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Portfolio Case Study

Building English Language Capacity from the Ground Up: Curriculum Design and Teacher Development Across Three Japanese Elementary Schools

Client	Anjo City Board of Education via ALTIA Central
Location	Anjo, Aichi Prefecture, Japan
Engagement	April 2019 – March 2020 (one full academic year)
Scope	Three elementary schools · P1–P6 (all year groups)
Focus areas	Curriculum design · Teacher development · Capacity building

CONTEXT

In 2019 the Japanese Ministry of Education (MEXT) brought in a national requirement: elementary schools had to teach English formally, across every year group. For a lot of schools this landed as a genuine crisis. The three in Anjo City I was sent to were among them.

Between them they had no English curriculum, nobody designated to teach the subject, and no real model for how language teaching at primary level should even work. The homeroom teachers, most with little usable English of their own, were simply told they were now responsible for English lessons. A handful of freelance 'Senka' teachers, keen but with no formal teaching qualifications, were lined up to take the subject on once some initial groundwork was done.

I came in as the lead specialist with one academic year to sort it out: write the curriculum, bring the teachers up to speed, and leave a working English programme that could keep running without me.

No curriculum, no qualified teachers, and a government mandate that arrived with nothing to deliver it. All three had to be fixed at once, inside a single year.

THE CHALLENGE

Three problems came tangled together, and none could wait for the others to be solved first:

- Write a full P1–P6 curriculum from scratch, in line with MEXT's national Course of Study and suited to communicative teaching with young children.
- Develop two very different groups at the same time: homeroom teachers, who needed just enough confidence and structure to take part properly, and Senka teachers, who had to be running lessons on their own by the end of the year.
- And do all of it while teaching the classes myself, because the children couldn't sit and wait for the groundwork to finish.

The two groups needed almost opposite things. The homeroom teachers were mostly anxious about not being able to speak English, so what they needed was reassurance, a simple structure, and a clearly bounded role in the lesson. The Senka teachers were the opposite kind of problem: full of enthusiasm, short on training. They needed the real thing, methodology, planning, reflection, and enough confidence to run a room by themselves.

MY APPROACH

1. Curriculum Design

Working inside the MEXT Course of Study, I built a full communicative curriculum across all six year groups. It put speaking, useful everyday language and confidence ahead of written accuracy, which suited both the age of the children and the reality of teachers who had limited English themselves.

Content was sequenced to build year on year, with clear objectives at each stage and materials a non-specialist could actually handle. The structure mattered most here: a Senka teacher could lead the lesson while a homeroom teacher took a real part in it without ever having to produce English on the spot.

2. Teacher Development — Homeroom Teachers

With the homeroom teachers, the first job was to take the fear out of it and give them a role they could feel competent in. I never asked them to lead. Instead I set them up as fellow learners in the room, going through the lesson alongside the children. Their part was supportive and clearly bounded, so they could contribute without ever being caught out by the edges of their own English.

3. Teacher Development — Senka Teachers

The Senka teachers were the real capacity-building work. My approach paired live classroom experience with structured reflection:

- Co-teaching: they watched and joined in on lessons I led, then took on more and more of the delivery as they grew into it.
- Collaborative planning: we built lessons together away from class, where I'd talk through how I plan, mark up their plans with them, and unpack the reasoning behind each choice.
- Observation and feedback: once they were ready to lead a lesson, or part of one, on their own, I'd sit in and give them structured feedback afterwards, keeping it to a few specific things they could act on instead of vague praise.
- Ongoing informal talk: the steady stream of informal conversations about method, managing a class, and how the children were doing kept a thread of development running right through the year.

I kept this away from the model of a formal training course with timetabled sessions and assessments on purpose. It was relational and rooted in practice. The learning happened in and around real lessons, which meant it could be used straight away and there was very little distance between theory and the classroom.

OUTCOMES

Curriculum delivered

A full P1–P6 communicative curriculum, aligned to MEXT guidelines, built from scratch and bedded into all three schools inside one academic year.

Capacity built

By the close of the year the Senka teachers were running lessons entirely on their own, which was the whole point. No outside support needed after that.

Sustainable model

The whole thing was designed to stand on its own once I left, with teachers, materials and a curriculum the schools could keep running and build on themselves.

By the end of the year the Senka teachers were teaching English on their own across all three schools. The thing I was brought in to do, leave behind capacity the schools could sustain themselves, was done.

WHAT THIS DEMONSTRATES

A few things this engagement shows that carry straight over into education and learning consultancy:

- Learning needs analysis: reading a messy, multi-layered situation, no curriculum, a teaching group of very mixed ability, a mandate from above, and shaping one coherent response to all of it at once.
- Curriculum architecture: building a progressive P1–P6 curriculum from scratch, matched to national standards and realistic for non-specialists to actually teach.
- Differentiated teacher development: designing two genuinely separate paths for two groups who started in different places, wanted different things, and had to end up somewhere different.
- Capacity building over dependency: setting the whole engagement up, from day one, to leave the schools standing on their own rather than leaning on me, and to keep working after I'd gone.
- Practice-based professional development: planning together, co-teaching live, and reflecting in a structured way instead of running a training course, because that is closer to how teachers actually get better.
- Cross-cultural programme design: working within the particular world of Japanese elementary education, from the national frameworks down to the delicate business of supporting teachers who had been put in a position they hadn't asked for.

References available on request

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