Practice-Oriented Paper

Investigating Mental Health and Well-being among Tertiary Language Teachers in Japan

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Teaching is widely recognized as one of the most stressful professions. This is particularly the case for language teachers who must contend with language anxiety, insecure working conditions, administrative demands, and the inherent stress of working in a foreign country. However, there is very little research available that investigates language teachers' mental health in the specific context of Japanese tertiary education. This paper presents two case studies of English language teachers working at two different universities in northern Japan. The case studies aim to forefront some of the psychological demands of working and living long term in Japan and suggest measures that can be taken to maintain teachers' mental health in both their professional and personal lives. In describing and reflecting on personal experiences with stress, burnout, and depression, the authors hope to generate some useful knowledge about a somewhat neglected area of foreign language teaching in Japan.

As readers of this journal are no doubt aware, teaching is a stressful occupation. As a predominantly social profession, teaching requires constant interaction with a diverse range of people. At the tertiary level these include students, other faculty, administrative staff, university executives, visiting faculty, parents, and often overseas university personnel. Given such a diversity of interlocutors with a corresponding diversity of interests and requirements, the potential for interpersonal conflict is ever-present (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007). There are

also the inherent structural demands of the job: teaching, assessment, course management, research, publications and presentations, administrative duties, and professional development are probably the most prominent tasks amongst a myriad of roles and responsibilities the contemporary university teacher must deal with.

Cowie (2011) has highlighted how language teaching in particular includes a range of additional stressors. These include teaching overseas, cultural differences between the teacher and students, high emotional labor costs (King, 2016), and a feeling of negativity arising from perceiving the state of the profession as precarious (Mercer & Kostoulas, 2018).

Within the classroom itself foreign teachers are often required to take on a 'performative role' (Taylor, 2020), amplifying a pretense of positivity and enthusiasm in order to motivate students. Such a role is usually not expected of Japanese teachers of English. However, this performativity and constant exhibition of '*genkiness*' can be highly stressful (Ogbonna & Harris, 2004), often resulting in emotional exhaustion and professional burnout.

Intuitively (and perhaps from direct personal experience) we can understand how such stress-inducing factors can have a detrimental effect on both the quality of our teaching and the level of learning attained by our students. The following two case studies highlight some of these factors and how they can adversely affect both our professional and personal lives.

Case Studies

This paper presents two case studies of English language teachers working at two different universities in northern Japan. The case studies aim to forefront some of the psychological demands of working and living long term in Japan and suggest measures that can be taken to maintain teachers' mental health in both their professional and personal lives. In describing and reflecting on our own experiences with stress, burnout, and depression, the authors hope to generate some useful knowledge about a somewhat neglected area of foreign language teaching in Japan.

To present our case studies in a comparable manner, we have adopted the

sub-themes listed below.

- Causal context
- Stress
- Burnout / Depression
- Recovery

This provides a structure that facilitates the reader's understanding of our experiences and enables some common themes to be explored. Conversely, it also highlights how subjectively different our experiences were.

Although the authors' experiences do not always fit neatly into this framework, it provides a relatively coherent means of elucidating our case studies.

The data on which the case studies are based are a mixture of recollection and excerpts from online communication with family and friends. Depression, by its very nature, does not lend itself to rigorously academic data collection methods. If at times our accounts seem to shade too much into the anecdotal, then we ask the reader's indulgence for our necessary subjectivity.

Case Study 1

The following case study describes the second author's experiences aboard a research ship on a one-month educational voyage around Japan in February and March of 2023. The sections below describe the perceived causes and consequences of the various psychological stressors the author experienced onboard. Although some of the issues were exclusive to the voyage itself, many of the problems are analogous to those challenges faced by non-Japanese teachers working in Japan. However, being on the ship had the effect of exacerbating these factors.

Causal Context. Every year from February to March, around 80 students from my institution participate in a university-organized educational voyage around the South Pacific on board a training and research vessel. The ship is quite large: 88m long, with a crew of 33, and a maximum capacity of 157 passengers. Students and faculty spend six weeks on the ship, stopping at a number of foreign ports to participate in cultural exchange activities.

However, from 2020 to 2022 the voyage was cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It recommenced in the spring of 2023 but, with the

coronavirus still prevalent, the university decided that the voyage would only take place within Japanese waters. On board were 83 Japanese university students, and ten members of the university staff including faculty, medical doctors, and administrative personnel. The author was the only native English speaker onboard. For the duration of the voyage the author was expected to teach four English classes in total, and to converse with students in English.

As preparation for the voyage, there was a one-day orientation for faculty and staff in May 2020. This was followed by an overnight stay onboard the ship in August 2022. The ship departed from Tokyo in February 2023, calling at Ogasawara, Okinawa, Kagoshima, Kumamoto, Hiroshima, and ending the voyage in Yokohama.

Stress. Soon after the start of the voyage the author began experiencing elevated levels of stress and anxiety. Symptoms included constant worry, insomnia, feelings of hopelessness, and sweating. I experienced tingling sensations in my fingers and feet, and my heart rate seemed to be continually elevated. Under normal, everyday circumstances, I am not used to feeling these sensations and concluded that they were due to the environment of the ship. By the twentieth day of the voyage, I was physically and emotionally exhausted and experiencing symptoms typical of depression and chronic anxiety. I felt isolated and disconnected as evidenced by the messages I was sending friends and family (Appendix). Reflecting on my experience, I have identified two key factors that contributed to the initial stress and subsequent decline in my mental health. They were unclear responsibilities, and isolation. The latter can be further subdivided into linguistic, cultural and social isolation. The following sections describe these factors in detail.

Unclear Responsibilities. I have worked as an English teacher in Japan since 2004 and have always taken my responsibilities seriously. My first job was at an English conversation school and it soon became clear that non-Japanese teachers were treated differently to the Japanese teachers in that less was generally asked of us. I had always felt uneasy about this disparity, believing that we should be expected to work as hard as our Japanese colleagues. Onboard the ship I sensed a clear difference in expectations. I was expected to do a lot less than the other Japanese teachers and staff. I suspect that I was there as the token English speaker

in order to add an international flavor to the atmosphere on the ship. My duties amounted to giving an English class once a week and chatting with the students. As already mentioned, the ship normally visited different countries but due to the threat of COVID-19 our voyage was limited to Japan. This further diminished the importance of having an English teacher onboard the ship. My perceived lack of relevance, unclear responsibilities, and lighter workload created within me a sense of guilt. This situation was wholly unsatisfactory to me, and negatively affected my mental health.

Linguistic Isolation. My Japanese language ability is sufficient to function effectively in daily life, in the classroom, and with the administrative duties assigned to me at work. However, faced with the challenge of living in an entirely Japanese-speaking environment, I became overwhelmed. I failed to fully understand what was going on and I had to try to continuously second guess things, which was mentally exhausting. My inability to communicate effectively led to a sense of disconnection and exhaustion. There were extended periods at sea, for example six days from Ogasawara to Okinawa, without internet or cell phone connection which compounded my sense of linguistic isolation.

Cultural Isolation. This also played a critical role in my experience. Being immersed in a constant Japanese environment on the ship was a very intense and isolating experience for me. In my normal everyday life, I might be exposed to direct, unmediated Japanese culture for a few hours a day at most. This exposure comes in manageable doses where I have time to reflect and learn from the experience, and to take a break, both mentally, by talking with a non-Japanese friend, and physically, by exercising. On the ship though, these breaks were not available and instead I found this exposure unrelenting and exhausting. From compulsory early morning group exercises on the main deck through to our nightly teachers' meetings, I simply was not in tune to what was happening as everybody else was. Although I have lived in Japan for twenty years, this was by far my most intense and immersive exposure to Japanese culture given the sea-bounded environment of the ship. This daily, morning-to-night continuous exposure to Japanese culture left me feeling out of touch with my Japanese colleagues and the students.

Social Isolation. The most serious consequence of linguistic and cultural isolation was that, with one exception, I failed to establish a meaningful or supportive relationship with any of the teachers or administrative staff. A key component of my responsibilities onboard was to converse with the students in English, which I did. However, the average English level of the students was extremely low, and as I became more sleep-deprived and anxious, this role became more and more difficult. After a while, the unintentional nervousness that I evoked in students when they spoke to me in English became emotionally draining for me. As I became more exhausted, and more emotionally distressed, the gap between my usual external teacher persona and how I was feeling inside became ever wider. This in itself became an additional source of stress. I longed for someone simply to have a normal conversation with. Of course, as teachers we all have days when our enthusiasm for making small talk with students is low. However, in the intense environment of the ship, this feeling gradually became the norm for me, and I felt guilty about it. I was caught in a downward spiral. Compounding this sense of social solitude was my inability to communicate with family and close friends during the voyage due to the absence of an internet connection. This social isolation significantly contributed to the decline in my mental health.

Recovery. When I returned to my family home at the end of March 2023, I immediately sought medical help with my symptoms. I was diagnosed as suffering from depression and anxiety, and I was excused from work indefinitely. Things did not improve until around six weeks later, when I started to have short periods of feeling normal. I have a lovely home, a loving wife, and two great sons. Being in such a secure, loving and supportive environment contributed greatly to my recovery. I also started connecting with extended family more frequently and on a deeper level. This reconnecting with people was instrumental in my recovery. By the beginning of June, I was feeling back to my old self and resumed teaching again, albeit with a reduced workload. Writing these words in May 2024, I would say that I am fully recovered. The voyage lasted for a month, and it was too much for me. We all have different breaking points, and I clearly reached mine on the ship.

In light of the author's experience, a number of relatively straightforward

measures could be implemented to help to prevent a non-Japanese teacher undergoing similar difficulties while participating on the voyage, or other similarly intense contexts. Firstly, two non-Japanese teachers could participate instead of one. In this way, the pair could provide emotional support for each other. Each could be a soundboard for the other; an outlet to talk things through, and to vent frustration if necessary.

Another helpful step would be to better clarify the teacher's role while onboard. This would help to minimize any ambiguity and confusion inevitably present to some degree due to unavoidable linguistic and cultural miscommunication. Finally, clear guidelines for self-care practices in order to maintain one's mental health and wellbeing while on board should be part of the pre-voyage training for all teachers and administrative staff. Despite the importance and relative ease of implementing such measures, as far as the author is aware at the time of writing, no changes had been made to safeguard the mental wellbeing of the solitary non-Japanese teacher who participated in the voyage in the spring of 2024.

Case Study 2

This case study describes how the first author was unable to cope with an overwhelming workload. The issues contributing to this situation along with the subsequent burnout are described in detail. Again, some of these factors are unique to this particular case study, but overwork, exhaustion and burnout are, unfortunately, all too common in education.

Causal Context. In September of 2019, just before the start of the autumn term, one full-time teacher and one part-time teacher unexpectedly quit the university's English department. Neither resignation was anticipated but the full-time teacher left for medical reasons, and the part-time teacher found a permanent position at another university. Unfortunately, in the short time remaining before the term started in October, we could not secure any replacement faculty. Muroran is not Tokyo and as a small, blue-collar industrial town there is a very limited supply of potential adjunct faculty to draw on. In addition, timetabling issues meant that we could not cater to the availability of the one person who did express interest in

working at the university. As a result, each of the existing full-time faculty had to take on a significant number of extra classes. In my case, my workload increased from eight, ninety-minute classes a week, to thirteen classes, with two of those classes being taught on separate evenings from 8:15p.m. to 9:45p.m.

Concurrently, I was also working on the CREATE Project. This was a national educational project administered by Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) in conjunction with the Myanmar Ministry of Education. The aim of the project was to reform the entire Myanmar national primary school curriculum. I was one of two 'expert advisers' charged with planning, creating, and implementing the entire English curriculum. In practice, this meant week-long working trips to Myanmar every month, and almost daily coordination and contact with project members in order to meet various deadlines.

Stress. By late 2019 I was essentially working two full-time jobs. The constant strain of doing this was leading to insomnia. My mind would keep replaying the days' work, whilst also detailing what needed to be done the next day. It was an incessant loop of work badly done, work not completed, work yet to be started. Furthermore, there seemed to be no end to it. Any prospect of a break or temporary respite over the Christmas - New Year holiday period was extinguished by the demands of the CREATE Project. Understandably, since Myanmar is a predominantly Buddhist country, neither Christmas nor New Year are holidays.

At the end of January, the first reports started emerging from China of a highly infectious respiratory illness with a worryingly high mortality rate. By February, the world knew the term 'COVID' and because of it the world became a very different place.

For the CREATE Project, we had to suddenly switch our focus to editing the various textbooks for all of the elementary school grades, the related workbooks and teacher's guides so that they could be used for distance learning, with an emphasis on students self-studying with minimal resources. Then at the university, I was also co-opted onto a committee to design and implement an immediate plan for delivering all of our undergraduate and postgraduate classes online. In addition, I was concerned for my elderly parents back in Ireland. Their initial blithe disregard for COVID and aversion to mask wearing were very

disconcerting, particularly as I had no way of travelling back to Ireland to assist them should they fall ill.

Burnout & Depression. By the end of February 2020, I was physically and psychologically exhausted. An enervating combination of ongoing insomnia, constant anxiety, and never-ending work, with no sign of any let-up in sight led to what was subsequently diagnosed as 精神的崩壊 (*seishinteki hokai*), a mental breakdown. It was as if my mind had shut down. I withdrew from the world, staying in bed for the majority of the time, not communicating with family, friends, or work colleagues. My teenage son describes it as my "dark time", when days would go by without me talking to either him or my wife.

I lost a significant amount of weight and would occasionally have severe heart palpitations and dizzy spells. These symptoms particularly concerned my wife as my father has a history of high blood pressure and has suffered several heart attacks, though my depression left me personally indifferent to my condition. My depression left me both unable and unwilling to recognize what was happening to my health.

Recovery. There were two main factors that put me on the road to recovery. The first was my wife's consistent encouragement and cajoling to seek clinical psychiatric help. She arranged for me to visit a local psychiatrist. I found it difficult to relate my experiences to the doctor. He was sympathetic and offered good advice, but the cultural gap between us proved too much of a hindrance. My Japanese language competence was sufficient to articulate what was wrong with me and to understand the sensible advice he proffered, yet, I found it difficult to explain my feelings and my psychological state to this kindly Japanese gentleman. The problem was not so much *what* I wanted to say, but *how* I wanted to say it: the words, nuances, allusions, and metaphors I needed to use to describe my condition.

My wife was aware of my misgivings and so took it upon herself to see if there was any online English language counseling service I could use[1]. Initially we considered the Tokyo English Life Line (TELL), but after we looked at their roster of counsellors, they all seemed to be American. Although we shared the English language, the cultural gap remained.

She then found Helplink, a free Irish state-funded counseling service for Irish people living abroad. I had my first online counselling session on March 25th and then a further seven sessions held weekly until mid-May. Being able to talk through my depression with an Ireland-based counsellor who specialized in counselling Irish emigrants was both an unbelievable stroke of (Irish) good luck, and an immense help in dispelling my depression.

The second factor that contributed to my recovery was reengaging with my students. I enjoy teaching. The stay-at-home directive issued by the Japanese government meant that I did not need to be (nor could I have been) present in a physical classroom. However, the move to online teaching and learning allowed me to be partially present - even if only as a disembodied voice talking over a series of PowerPoint slides. This gradual, displaced return to teaching beginning in the third week of April (and after four counselling sessions) also provided a more specific set of goals to aim for. Rather than just a vague notion of 'improvement', I tried to focus on specific aspects of online teaching and how I could facilitate student-to-student interaction. This was especially necessary for my first-year students who were scattered all over Japan and had never met each other. Their initial university experience was one defined by distance, isolation, and minimal interaction with their fellow students and faculty.

My recovery was gradual but progressive. By the beginning of May, my 'dark time' had thankfully brightened. I was sleeping better and tentatively reengaging with my family and colleagues. I had withdrawn from the CREATE Project and the university had facilitated a reduction in both teaching hours and administrative work. The combination of professional counselling and a reduced workload proved to be highly effective in regaining my mental wellbeing.

Recommendations

Although readers of this paper are unlikely to be asked to participate in a month-long educational voyage onboard a research vessel, or work on a national-level curriculum, characteristics of both case studies can offer lessons which might be used to reduce any adverse effects of culturally-related stress on foreign teachers working in Japan. These recommendations emphasize some of the precautions and

remedies the reader can take at the individual level. A considerably more difficult challenge is instigating remedial changes at the institutional level. Although there is a growing awareness of the increased workload at Japanese universities and the concomitant pressure and stress this puts on faculty (Watanabe, 2011; Kita et al., 2022), institutionally instigated measures to counter these developments are tokenistic at best, for example, posters directing faculty to mental health lines and enjoinders to take more annual leave. The principal obstacle, as with so much of tertiary education, is finance. Universities are not in a position to take on extra faculty in order to alleviate the workload of current faculty.

The authors must also take some personal responsibility for how events transpired. Neither of us were coerced into participating in a maritime research trip or overhauling the Myanmar elementary school English curriculum. Our insufficient Japanese language ability and reluctance to firmly decline also played a part. However, this is with the benefit of hindsight. Circumstances beyond our immediate control also had a significant impact. This confluence of factors ultimately resulted in a rapid decline of our respective mental health, a prolonged depression, and belatedly some form of recovery. From these experiences we would like to offer the following recommendations.

Japanese Language Skills

Foreign faculty should continuously work on improving their Japanese language skills. It is often the case that good language teachers make for bad language learners. In the same way as we advise our students on how to learn English (or other foreign languages) better, so we should apply the same advice to ourselves when studying Japanese. Enroll in a language class, practice regularly, and immerse yourself in Japanese conversation as much as possible. Finding a Japanese 'study buddy' can help boost and maintain motivation. Also signing up for a Japanese language proficiency test or course can have a similar effect. At work, it is important to ask for help when problems of understanding due to language arise, as seeking assistance is more beneficial than pretending to understand. It might be tempting to feign understanding, but it is better to swallow one's pride and get help rather than storing up trouble for later.

Cultural Awareness and Sensitivity

It is also important for non-Japanese faculty to continually work on their levels of cultural awareness and sensitivity. Being able to understand cultural differences without immediate judgement can be an effective way to minimize frustration and other negative emotions (Bhaskar-Shrinivas, et al., 2005). Engage in some low-key anthropology. Observe and study Japanese customs and etiquette in both professional and personal contexts. Pay attention to non-verbal cues and body language as these are an important, albeit often overlooked part of Japanese communication.

Build relationships

Make an effort to build and maintain relationships, both professional and personal, with Japanese people. Join a local club, organization, or interest group to meet people who share your interest. It is a lot easier to communicate about something you are enthusiastic about. Be patient though; as with any group or organization gaining trust and building strong connections will take some time.

Social Connections

It is especially important that we prioritize and maintain our own established social connections with family and friends. Make a concerted effort to write emails, talk on the phone, meet for a coffee, or arrange a Zoom chat. Solid relationships will help us through the challenging times. Regularly and actively engaging with family and friends in order to nurture relationships will strengthen these connections.

Defined Work Responsibilities

Finally, both our experiences highlight the importance of clearly defining expectations and boundaries at work. It is essential to balance our professional and personal lives, and this means knowing when to turn down additional responsibilities.

Conclusion

It is the authors' hope that the accounts of their experiences will enable readers to gain some understanding of the impact of stress on our lives here in Japan. While

the extreme circumstances of the educational voyage in Case Study 1 exacerbated these factors, many of the same stressors are present to some degree in the daily lives of most expatriate teachers. Similarly, by understanding the effects of the excessive workload described in Case Study 2, teachers can be more aware of how they can take steps to ensure their own self-care and avoid falling into the same trap. By recognizing and addressing these factors, readers can better safeguard their mental well-being, ultimately contributing to a more fulfilling experience in Japan and better support for their students.

Notes

1. The Tokyo English Lifeline (TELL; https://telljp.com/ tel. 0800-300-8355) is not the only service available in Japan. Others include Befrienders Japan (https://www.befrienders-jpn.org/ tel. 81+03-5286-9090), International Association for Suicide Prevention (IASP; https://www.iasp.info/), Japan Healthcare Info (JHI; https://japanhealthinfo.com/), International Mental Health Professionals Japan (https://www.imhpj.org/), Japan 24-Hour Helpline (https://www.japanhelpline.com/), American Samaritans: Suicide hotline (24 hours, tel. +1-212-673-3000), and UK Samaritans: Suicide hotline (24 hours, tel. +44-8457 90 90 90).

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Appendix

Excerpts from social media messages to friends and family from the second author.

(*Facebook* message to friend 11.03.23)

I've been really struggling ***. It's been very tough. I've got anxiety all the time, just the intensity varies. I feel isolated on the ship because I don't understand what the other ten teachers are talking about, and I've not really managed to build any kind of relationship with any of them except one. Things reached a head after about a week, I hadn't slept a wink for two nights and I was at my wits end. I told my direct boss that I couldn't cope and I needed to get off the ship at the next port, that I was having a nervous breakdown.

(*Facebook* Message to father 22.03.23)

Hi Dad. I'm sleeping better, but I'm struggling. Everything seems overwhelming. I'm working through my list of things I've got to do, but I'm struggling with it. Life seems so complex and hard to manage. I want it to be simple.

(*Facebook* message to friend 20.04.23)

When we got to Ogasawara, I just felt so down, and I didn't understand why I felt that way. After all, we were in such a beautiful location. But inside, I felt awful. I couldn't sleep. Once I stopped sleeping properly, my condition got worse and worse. I'm back home now, and I've sunk into depression. I've been struggling to get out of it. I'm off work for two months. So I'm due to start work again at the end of May. My condition is improving but I still have bad days.