Applied Language Sciences

INNOVATION IN PRACTICE Open Access

Creating English-Medium Professional Dialogue in Japan: A Practitioner-Led Innovation Study

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Abstract

This practitioner-led innovation study examines a decade-long effort to establish English-medium academic meetings at a teacher education university in Japan, where English is highly valued as a school subject yet rarely used in teachers' professional communication. Drawing on reflective journals, meeting notes, emails, and participant feedback, the paper addresses a practical problem: how to make English-medium professional dialogue workable in a shared-L1 EFL context. The study describes how the meetings were initiated, structured, and sustained, and how recurring design problems such as participant anxiety, native-speaker norms, and limited willingness to speak shaped the development of the innovation. Rather than presenting English-medium professional communication as an all-or-nothing practice, the paper focuses on practical adjustments that made participation more manageable and meaningful over time. It also reflects on the challenges of implementation, including resistance, discomfort, and the risk that English use might be interpreted as performance rather than support. This study identifies three replicable practice innovations: (a) a low-stakes translanguaging protocol, (b) Japanese-accented English as a legitimate professional model, and (c) behavioral participation indicators as alternatives to fluency-based measures of success. These innovations were developed through repeated practice over more than a decade and are offered as adaptable designs for practitioners facing similar challenges in EFL professional settings.

Keywords: Practice-based innovation research, English-medium professional communication, Teacher professional development

1. Introduction

In Japan, English is strongly valued as a school subject and is often promoted as an important medium of classroom interaction. However, professional communication among English teachers and teacher educators is still typically conducted in Japanese. This leaves a gap in teacher development, since English is encouraged pedagogically but rarely used professionally. For teachers who wish to model meaningful target language use, this raises an important question about how English might function not only in classrooms but also in professional dialogue.

This study therefore asks not only how I experienced resistance, but more centrally: What practical innovations emerged from a decade of trying to make English-medium professional meetings work? Rather than asking simply whether the meetings succeeded or failed, I identify three replicable practice innovations: (a) lowering perceived performance stakes through translanguaging policies, (b) positioning Japanese-accented English as a legitimate professional model, and (c) replacing attendance/fluency metrics with behavioral participation indicators.

The innovation described in this paper was developed in an English-medium academic study group at a national university of teacher education in Japan. As discussed by Izumitani and Sato (2024), the group was intended not only as a place to discuss English education, but also as a space in which English itself could be used as a professional resource for teacher learning and development. In this sense, the project responded to a local but persistent problem in Japanese EFL teacher development, namely how to create a low-stakes environment in which English teachers who share the same first language can use English for authentic professional purposes.

This paper draws on a decade of reflective journals, meeting notes, emails, and participant feedback to describe how the innovation was initiated, structured, and sustained. Although the project is informed by autoethnographic reflection, the present paper foregrounds its practical dimension as a form of practitioner-led innovation study. The discussion is informed by work on teacher development in global contexts (Canagarajah, 2012), teacher identity and legitimacy (Barkhuizen, 2021), and professional learning through self-study and teacher education practice (Peercy & Sharkey, 2020). The aim is to present a set of adaptable designs that may be useful for practitioners in similar shared-L1 EFL contexts.

2. Teaching/Learning Context

This innovation was developed at a national university of teacher education in Japan, where I have worked as a teacher educator and researcher in English education. It was implemented through an English-medium academic study group that I initiated in order to create opportunities for professional dialogue in English among participants who shared Japanese as their first language. As described by Izumitani and Sato (2024), the group was intended not only as a place to discuss English education, but also as a space in which English itself could be used as a professional resource for teacher learning and development.

Participants included pre-service teachers, in-service elementary and secondary school teachers, graduate students, university faculty, and researchers. Because these participants differed considerably in teaching experience, academic background, and confidence in

using English, the meetings brought together people with a shared professional interest in English education but very different relationships to English as a medium of professional communication. In this sense, issues of identity, legitimacy, and participation, which are central to teacher development (Barkhuizen, 2021), were highly visible in this setting.

The study group was implemented partly to address a gap in the Japanese EFL context. English is strongly valued as a school subject and often promoted as a classroom medium, yet professional communication among English teachers and teacher educators is still typically conducted in Japanese. The meetings were therefore designed as a low-stakes professional space in which English could be used for authentic discussion while Japanese remained available for clarification and support.

Meetings were held regularly over a period of more than ten years, although the exact frequency and format varied over time. A typical session involved a presentation, workshop, or research-oriented talk conducted mainly in English, followed by discussion among participants. In many meetings, English was positioned as the primary medium, but Japanese was permitted when needed for clarification, elaboration, or emotional support. This design reflected the view that professional learning in shared-L1 EFL contexts requires not only opportunities for English use, but also practical support for participation (Canagarajah, 2012; Peercy & Sharkey, 2020).

3. Rationale for the Innovation

At the heart of this innovation was a practical problem in the Japanese EFL context. English is strongly valued in schools and is often promoted as an important classroom medium, yet it is rarely used in professional communication among English teachers. As a result, there is often a gap between what teachers are encouraged to promote pedagogically and what they themselves are able or willing to do in their professional lives. Teachers may ask learners to take risks in English, while their own professional discussions about teaching, research, and curriculum continue almost entirely in Japanese.

For me, this gap was not only practical but also pedagogical and ideological. If English teachers are expected to model meaningful target language use, then opportunities for them to use English in authentic professional settings also matter. As Canagarajah (2012) argues, teacher development in global contexts is shaped by cultural, political, and emotional conditions rather than by technique alone. In Japan, those conditions include limited opportunities for professional English use, as well as persistent assumptions about who can speak English with legitimacy and authority. In this sense, the absence of English from teachers' professional interaction is connected not only to language choice, but also to identity and participation in professional communities (Barkhuizen, 2021).

The study group was also informed by a concern with native-speakerism and with the narrow ways in which English often circulates in teacher development settings. As discussed in my earlier work (Sato, 2022), Japanese teachers' use of English may still be judged against native-speaker norms, which can discourage public and professional use of English even among teachers who value it pedagogically. This concern also reflects broader discussions of native-speakerism in English language teaching (Hiratsuka, 2025). At the same time, small communities of practice can offer important spaces for professional experimentation, participation, and learning (Peercy & Sharkey, 2020; Izumitani & Sato,

2024). This suggested that an English-medium academic meeting could function not only as a site of discussion, but also as a site for trying out different ways of making professional English use more workable.

This innovation therefore offered a structured, low-stakes model for establishing English-medium professional dialogue among teachers who share the same first language. Rather than treating English-medium communication as an all-or-nothing requirement, the aim was to design a setting in which participation could be scaffolded, anxiety reduced, and English use gradually became more familiar through repeated interaction.

4. Description of the Innovation

Stage 1: Initiating the Group

The first challenge was not linguistic but relational: how to invite participants into an English-medium professional space without making the invitation itself feel intimidating. In the Japanese EFL context, many teachers are accustomed to discussing English education in Japanese, even when they support the use of English in classrooms. An invitation to join a meeting conducted mainly in English could therefore be seen as demanding, especially by those who were not confident about speaking English in front of others. I learned early that the group could not be introduced in a way that made participation seem like a test of English. Instead, it had to be framed as a space for shared professional learning rather than as a place where participants might feel judged for how they used English (Peercy & Sharkey, 2020).

The first participants were recruited through existing professional relationships rather than through formal institutional policy. I invited university students preparing to become teachers, graduate students, practicing school teachers, and colleagues in English education whom I thought might be open to trying English-medium professional dialogue. In describing the meetings, I emphasized that the meetings were intended as a practical space for professional exchange and not at all as a place to display English ability. They were presented as opportunities to exchange ideas about English education, share classroom practice, and discuss current issues in the field.

Stage 2: Establishing Norms

Once the group had been initiated, the next task was to establish norms that would make participation sustainable. The meetings were not designed as English-only events. Instead, English was positioned as the primary medium, while Japanese could also be used selectively when needed, for example for clarification, elaboration, or moments of hesitation. I also tried to make clear that mistakes were acceptable and that silence would not automatically be treated as failure or lack of interest. This was important because silence and selective use of Japanese often reflected reflection, uncertainty, or identity negotiation rather than simple unwillingness to participate (Sato, 2024).

Over time, I came to use a simple opening message that reflected these norms. Participants were encouraged to use the English they had, to ask questions in Japanese if necessary, and to participate at their own pace. This helped establish the meetings as low-stakes professional spaces rather than as settings in which participants were expected to perform fluent English.

Stage 3: Structuring Meetings

A typical meeting involved a presentation, workshop, or research-oriented talk conducted mainly in English, followed by discussion. In many cases, the session moved through several stages: an opening greeting or brief check-in, a main presentation, discussion with questions from participants, and a short summary of key points at the end. Although the exact format varied, the meetings were generally structured in a way that maintained an academic focus while making participation manageable for those with different levels of confidence in using English.

Stage 4: Scaffolding Participation

As the meetings continued, I introduced a number of practical supports to make participation easier. These included bilingual handouts, summaries of key points, explicit reassurance that brief comments were welcome, and my own use of Japanese-accented English as a possible professional model. I also tried to respond supportively when participants spoke hesitantly, so that they would feel that their ideas were valued even when their English was not fluent or fully accurate. These supports were especially important because many participants appeared to associate English-medium interaction with high performance demands. By lowering those demands, I hoped to shift attention from correctness to communication. This approach was also consistent with my broader interest in translanguaging and flexible language use in EFL settings (Sato, 2023).

Stage 5: Sustaining the Group Over Time

Sustaining the group required more than simply repeating the same format. New participants needed to be welcomed without feeling that they had joined a closed or highly proficient community, while continuing participants needed opportunities to take on more active roles. I therefore tried to maintain momentum by inviting a range of presenters, varying the themes of meetings, and allowing participants to move gradually from listening to asking questions, commenting, and eventually presenting.

Not all attempts were successful. Some participants remained hesitant, and some meetings revealed continuing discomfort with English as a professional medium. However, over time, the group developed into a space in which English-medium professional dialogue became more familiar and more manageable for a number of participants. In this sense, the innovation was not a fixed model implemented all at once, but an evolving design shaped by repeated adjustment, participant response, and ongoing reflection.

5. Reflection and Impact

5.1 What Worked Well

Several aspects of the innovation appeared to support participation over time. First, positioning English as the primary medium while still allowing selective use of Japanese made the meetings more manageable for participants with different levels of confidence. Participant feedback and meeting notes repeatedly suggested that this flexibility reduced pressure and made it easier for some participants to join the discussion. Second, the repeated use of Japanese-accented English as a visible professional model seemed to help challenge assumptions that only native-speaker-like English was appropriate in academic settings. In this sense, the meetings functioned not only as sites of discussion, but also as spaces where participants could begin to see English use by Japanese teachers as more legitimate and more achievable (Barkhuizen, 2021). Third, the group format itself created

a small community in which participants could gradually move from listening to asking questions, commenting, and sometimes presenting. This gradual participation was one of the clearest signs that the innovation was becoming workable.

5.2 What Was Challenging or Unexpected

At the same time, the innovation also revealed continuing difficulties. Some participants appeared to interpret English-medium meetings as demanding or uncomfortable, while others seemed to see the use of English as performative rather than supportive. These reactions showed that the challenge was not only linguistic but also ideological. English use in Japanese professional settings could still be read as unnatural, excessive, or exclusionary. In addition, not all participants responded in the same way. Some welcomed the opportunity to use English for authentic professional purposes, while others preferred Japanese for reasons of confidence, efficiency, or accessibility. These contrasting responses reminded me that participation in English-medium professional dialogue is shaped by affective, social, and identity-related factors as much as by language ability (Peercy & Sharkey, 2020; Sato, 2024).

5.3 Key Lessons Learned

Two lessons became especially clear. First, successful innovation in this context depended less on formal policy than on trust, repeated interaction, and careful scaffolding. Second, success was better understood not in terms of fluent performance, but in terms of small observable shifts in participation. A participant who moved from silence to asking one question, or from listening to offering a brief comment, represented meaningful progress. In this sense, the impact of the innovation was gradual rather than dramatic. Its value was in making English-medium professional dialogue more possible, more sustainable, and more meaningful for many participants in a shared-L1 EFL context.

6. Innovations in Practice: Three Replicable Designs

Based on more than a decade of experience in organizing and refining these meetings, I identify three concrete innovations that practitioners in similar EFL contexts may be able to adopt or adapt.

6.1 Low-Stakes Translanguaging Protocol

The first innovation was a low-stakes translanguaging protocol. Rather than treating meetings as either English-only or Japanese-only, English was positioned as the primary medium while Japanese remained available for clarification, side comments, or moments of hesitation. At the beginning of meetings, I increasingly made this expectation explicit by encouraging participants to use the English they had, while also making clear that Japanese was acceptable when needed.

This innovation appeared to reduce the pressure associated with speaking English in front of others. Participant comments and meeting notes repeatedly suggested that the possibility of using Japanese selectively made participation feel more manageable. In this sense, translanguaging did not weaken the English-medium principle. Instead, it functioned as a practical support that helped participants remain engaged in professional dialogue.

6.2 Japanese-Accented English as a Legitimate Professional Model

The second innovation was the modeling of Japanese-accented English as a legitimate professional model. Instead of avoiding English or relying on native-speaker norms as the

implicit model, I used my own English consistently in presentations, workshops, and discussions, while making it clear through practice that intelligibility and engagement mattered more than sounding native-like.

This design addressed a recurring ideological barrier in the Japanese EFL context. Participant feedback and reflective records suggested that seeing English used professionally by a Japanese teacher educator made the idea of speaking English seem more realistic for some participants. The goal was not to present my English as ideal, but to make visible a local and usable model of professional communication in English.

6.3 Behavioral Participation Indicators

The third innovation involved redefining success through behavioral participation indicators rather than attendance alone or fluency-based judgments. Instead of focusing primarily on how many people attended or how well they spoke, I began to pay closer attention to small observable changes, such as a previously silent participant asking a question, a hesitant attendee offering a brief comment, or a regular listener later agreeing to present. Although no formal quantitative measures were collected, meeting notes, participant feedback, and reflective journals suggested that such small shifts were meaningful indicators of professional growth. This innovation helped reframe participation as gradual risk-taking rather than as error-free performance. In doing so, it offered a more realistic way of evaluating English-medium professional dialogue in a shared-L1 EFL setting. Table 1 summarizes these three innovations and the qualitative indicators used to assess their practical value over time.

Table 1. Three Practice Innovations and Their Qualitative/Observational Indicators

Design problem	Practice innovation	Practical features	Qualitative/observational indicators
Anxiety about speaking English in professional settings	Low-stakes translanguaging protocol	English as primary medium; Japanese available for clarification or hesitation; explicit reassurance at the start of meetings	Participant comments and meeting notes suggested that participation felt more manageable when selective Japanese use was available.
Native-speaker norms shaped perceptions of who could use English legitimately	Japanese-Accented English as a Legitimate Professional Model	The facilitator used Japanese-accented English confidently in professional interaction and emphasized intelligibility over nativeness.	Reflective records and participant comments suggested that English use by a Japanese teacher educator seemed more realistic and achievable for some participants.
Attendance or fluency alone did not capture meaningful change	Behavioral participation indicators	Attention to small shifts such as asking a question, offering a short comment, or later presenting	Meeting notes and feedback suggested that these small shifts were meaningful signs of growing participation and confidence.

7. Future Directions

Several directions for future practice emerge from this innovation. First, practitioners in similar EFL contexts may benefit from starting with smaller and less demanding formats

rather than attempting to establish a full English-medium academic meeting from the beginning. For example, a short reading circle, a brief discussion session, or a small workshop may provide a more manageable entry point for teachers who are interested in professional English use but hesitant about participating in longer meetings.

Second, institutional support may be easier to obtain if such initiatives are framed as teacher development rather than as language training alone. Positioning English-medium meetings as opportunities for professional exchange, reflective dialogue, and collaborative learning may help reduce resistance and clarify their educational value. In addition, colleagues who are uncertain about joining may first be invited as observers, which can lower initial anxiety and make later participation more likely.

Third, this innovation may be relevant beyond Japan, particularly in other Asian EFL contexts where English is strongly valued educationally but remains limited in teachers' professional communication. At the same time, some aspects of the present context are Japan-specific, including the strong separation between classroom English and Japanese-medium professional dialogue. Future adaptations should therefore remain sensitive to local institutional cultures and teacher beliefs.

If I were to develop this innovation further, I would begin collecting participant feedback more systematically and would also consider building stronger co-leadership so that responsibility for the meetings does not rest on one facilitator alone. An unresolved issue remains how best to include teachers with very low confidence in English while still maintaining English as the primary professional medium. This remains an important challenge for future practice.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work, the author used ChatGPT to check and correct English errors. After using this tool, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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Author bio

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