyo participated in this study. All were non-English

majors enrolled in degree programs in economics, law, business, urban innovation, or hospitality management. All first-year students were required to take this freshman English course in their first year of study. Students were classified at the A1-A2 (basic user) CEFR level based on the placement in their English program, and all participants attended 50-minute English classes five days per week. Additionally, all participants in this study gave their informed consent by signing a consent form written in both English and Japanese, allowing their data to be collected and used.

**Instruments**

A post-lesson questionnaire was administered using Google Forms and consisted of eight closed-ended questions written in English with Japanese translations. Questions were designed to provide immediate feedback on students' understanding of the iambic pentameter lesson and their engagement with the content and thus were either Yes/No or Likert-type items. The questionnaire was intentionally short to accommodate low-motivated learners and minimize the possibility of missing or incomplete responses. The survey was conducted at the end of each class to ensure a high response rate.

**Procedures**

To explore student engagement and understanding, a single 50-minute lesson using texts from *Romeo and Juliet* and an introduction on the concept of iambic pentameter was designed. Each class then finished with the post-lesson questionnaire. The lesson began with a typical communicative style warm-up to create a relaxed atmosphere and shift students into "English mode." In pairs, students exchanged short, familiar questions (e.g., "How are you?", "How was your weekend?", "What did you eat for breakfast?"). This warm-up was not directly related to the Shakespeare or rhythm focus; rather, it served as a low-stakes speaking activity to support participation in the subsequent lesson tasks.

Next, a PowerPoint presentation was used to show visuals of William Shakespeare and scenes from *Romeo and Juliet* and elicit students' prior knowledge of these topics. The structure and rhythm of iambic pentameter was also explained and visualized through this PowerPoint presentation. Students then watched a short scene from a film adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* (Luhrmann, 1996) to provide a model of the rhythm in authentic context. This was followed by student-centered pair work and activities designed to practice listening to and reciting the famous line in iambic pentameter. Students first practiced individually by speaking aloud while clapping the rhythm. They then worked in pairs, with one reciting the

line and the other clapping. Partners rotated multiple times to maximize practice, maintain engagement, and allow exposure to different speakers. During both activities, instructors progressively directed students to concentrate on reciting the lines with the rhythm and listening to their partner's rhythm instead of reading from the PowerPoint presentation. Excerpt from *Romeo and Juliet*:

"O Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?
Deny thy father and refuse thy name;
Or if thou will not, be but sworn my love,
And I'll no longer be a Capulet" (Shakespeare, 1597/2008, Act II, Scene ii).

After completing the exercises and pair practice, students completed the post-lesson questionnaire. The lessons were conducted by the two authors, with each instructor leading three classes for a total of six classes. Both instructors designed and rehearsed the lesson and questionnaire procedures together to ensure consistency in instruction and materials across all classes.

## Results and Discussion

The Google Form questionnaire data was downloaded into Excel for data analysis and graph and table creations. All six classes were given the iambic pentameter introduction lesson and the post-lesson questionnaire. In total, 70 (N = 70) students responded.

### Results

The first three questions assessed students' prior awareness of Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, and the idea of rhythm in English verse drama. Out of 70 respondents, 44 (63%) reported knowing of Shakespeare, while 26 (37%) did not. A larger majority, 57 students (81%), recognized *Romeo and Juliet*, suggesting greater familiarity with the play than with the author himself. However, when asked whether they were aware that English verse has a specific rhythm such as iambic pentameter, nearly all students (65, 93%) responded "No." These results align with Addison (2013) and Morinaga (2018), who note that Japanese students often recognize Shakespeare by name or through iconic story elements but have little exposure to the formal qualities of his language. The findings are summarized in Figure 1.

**Figure 1.**

*Prior Awareness*

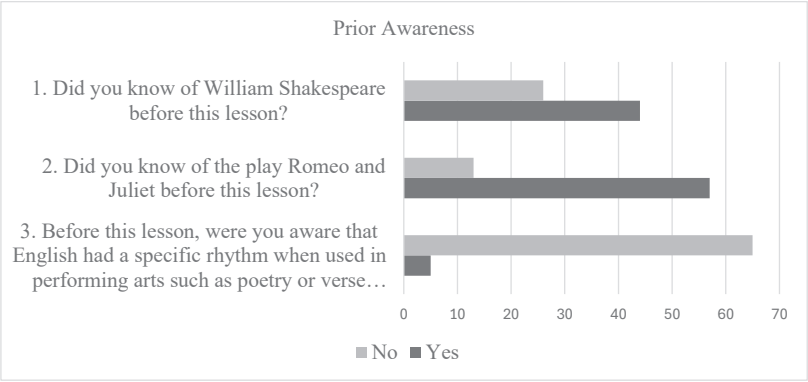
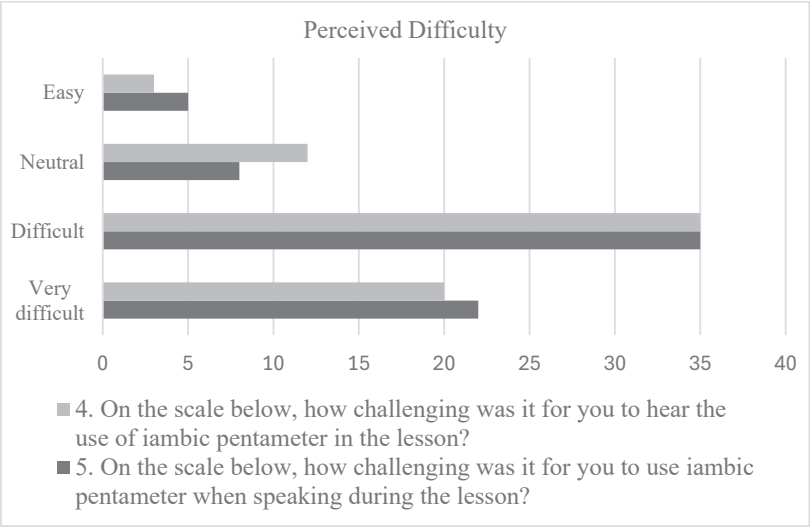



Figure 2 presents students' self-reported difficulty with iambic pentameter during the lesson. When asked about listening, 35 students (50%) rated it as "difficult" and 20 (29%) as "very difficult," with only 15 students (21%) selecting "neutral" or "easy." A similar pattern emerged for speaking: 35 students (50%) reported "difficult" and 22 (31%) "very difficult," while 13 students (19%) indicated "neutral" or "easy."

**Figure 2.**

*Perceived Difficulty*




Finally, Figure 3 and Figure 4 capture the post lesson outcomes and summarize student responses to questions six, seven, and eight. For overall understanding, 65 students (93%) reported that the lesson helped them understand the rhythm of iambic pentameter, while 5 students (7%) responded that it did not. When asked about future listening, 34 students (49%) indicated they were "very likely" or "highly likely" to listen for iambic pentameter in performance contexts, while 28 (40%) selected "neutral" and 8 (11%) indicated "unlikely" or "highly unlikely." Finally, in terms of interest in learning more about English in the performing arts, 26 students (37%) answered "yes," 32 (46%) answered "maybe," and 12 (17%) answered "no."

**Figure 3.** Post-Lesson Outcomes

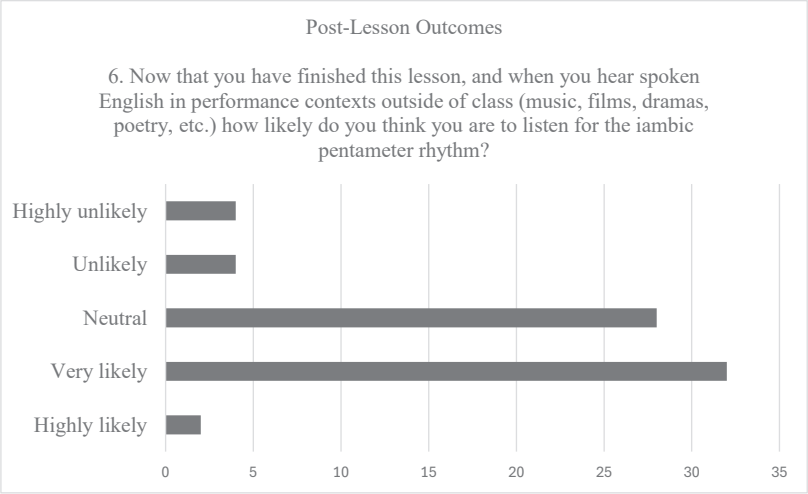
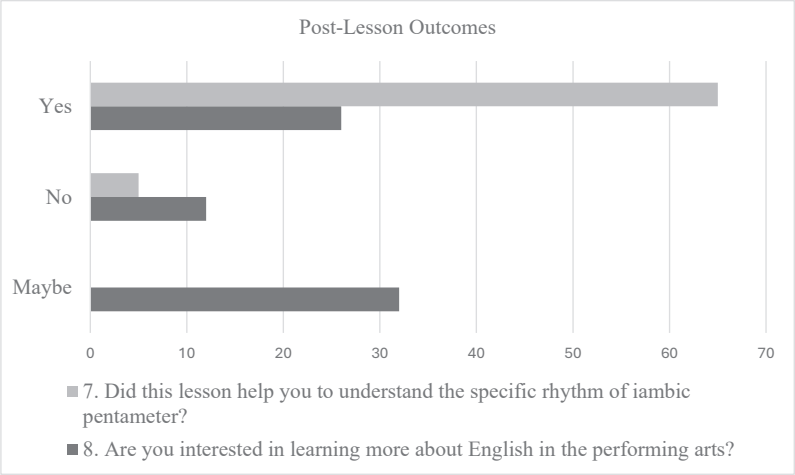


**Figure 4.** Post-Lesson Outcomes continued




The findings from this study reveal some notable observations and insights with practical implications for teaching and curriculum design. First, a majority of students were already familiar with Shakespeare and his romantic tragedy *Romeo and Juliet*, yet most had little or no awareness of the rhythmic features of English in this verse drama. While students generally reported that hearing and speaking in iambic pentameter was challenging, nearly all indicated that the lesson helped them better understand the rhythm. Additionally, almost half expressed that they would be likely to notice iambic pentameter in future performance contexts, and over 80% reported at least some interest in learning more about English in the performing arts. Taken together, these results show initial evidence that an introductory iambic pentameter lesson can both raise awareness of English rhythm and spark curiosity in the literary and artistic dimensions of the language. These findings may also be valuable for educators when considering curriculum design and course offerings in their English departments and language programs.

**Discussion**

The findings of this action research study suggest that an introductory lesson on Shakespeare and iambic pentameter can enhance EFL students' awareness of English rhythm and stimulate interest in literature and the arts even among A1-A2 non-English majors in

required first-year English courses. While previous research has focused primarily on advanced-level students, English-focused majors, and/or English elective classes (Addison, 2013; McIlroy, 2020; Morinaga, 2018; Smith, 2013; Uchimaru, 2020), this study demonstrates that with appropriate scaffolding and support, lower-level students can also meaningfully engage with literary and poetic material.

These outcomes carry several implications. Students reported that iambic pentameter was challenging yet engaging, and most indicated improved understanding and interest in exploring English in performance contexts. This suggests that rhythm-based literary content can function as both a linguistic and motivational resource, supporting creativity, communicative practice, and cultural appreciation. For instructors and curriculum designers, this lesson provides insight for integrating literary-focused activities in ways that remain accessible and engaging.

From an action research perspective, these findings also provide insight into the effectiveness of the instructional intervention and offer opportunities for reflection and improvement. The post-lesson survey highlighted that hearing and performing iambic pentameter were both challenging and engaging for students. Notably, some students reported that they would expect to notice iambic pentameter in "music, films, dramas, poetry, etc." While true iambic pentameter is rare outside of poetry and scripted verse, these responses suggest that the lesson heightened students' awareness of English rhythm more broadly. This broader awareness may support listening and speaking skills across a range of contexts, even if the specific metric is uncommon. Building on these insights, future lessons could include more modeling of the iambic pentameter rhythm, additional guided practice, and communicative tasks that connect rhythm to both receptive and productive skills. Short excerpts from a range of Shakespearean works could also be used to reinforce the pattern.

In addition to survey responses, classroom observations provided further insight into student engagement. At the beginning of the lesson, many students appeared hesitant as iambic pentameter and rhythmic clapping represented an unfamiliar use of English. Coordinating the unstressed-stressed pattern through clapping was initially challenging, and some self-consciousness was evident during the whole-class practice. As activities shifted to pair work, however, students became more comfortable. Practicing in pairs, changing partners, and allowing additional practice time appeared to reduce anxiety and increase participation. Over time, students demonstrated greater confidence in identifying and attempting the rhythmic pattern. These observations suggest that structured pair work and

sufficient practice time are key for supporting participation in performance-based rhythm activities at lower proficiency levels.

Based on both classroom observations and student survey responses, several instructional adjustments would be made in future iterations of the lesson. While the 50-minute class period was sufficient to introduce Shakespeare, build basic understanding of the language, and engage students in rhythmic practice, additional vocabulary-focused scaffolding would support comprehension and confidence, particularly when working with Shakespearean texts. Pre-teaching key words or phrases or incorporating short vocabulary-building tasks could allow students to focus more fully on rhythm and performance. In addition, rhythm practice could be expanded beyond Shakespeare by incorporating contemporary or familiar language. Practicing iambic pentameter using modern sentences or everyday expressions may help students internalize the rhythmic structure before applying it to literary texts.

Likewise, there is potential for integrating these content elements into a project-based learning (PBL) or content and language integrated learning (CLIL) style curriculum. Instructors could design multi-week modules in which students collaboratively engage with selected Shakespearean works or short scenes, exploring rhythm through performance and preparing dramatic readings or skits. This type of structure would allow students to revisit rhythm, deepen engagement, and apply language skills toward a final meaningful product. This incremental, iterative approach aligns with the action research cycle of planning, acting, observing, reflecting, and enabling teachers to refine their practice based on evidence (Cohen et al., 2018; Dosemagen & Schwalbach, 2019; Mills, 2018).

The findings also underscore the potential for broader educational impact within the local institutional context. While the results are not generalizable, they provide evidence-based guidance for educators considering the inclusion of creative and cultural content in English language programs. Reflection on the findings can inform course planning, curriculum design, and instructional strategies, highlighting how action research can generate insights and improvement in teaching practice.

Finally, this study contributes to the ongoing discussions about innovative and creative approaches in Japanese EFL education. National reforms have emphasized standardized assessments (Uematsu et al., 2024), but such approaches have not consistently improved proficiency or enthusiasm for English. Introducing creative and culturally rich materials, such as Shakespeare and poetic rhythm, offers a pathway that can engage learners, develop linguistic awareness, and cultivate appreciation for English as a communicative and

expressive medium. Through the lens of action research, these insights highlight the value of reflective, context-specific experimentation in informing and advancing classroom practice.

## Limitations and Future Directions

As an action research project, this study is context-specific and not intended to be generalizable. The participants represented a single institution and program, and the findings reflect the experiences of one introductory lesson. Additionally, the use of a closed-ended questionnaire provided useful quantitative insights but limited the depth of student perspectives. Future research could build on this initial exploration by incorporating open-ended questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, classroom observations, or analyses and assessment of student work to capture richer data on learner engagement and outcomes.

Further investigations might also consider the role of teachers in implementing rhythm and literature-based instruction. Professional development for teachers centered on integrating poetic rhythm, performance elements, and literary texts into EFL classrooms could provide valuable insights into pedagogical strategies, teacher confidence, and perceived challenges. Expanding research in these directions would not only strengthen the evidence base but also support more sustainable curricular innovations for incorporating literature and performance elements into the Japanese EFL classroom.

## Conclusion

This initial action research study demonstrated that introducing iambic pentameter and Shakespearean text into the Japanese EFL classroom is both feasible and engaging, even for students at the A1–A2 level and outside of English-focused programs. The findings suggest that exposure to literary rhythm can help students recognize the rhythmic qualities of English while also fostering interest in literature, performance, and cultural heritage.

While broader challenges of English education in Japan persist, this study highlights the potential of integrating literary and performative elements as a means to move beyond test-driven, grammar-oriented, and strictly practical communication-focused instruction. By providing students with opportunities to experience English as a rhythmic, expressive, and creative medium, educators may stimulate curiosity, motivation, and deeper emotional and cultural connection to the language. Moving forward, continued classroom-based inquiry through action research can help refine pedagogy and curriculum, allowing instructors and programs to iteratively improve practice based on evidence from their learners.

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## Appendix

*Survey questions*

1. Did you know of William Shakespeare before this lesson?
2. Did you know of the play *Romeo and Juliet* before this lesson?
3. Before this lesson, were you aware that English had a specific rhythm when used in performing arts such as poetry or verse dramas?
4. On the scale below, how challenging was it for you to hear the use of iambic pentameter in the lesson?

    Very difficult
    Difficult
    Neutral
    Easy

5. On the scale below, how challenging was it for you to use iambic pentameter when speaking during the lesson?

    Very difficult
    Difficult
    Neutral
    Easy

6. Now that you have finished this lesson, and when you hear spoken English in performance contexts outside of class (music, films, dramas, poetry, etc.) how likely do you think you are to listen for the iambic pentameter rhythm?

    Highly unlikely
    Unlikely
    Neutral
    Very likely
    Highly likely

7. Did this lesson help you to understand the specific rhythm of iambic pentameter?
8. Are you interested in learning more about English in the performing arts?

*Survey results*

**Table 1**

*Prior Awareness: Responses to questions 1-3*

| | Yes | % | No | % |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Did you know of William Shakespeare before this lesson? | 44 | 62.9% | 26 | 37.1% |
| 2. Did you know of the play *Romeo and Juliet* before this lesson? | 57 | 81.4% | 13 | 18.6% |
| 3. Before this lesson, were you aware that English had a specific rhythm when used in performing arts such as poetry or verse dramas? | 5 | 7.1% | 65 | 92.9% |

**Table 2**

*Perceived Difficulty: Responses to questions 4-5*

| 4. On the scale below, how challenging was it for you to hear the use of iambic pentameter in the lesson? | N | % |
|---|---|---|
| Very difficult | 20 | 28.6% |
| Difficult | 35 | 50.0% |
| Neutral | 12 | 17.1% |
| Easy | 3 | 4.3% |
| 5. On the scale below, how challenging was it for you to use iambic pentameter when speaking during the lesson? | N | % |
| Very difficult | 22 | 31.4% |
| Difficult | 35 | 50.0% |
| Neutral | 8 | 11.4% |
| Easy | 5 | 7.1% |

**Table 3**

*Responses to question 6*

| 6. Now that you have finished this lesson, and when you hear spoken English in performance contexts outside of class (music, films, dramas, poetry, etc.) how likely do you think you are to listen for the iambic pentameter rhythm? | N | % |
|---|---|---|
| Highly unlikely | 4 | 5.7% |
| Unlikely | 4 | 5.7% |
| Neutral | 28 | 40% |
| Very likely | 32 | 45.7% |
| Highly likely | 2 | 2.9% |

**Table 4**

*Responses to questions 7 and 8*

| 7. Did this lesson help you to understand the specific rhythm of iambic pentameter? | N | % |
|---|---|---|
| No | 5 | 7.1% |
| Yes | 65 | 92.9% |
| 8. Are you interested in learning more about English in the performing arts? | N | % |
| No | 12 | 17.1% |
| Yes | 26 | 37.1% |
| Maybe | 32 | 45.7% |

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