

Social construction of professional development among Japan's migrant teachers via online forums

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ABSTRACT

Online discussion forums have proven potent in the social construction of professional knowledge among teachers. However, research examining their role in supporting migrant English teachers is scarce. This qualitative study responded by using netnography to investigate how one popular forum for English teachers interested in Japan addressed the issues of gaining teaching qualifications, navigating differences in educational culture between their origins and those associated with Japan, and increasing Japanese language competency. The research examined how community members addressed these issues, given the increased recruitment in Japan of English teachers from outside traditional English-speaking contexts, including ASEAN countries. A corpus of 944 discussion threads was subjected to an epistemological content analysis to foreground the social construction of what counted as educator knowledge. Findings shed light on the above questions while also revealing how the social construction of teacher knowledge responded to an increased presence of teachers from outside traditional English contexts.

Keywords: ASEAN, English teachers, Japan, netnography, migrant teacher professional development

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Introduction

Migrant teachers face hurdles to optimal effectiveness in their adopted contexts. This study considered the role of online communities in addressing these needs. The focus was on Japan because its popularity as a destination for migrant English teachers has resulted in the emergence of vibrant online communities among them. Additionally, Japanese English education is in flux, particularly with the increasing recruitment of English teachers from outside the traditional English-speaking countries, including those from ASEAN contexts. Understanding employment conditions in Japan is crucial for ASEAN teachers considering work opportunities in Japan. Given the importance of social media venues in professional life, this project responded by conducting a netnography to investigate the professional development role of one prominent online forum for English teachers interested in Japan. This project examined the role of online settings in the social construction of teacher knowledge among this cohort. While the social construction of knowledge may take various forms, such as relational or narrative manifestations, this project focused on the epistemological aspects of the social construction of professional knowledge among these migrant teachers.

Literature Review

Migrant teacher professional development

Teachers are more internationally mobile than ever. This has implications for ASEAN teachers, as many from ASEAN countries seek careers both within and outside the region. Such migrant teachers, in particular, face three challenges to their professional development. The first

step is to acquire teaching qualifications in the destination country. In Thailand, for example, the government has made the application process for teaching qualifications more stringent in recent years, impacting migrant teachers (Hickey, 2018). A second issue is adapting to the differences in educational culture. A study of Filipino teachers in the United States, for example, found that understanding cultural differences in education, such as adapting to a preference for a more student-centered experience, was critical (Modesto, 2020). Ultimately, proficiency in the local language is essential for the various tasks that any teacher must perform (Modesto, 2020). Despite the importance of such issues, there is a notable lack of scholarship regarding the role of online venues in how migrant teachers socially construct these needs and responses.

The social construction of teachers' professional knowledge in online forums

This is an important area of inquiry because professional knowledge for teachers involves a socially constructed component, with online professional discussion forums playing a crucial role in this regard. So powerful are online communities as professional socialization agents in many contemporary professions that they are considered by scholars to have taken on the role of communities of practice, learning communities in which members share a common area of concern and improve their competency through regular interaction (Wenger, 2011). Research into the social construction of teacher knowledge suggests that social interactions among teachers result in the creation of a "pool of thought" upon which they can draw in their work (Johnson et al., 2011). Indeed, the very understanding of "what counts" as professional knowledge - its epistemology - is negotiated via member discourse within such communities of practice (Saldana, 2016). Such

social construction of knowledge among teachers is significant in the uptake of new developments in education (Rodríguez-Triana et al., 2020). Yet, research into how this knowledge creation plays out in contemporary English language teaching (ELT) among migrant teachers via online social media forums is scant.

The case of Japan

This research considered the role of online communities for foreign English teachers in Japan. Foreign teachers are widely recruited in Japan in the belief that they provide more “authentic” exposure to English (Nakao et al., 2019). English teaching positions in Japan – such as so-called Assistant Language Teaching (ALT) positions - often require no professional teacher preparation, relying upon the individual’s ability to speak English (Turnbull, 2018). This suggests that there are professional development needs among migrant English teachers in Japan. The terrain of ELT in Japan is also in a state of flux. Although historically, migrant English teachers were often from the so-called “Inner Circle” countries, such as Australia or Canada, they are now increasingly recruited from outside, including teachers from ASEAN states. How such teachers from outside the Inner Circle can be integrated into Japanese ELT remains an open question, although some scholarship indicates resistance to their presence (e.g., Balgoa, 2019). Considering the role of online communities in professional knowledge creation among ELT teachers interested in Japan and the role of non-Inner Circle teachers in this process is thus essential. Still, it has not been the focus of previous scholarship.

Research Questions

This project responded by empirically investigating the social construction of professional knowledge among migrant teachers in Japan through online forums, addressing the following research question: First, how do users of online forums created for migrant teachers in Japan construct the relevant teaching qualifications for professional success as English teachers in Japan? Second, how do these forum users build differences in the educational culture between their homelands and Japan to promote professional success as English teachers in Japan? Third, how do these forum users construct the role of attaining Japanese language competency needed for professional success as English teachers in Japan? Finally, what is the role of non-Inner Circle teachers, such as those from ASEAN member states, in this knowledge construction?

Participants

This project was a case study of one online discussion forum for migrant teachers in or interested in moving to Japan. This project adhered to ethical standards, ensuring that no personally identifiable information, such as names, online handles, or places of work, was included in publications. Individuals posting in these threads spanned a range of ages, from the 20s to the 60s, and represented a diverse range of countries of origin.

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Methodology

Research Design

The research method employed in this study was netnography, a qualitative research approach that explores “digital tribes and consumer behavior using ethnographic research conducted online” (Bartl et al., 2016, p. 165). Netnography acknowledges that online venues are cultural spaces where knowledge is shared among members (Kozinets, 2015). Like ethnography, netnography can promote a deep understanding of ways of knowing associated with a social group through long-term researcher immersion. Since the goal of netnography as a naturalistic qualitative approach is to understand how a culture works rather than to make statistical statements, a case-based focus on a single site as a cultural zone for a particular group of people is warranted (Kozinets, 2015, p. 118).

Procedures

A subreddit site for teaching in Japan was selected (<https://www.reddit.com/r/teachinginjapan/>). A highly trafficked site, this subreddit had 66,000 members as of the time of data collection in 2024-2025 and was vibrant and growing. The forum chosen involved actors from diverse regions, countries, languages, cultures, career goals, and experiences but who shared an interest in teaching in Japan.

Data Collection

This study involved 14 months of data collection, comprising 944 discussion threads related to the professional lives of English teachers in Japan. The researcher possessed both insider and outsider experience. The researcher, who is not Japanese, grew up outside of Japan and has

spent much of his educational and professional life outside of Japan, working in high schools, community colleges, and universities. Having worked in Japan for about 10 years as a middle school ALT, university English teacher, and trainer of English teachers, this experience provided him with keen insider insights.

Data Analysis

This project involved deductive data analysis, a method in which the areas of interest are determined beforehand. The data analysis process consisted of three phases (Figure 1). First, codes were created in response to the four research questions. Content related to acquiring skills and qualifications to improve teaching effectiveness or professional prospects was coded as knowledge related to Question 1. Content about how Japanese education differs from other contexts was coded as knowledge relevant to Question 2. The analysis considered any content promoting Japanese language learning as knowledge about Question 3. Content about the roles of teachers from outside of the traditional Inner Circle of Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, the UK, and the US was coded as knowledge related to Question 4. Given the epistemological focus, a thematic analysis was used to map out the knowledge presented and to consider the relationships among ideas.

The second phase of the analysis was confirming that *saturation* had occurred. Saturation represents the point after which no new insights can be gleaned from further data collection and analysis. Determining saturation here hinged on data analysis being linear, with the corpus analyzed from the beginning to gather evidence of the social construction of knowledge about the four research questions. As Rahimi and Khatooni (2024) note, determining the

Figure 1

Data Analysis Method

	Research Question	Coding Rationale	Example
PHASE 1 Deductive Data Analysis	1. Acquiring Qualifications	Pertinent data = actions – both formal and informal - for increased teaching effectiveness and professional progression	Example: Earning teaching license in home country
	2. Culture of Japanese Education	Pertinent data = Practices in Japanese education (constructed as) differing from participants' home contexts	Example: The <i>Sempai</i> (elder or veteran) vs. <i>Kohai</i> (newcomer or underling) relationship
	3. Resources for Learning Japanese	Pertinent data = any forum content promoting Japanese language acquisition	Example: Learning Japanese in college and reasons for doing so
	4. Role of non-Inner Circle Teachers	Pertinent data is that constructing the role of teachers from outside Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, the UK, and the US in Japanese ELT.	Example: These teachers constructed as threat, especially because of willingness to accept less pay
PHASE 2 Saturation Determination	Determine that no new insights emerge as data analysis is undertaken from the start of the corpus. This took place long before the end of the 548,663 word corpus was reached.		
PHASE 3 Analytical Induction	Actively seek exceptions to the findings from all of the data by returning to the beginning of the corpus. Example: <i>Japanese people aren't good at mimicking foreign language accents, compared to let's say, Filipinos.</i> Rationale: The researcher was seeking any exceptions to the construction on non-Inner Circle teachers in a negative way. This comment constructs the non-Inner Circle teacher in a positive way because they can potentially provide a good model of English pronunciation.		

point at which saturation has occurred requires the researcher to exercise experience and judgment. In this case, the fact that 960 pages of data, comprising 548,663 words, resulted in no additional themes emerging long before the end of the corpus was reached satisfied the

researcher that saturation had been reached. This demonstrates one benefit of assembling a large data corpus.

The final data analysis phase was analytic induction. Analytic induction involves active

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efforts to identify exceptions to conclusions, thereby solidifying the certainty of results. The entire corpus was thus revisited to seek such exceptions. Understanding the social construction of knowledge in a community also involves considering the question of representativeness, as not everyone thinks in the same way. In this case, the goal was especially to determine the mainstream consensus while also understanding essential outliers. Although the community had 66,000 members, no assertion can be made that the results represent a consensus among *all* of them; results do indicate prevailing narratives within this group and also represent knowledge from which newcomers could learn. The exception to this consensus mainly pertained to Research Question 4, in which the project revealed contention regarding the role of non-Inner Circle teachers in Japanese ELT.

Findings and Discussion

Findings

1. Teacher Qualifications

The results of the first three research questions are presented in Table 1. The needs for teacher certifications, licensure, and related qualifications were socially constructed as depending upon the position sought by participants, especially creating a dichotomy between potential “foot in the door” English teaching positions and those representing careers. Of these transitional positions, the first was working as an English conversation (*eikaiwa*) teacher in which no professional requirements were generally considered necessary beyond the ability to speak English. As a result, forum participants often felt that such positions represented “dead-end” jobs rather than careers with low pay and no potential

for advancement. Forum users also consistently constructed ALT positions as not representing a viable career in themselves. They especially urged those contemplating coming to Japan for either *eikaiwa* or ALT positions to have a clear plan for gaining professional qualifications. One poster summarized the consensus in the community, stating that “most people do ALT or *eikaiwa* work with basic or no qualifications for a few years and then go home.”

The other side of this dichotomy was English teaching positions constructed by community members as representing careers. The first was teaching K-12 in an international school, which community members consistently constructed as a desirable, well-paying job. In one exchange, a poster discussed their hopes to transition from *eikaiwa* work to a position in an international school, with another participant responding that “you’d need your MA, a license, as well as prior experience. How will you get that while living in Japan? Hate to say it, but I don’t think you’re being realistic.” This represented the consensus regarding work in international schools in Japan, namely that a teaching license along with several years of experience would be required.

The last prominent scenario considered to represent a long-term career pathway was university teaching. In this case, community members often felt that adjunct or similar positions could represent a stepping stone to tenured posts. To gain adjunct or temporary jobs, though, the minimum qualifications were considered to be a master’s degree with a few research publications. For permanent English teaching positions at the university level, forum users consistently indicated that a doctorate with strong research portfolios was necessary.

As the foregoing indicates, the community served as a source of information about the value of obtaining various qualifications related to English teaching. It also provided information on how to obtain certifications, such as the CELTA English teaching certification or advanced degrees, particularly in Japan. The benefits often given were the lower cost, especially compared to institutions in the United States, as well as the associated networking and Japanese language learning opportunities. For example, one poster asked whether an individual with questions about career options had ever considered studying in Japan, providing advice to pursue a Japanese education ministry scholarship because it is “relatively easy to get if you decide on a field of study, professor, and university beforehand that wants you to come.”

2. Knowledge of Japanese Educational Culture

In the context of Japanese education culture, the forum served as a rich source of knowledge. Posters explained various aspects of Japanese education that could be confusing to newcomers, such as *gyomu itaku* (freelancers). In other cases, essential concepts were used without explanation. A good example of this would be the

use of the term *eikaiwa*, itself, which occurred 566 times in the discussion corpus, as well as terms such as *sempai* (elder or superior-rank person), *koma* (teaching units in university), *kocho-sensei* (principal), *kumi* (student cohort), and *juku* (cram school). In this way, participants gained contextualized exposure to the necessary jargon and concepts commonly used in Japanese education through forum interactions with users, thus being socialized into Japanese culture.

3. Japanese Language Learning

This forum provided extensive guidance on Japanese language learning, with the content divided into discussions on the need for Japanese language learning and resources for undertaking it. For ALT and *eikawa* jobs, posters repeatedly told potential migrant teachers that Japanese ability was not strictly necessary to obtain these positions but that it was helpful to personal well-being and professional effectiveness to learn as much Japanese as possible. For example, one poster created a list of changes that they felt were needed to increase the effectiveness of ALTs, arguing that they “should be expected to learn at least basic Japanese throughout their employment.” By contrast, posters consistently

Table 1

Role of an Online Teacher Forum in Social Construction of Professional Development Needs Among Migrant English Teachers in Japan

Socially Constructed Need	General Manner of Characterization in Forums	Role of Forum in Providing Resources
Certifications/Licensure	Needed only for mainstream K-12 positions	Source of information about external resources
Knowledge of Japanese Educational Culture	Important for all positions, especially permanent ones	Socialization via implicit use in many discussions
Japanese language learning	Important, especially for long-term careers in higher education	Source of information about external resources

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informed potential migrant teachers that a high level of Japanese proficiency would be necessary for teaching in Japanese universities, primarily to serve on faculty committees. For example, one poster noted that Japanese would be critical to obtaining a permanent university teaching position because “you’re going to be the guy and expected to serve on all sorts of committees in Japanese.” For teaching in international or American schools, Japanese was also considered helpful but not strictly necessary, as these were English-medium venues.

4. The Role of Non-Inner Circle Teachers

This research demonstrated that the recent increase in the recruitment of English teachers to Japan from outside the Inner Circle was a significant issue for this community, with these individuals typically being constructed as a threat. For one thing, community members frequently even questioned their English ability. For example, in one posting discussing the undesirability of *eikaiwa* employment, a member asked whether the original poster “[minded] being surrounded by Filipinos speaking Tagalog and broken English?” In response to a question from a community member as to why his Filipina girlfriend had been unable to secure an English teaching job in Japan, a poster suggested that “[i]f she’s from a non-English native country maybe her English isn’t good enough, or she has a strong accent.” Thus, many community members constructed the increase of non-Inner Circle teachers as a threat to the quality of English education in Japan.

Another trope in these discussions was that non-Inner Circle English teachers were willing to accept lower pay, which led to depressed wages, increased teacher precarity, and a greater need for additional training for advancement among Inner

Circle teachers. One member posted, “I have seen English teaching jobs aimed specifically at Filipinos (in Japan!) that pay under [2 million yen per year].” Another stated, “Japan is a sinking ship. Native speakers don’t want to work here anymore. It’s all Indians and Filipinos.”

Coupled with this was the feeling that their lower status necessitated non-Inner Circle English teachers needing higher qualifications to secure the same positions. One member argued that teachers from the Philippines are on their way, and there are only going to be more of them. I have worked with a number of them, and every single one has held a Bachelor of Education (sometimes accompanied by graduate degrees), licenses, and, in many cases, years of classroom experience, all with an excellent command of the English language.

While many in the community socially constructed the non-Inner Circle teacher as a threat to the quality of English instruction and to their own employment situations, others were more sympathetic to their plight. In particular, some members felt that white privilege made professional life for many teachers from outside of the Inner Circle more difficult. One member lamented that a lot of schools have a strong preference for hiring white people from stereotypical countries such as America, Canada, or England. I’ve helped hire my replacement before, and they told me to ignore any black or Filipino candidates.

In response to a question from an Indonesian community member about the viability of teaching English in Japan, another post replied that “some *eikaiwa* discriminate against non-native speakers.” In a discussion of *eikawa* jobs, one poster felt that “[s]taff tends to give more forgiveness to white, attractive, male

teachers, especially with a UK accent.” When an Egyptian member asked about the viability of a non-native speaker teaching English in Japan, a poster replied, “[t]here’s tons of Filipinos who do it, so yeah.”

Discussion

This research explored several vital themes with implications for related scholarship. One was simply a confirmation of the role of online forums in the social construction of teacher professional skills among English teachers in Japan. Inferences from this finding include the need to investigate such venues for migrant English teachers in other contexts. Insights gleaned from this theme include a deeper understanding of how such forums serve as communities of practice, fostering the development of participants’ competencies (Wenger, 2011). Yet, this research also documents how such venues may also impede professionalism, in this case by negative constructions of non-Inner Circle teachers. The implications are that such forums could be, as Macià and García (2016) note, intentionally created for migrant English teachers by administration or government agencies and perhaps moderated by them rather than being more “ad hoc” and “bottom up” as in this case where teachers themselves created the forums. Such actions could thus ensure that the online community of practice represented a mechanism for promoting accepted thinking among professional educators.

Another theme was the social construction of an epistemology of Japanese ELT in terms of a map of the different positions involved – such as *eikaiwa*, ALT, and university teaching with relational aspects among these positions, training needed, and career prospects. A necessary

inference is that these venues socially constructed more than just strict pedagogical knowledge; they constructed meta-knowledge about how skills relate to jobs within the field of Japanese English Language Teaching (ELT). These results also yield insights into how this epistemology of the positions in Japanese ELT involved an implicit hierarchical component. Scholarships about communities of practice note that they may include the construction of hierarchies among members based on their experience (Davies, 2005). This research extends such findings by documenting a hierarchy of ELT positions in Japan as manifest in the online community of practice, with the *eikaiwa* and ALT positions constructed as lower in status than university and international school teaching. The implications of these findings include the role of the online professional forum in reflecting, creating, and reinforcing such hierarchies.

Finally, an especially critical theme was how the social construction of teachers from outside of the Inner Circle, including teachers hailing from ASEAN contexts, involved an arena of contention. On the one hand, such teachers were often portrayed negatively, as lacking in “real English” ability and as willing to accept lower pay, thus driving wages down. Yet, such teachers were also constructed by some as needing to be *more* qualified to overcome discrimination and promote a healthy increase in workforce diversity. Reactions included a fear that the qualifications required for English teaching in Japan were increasing while compensation was decreasing. An inference from this theme is that Inner Circle and white privilege are undergoing much-needed erosion. Among the insights implied by these findings is that these changes are occurring slowly, given that Phillipson (2008) and other prominent figures in ELT have troubled the “native

speaker fallacy” for decades. A further insight is that this research demonstrates how the social construction of teacher knowledge within online communities may not be politically neutral. Among the implications is the need for continued scholarship about the role of the non-Inner Circle teacher.

Implications

This study thus provides critical general implications for theory, practice, and policy. In terms of theory, this project especially demonstrated the value of online communities for migrant teachers. The online community investigated here provided much accurate and essential advice about English education in Japan, such as dissuading unprepared individuals from coming to Japan with the idea of establishing careers as teachers, even though employment as ALTs and eikaiwa teachers is readily available. As community members noted, such a move may represent a career dead end, given the low pay and scarcity of promotions involved, as well as the difficulty of obtaining additional teaching credentials while working full-time in Japan. For those who did have teacher and/or Japanese language training before coming to Japan, these communities provided an essential resource for career advancement. The value of these forums for professional development was, of course, tempered by their sometimes injurious construction of the non-Inner Circle teacher. Implications for practice are that prospective teachers considering international moves should participate in such communities, but should be judicious in accepting even widely held ideas within them. In terms of policy, this research suggests that creating more such communities intentionally by educational authorities may be beneficial.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The primary objective of this study was to illuminate how online communities can support migrant teachers through social knowledge construction and dissemination. The study is essential in advancing scholarship by demonstrating how such online communities can be valuable to migrant teachers, particularly those in English Language Teaching (ELT). The primary objective of this study was to examine how members of an online community for English teachers in Japan socially constructed the necessary qualifications. The significant findings related to this objective were that community members developed Japanese-English education in detail, involving various positions with differing qualification needs and career potentials. Beyond demonstrating the value of online communities for migrant ELT teachers, theoretical implications also include the manifestation of hierarchy construction within online communities and the potential for this to cement relations of social power.

The second objective was to investigate how this community constructed the culture of Japanese English education and the implications for participants. The study confirmed the prominence of such cultural construction and that the community provided important cultural information for newcomers. Theoretical implications are that such venues can serve as essential bridges from outsider to insider status.

The third area of inquiry pertained to the role of this community in learning Japanese. Significant findings in this regard were that the community provided many Japanese language learning resources and consistently stressed the importance of Japanese for many long-term careers. Theoretical implications include the

value of such venues for lesser-studied languages, of which Japanese is one example.

The fourth and final area of investigation was to learn about the role of non-Inner Circle teachers, such as those from ASEAN member states, in the knowledge construction taking place in this community. Significant findings here were that the community was divided in its construction of the role of such individuals, with many viewing them as a threat. In contrast, others perceived their increased participation in Japanese ELT as a positive development. The theoretical implications demonstrate how such communities may serve as sites of contention and how the status of non-Inner Circle teachers often remains low.

There are especially some overall theoretical and practical implications for ASEAN teacher education. Theoretical implications primarily include shedding light on the social dimension of teacher knowledge construction and the role of social power relations in this process. The practical impact on ASEAN teachers is the importance of becoming more active and visible on sites such as this one. Additionally, given the ongoing ASEAN diaspora, support for diasporic populations has become a significant issue in ASEAN contexts (Effendi, 2022). The research presented here suggests the value of creating and managing online venues for English teachers (and perhaps other groups of workers) moving from ASEAN member states to countries like Japan and the value of using tools like netnography to shed insights into the ground-level conditions that they may expect in their destination countries.

The limitations of this project point the way for further research. As a netnography of a particular community, this project targeted one online discussion venue about ELT in Japan.

Future research could be expanded to include other online venues for migrant English teachers, especially in other destinations popular with such groups. Notably, this study has presented a *static* picture of the role of ASEAN and other non-Inner Circle teachers in contemporary Japanese ELT. Given that the acceptance of these teachers may be in flux, longitudinal studies aimed at documenting *changes* in the social construction of these teachers are strongly warranted. The importance of social media in contemporary life is undeniable. This study and others like it provide evidence that netnographic research should assume a more central position in understanding contemporary teachers' ways of knowing.



Statements and Declarations

1. Funding details.

There is no funding to report for this research.

2. Disclosure statement.

The author reports that there are no competing interests to declare.

3. Ethical Approval.

This research has followed applicable ethical norms for human subjects involvement.

4. Declaration of Generative AI in Scientific Writing

No AI tools were used in writing this paper.

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Bionote

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