

Conversations That Changed Our Teaching: Appreciative Inquiry in a Graduate TESOL Program

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ABSTRACT

Traditional approaches to continuous professional development (CPD) have been increasingly criticized in recent years for adopting transmissive, deficit-oriented models that often discount and even undermine teachers' professional identities, agency, and wellbeing. To address this criticism, strengths-based approaches such as appreciative inquiry (AI) have been presented as viable alternatives that foreground teachers' existing expertise and future possibilities (Gregersen & Mercer, 2022; Gregersen et al., 2023). This paper describes a reflective practice intervention conducted within a graduate TESOL program in Japan that combined Appreciative Inquiry's "4D cycle" (Cooperrider et al., 2008) with Edge's (2002) continuing cooperative development framework. Four teacher-participants in an MA TESOL program engaged in a series of non-judgmental reflective dialogues focused on personally meaningful areas of their professional practice before producing written narrative reflections on their experiences. Our analysis of these personal reflections suggests that the intervention supported us in reframing our professional beliefs, strengthening teacher agency, clarifying professional identities, and translating reflective insights into concrete pedagogical action. Across

our four narratives, we identified psychologically safe dialogue as a key contributor underpinning these developmental processes, enabling us to explore challenges while maintaining a strengths-based focus. Our findings suggest that appreciative inquiry may represent a valuable model for teacher-led CPD by fostering reflective dialogue that simultaneously promotes professional learning and teacher wellbeing. Implications for reflective practice, language teacher education, and strengths-based professional development are discussed.

Keywords: continuous professional development, reflective practice, strengths-based learning, teacher wellbeing, teacher development

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, increased attention from both researchers and educational practitioners has been directed towards concerns over teacher wellbeing (Brierton & Gkonou, 2022; Mercer, 2023) and the potential role that continuous professional development may have as one coping strategy in order to negotiate stressors in teachers' daily lives (Barbieri et al., 2019; Nazari et al., 2024; Pentón Herrera, 2025; Yousefi & Hooper, 2025). Concurrently, however, many in the field (Cirocki & Farrell, 2017; Gameda et al., 2014; Godínez Martínez, 2018; Hayes, 2019) have questioned the value of traditional, transmissive approaches to CPD, stating that they disregard teachers' existing knowledge, beliefs, and identities in favor of "one-size-fits-all" interventions that position practicing teachers as needing to be "fixed."

Partly in response to such concerns, a number of advocates of reflective practice have foregrounded the importance of bottom-up CPD via collaborative and supportive dialogue in the examination of issues that really matter to individual teachers. Furthermore, even in a "critical friendship" (Farrell, 2018; Uchida & Rothman, 2023), such dialogue represents a face-threatening act as teachers lay their pedagogical beliefs and practice bare for a peer to examine. Therefore, the notion of non-judgmental reflective dialogue has been argued by some to be a possible way of circumventing the

potential affective pressures of reflective dialogue in relation to either learners (Kato & Mynard, 2015) or teachers (Edge, 2002, 2015).

One approach that could be regarded as conceptually well-placed to address many of the above concerns is appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider et al., 2008). As opposed to traditional CPD approaches that tend to be deficit-oriented, appreciative inquiry focuses on identifying existing strengths, developing those strengths into greater possibilities, and then formulating a workable action plan to amplify one's strengths even more going forward. Although there have been a handful of studies (Gregersen & Mercer, 2022; Gregersen et al., 2023) demonstrating how appreciative inquiry can lead to increased teacher self-efficacy, wellbeing, and reflection in pre-service teachers, inquiry into how it impacts in-service teachers is extremely scarce.

This paper outlines a strengths-based reflective practice intervention within a graduate TESOL program for in-service teachers in Japan. Drawing upon principles from both appreciative inquiry and Edge's (2002, 2025) non-judgmental continuous cooperative development, four teacher participant-researchers engaged in a series of reflective dialogue sessions and written post-reflections based on personally selected areas of professional curiosity, interest, and growth. Through sharing each participant's narrative reflections, we hope to explore how appreciative inquiry impacted our professional identities and practices while also discussing the viability of similar approaches as options for wellbeing-supportive teacher-centered CPD.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Continuous Professional Development and Language Teacher Well-Being

Continuous professional development (CPD) refers to a long-term process of other- or self-initiated training, reflection, or exploration that professionals engage in to "maintain the knowledge and skills related to their professional lives" (Collin et al., 2012, p. 156). CPD tends to be on a sliding scale from more formalized or institutionally-mandated interventions to more grassroots, informal, and teacher-initiated initiatives. A more formal example of CPD might be a school bringing in an external party, such as a highly-regarded trainer or academic, to "transmit" knowledge

and train teachers in a given skill or methodology. Conversely, informal CPD might be something as simple as a weekly group where colleagues meet to dialogically explore puzzles and challenges that they have encountered in their classrooms.

In the case of the top-down, transmissive CPD that tends to dominate the educational field (Hayes, 2019), it can be argued that, while certain teachers may potentially derive value and skills from such initiatives, there are concerns over whether it truly meshes with teachers' needs (Gemeda et al., 2014) or professional curiosity (Mercer & Pawlak, 2024). Furthermore, it has been claimed that transmissive CPD implicitly aligns with a deficit framing of in-service teachers as needing to be "fixed" rather than "acknowledg[ing] the backgrounds, beliefs, stances and teacher experiences that practitioners possess' (Godínez Martínez, 2018, p. 427). Simply on a practical level, numerous accounts have claimed that such CPD approaches, that fail to include the teachers themselves as active, agentic stakeholders and contributors, are unlikely to engender any meaningful or long-lasting change in the classroom (Cirocki & Farrell, 2017; Gemeda et al., 2014; Hayes, 2019). Conversely, it has been found that if CPD resonates with teachers' professional interests and focuses on issues that truly matter to them, it can represent a valuable source of empowerment and motivation (Cirocki & Farrell, 2017; Mercer & Pawlak, 2024).

Furthermore, the issue of CPD and its efficacy has, in recent years, been tied to the issue of teacher wellbeing. Issues of teacher wellbeing, attrition, and burnout have gained increased prominence in the field in recent years (Brierton & Gkonou, 2022; Feryok, 2025; Pentón Herrera et al., 2023), and arguably, effective CPD has a role to play in bolstering teachers and helping them deal with the pressures of the profession. This, and other studies (Mercer, 2021; Sulis et al., 2024; Yousefi & Hooper, 2025), conceptualize teacher wellbeing from an *ecological-eudaimonic* perspective, which means that wellbeing stems from effectively functioning and thriving in the profession in a personally meaningful way while both influencing and being influenced by localized (personal/institutional) and broader (sociopolitical) factors. With this in mind, by pivoting from a deficit model and instead providing an interaction space in which teachers can utilize CPD to examine and interrogate their professional identities and curiosities, teachers can conceivably enhance their own wellbeing (Nazari et al., 2024;

Pentón Herrera, 2025; Yousefi & Hooper, 2025), and thereby, the quality of learning of their students (Briner & Dewberry, 2007).

Reflective Dialogue and Non-Judgmental Discourse

One mode of teacher-driven CPD that is well established within the field of language education is reflective practice (RP), and in particular, forms of RP that heavily draw upon reflective dialogue and critical friendships (Farrell, 2018; Gill & Hooper, 2020; Uchida & Rothman, 2023). In a more general sense, RP has been demonstrated to help teachers to maintain professional motivation (Ciriocki & Farrell, 2017) and examine areas of pedagogical curiosity including the connection (or gap) between teachers' beliefs and their actual in-class practices (Gill & Hooper, 2020; Watanabe, 2016). However, in collaboration with teaching peers, this process has the potential to be enhanced further. Congruent with insights from sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986), a number of researchers and teacher educators (Johnson & Golombek, 2016; Mann & Walsh, 2017) have highlighted the vital importance of dialogue in developmental processes. As such, by sharing classroom reflections or data and discussing it with others, teachers can build “contexts which create opportunities for learning potential” in which “new ideas are expressed, doubts aired and concerns raised” (Mann & Walsh, 2017, p. 33).

However, despite the compelling arguments over “why” dialogic RP should be incorporated into a teacher's CPD, there still remains a question over “how” this might be manifested in practice. Edge (2015) has argued that, because teaching is inextricably linked to teacher identity, sharing one's experiences, beliefs, and practices with others can leave teachers feeling exposed. As a result, RP has the potential to become an intensely face-threatening act. Consequently, Edge proposed a non-judgmental approach to dialogic RP known as *continuing cooperative development* (Edge, 2002). Within this approach, there are two main roles; 1) the “speaker” - who shares and reflects upon their professional curiosities, challenges, and questions, and 2) the “listener” - whose job it is to help the speaker make the most of the interactional space whilst withholding judgement. In parallel with practices from language learner advising (Kato & Mynard, 2015), within continuing cooperative development the listener adopts a non-judgmental

advisory role and utilizes interactional moves such as paraphrasing, probing, and summarizing to scaffold the speaker and help them to reach deeper insights. While Edge's continuing cooperative development could conceivably mitigate some of the potentially face-threatening elements of dialogic reflective practice, due to the predominantly top-down and deficit-focused nature of much CPD (Godínez Martínez, 2018; Hayes, 2019), it could be argued that an explicit focus on teacher strengths rather than shortcomings is a worthwhile extra addition to a well-being-supportive CPD approach.

Appreciative Inquiry

One strengths-based approach predicated on transformative rather than transmissive principles is appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider et al., 2008) - a means of 'seek[ing] out the best of what *is* to help ignite the collective imagination of what *might be*' (p. xi) (emphasis added). A common appreciative inquiry framework that has underpinned numerous existing studies (He, 2013; Hilao-Valencia & Ortega-Dela Cruz, 2023; Kaplan, 2014; Yousefi & Hooper, 2025) is the "4D cycle" (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Appreciative Inquiry's "4D Cycle" (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005)



In the initial “Discovery” phase, participants are encouraged to pinpoint personal and situational strengths that they already possess. In the “Dream” phase, they draw upon these strengths and take them one step further in order to create a vivid idealized vision of what might be. Next, moving on to the “Design” stage, participants work to determine realistic, viable avenues for moving closer to their “Dream” vision. Finally, in the “Destiny” phase, participants “publicly declare intended actions” (Cooperrider et al. 2008, p. 200) and begin taking concrete steps within their context to actualize the positive possibilities they have identified. In relation to discussions of teacher-led CPD, appreciative inquiry has clear potential as it eschews a deficit framing of teachers as “empty vessels” (Godínez Martínez 2018, p. 428) in need of fixing. Furthermore, this process is also grounded in dialogue and action focused on issues that are selected as personally meaningful and interesting by teachers (Mercer & Pawlak, 2024) and congruent with their professional identities rather than a “one-fits-all” approach.

Consequently, in recent years, several studies have examined the potential of appreciative inquiry for both stimulating teacher reflection and fostering professional wellbeing. Both Gregersen & Mercer (2022) and Gregersen et al. (2023) present practical ways in which appreciative inquiry can be integrated into RP for language teachers and highlight the benefits this may offer for pre-service teachers. These studies illustrated the positive impact of appreciative inquiry-oriented interventions on teachers’ well-being, confidence, sense of authenticity, and their awareness and acceptance of diverse teaching styles. A more recent study by Yousefi and Hooper (2025) added to this earlier work as they conducted an RP intervention with in-service Iranian English teachers that followed the “4D cycle.” This study reported that appreciative inquiry reinforced participants’ sense of self-efficacy and agency as it foregrounded ways in which they might “shape (rather than solely being shaped by) their context” (p. 24). Finally, the individually-tailored focus on each teacher’s strengths, challenges, curiosities, and values was claimed by some teachers to represent a “me space” (p. 18) within CPD.

With the issues outlined above in mind, we will now proceed to outline a strengths-based RP approach that was conducted in a graduate TESOL program in Japan to draw upon the transformative power of dialogue, to deepen teachers’

understandings of their own professional strengths and affordances, and to stimulate positive future direction across their careers.

3. METHODS

Participants

When these RP sessions took place, Dan was an instructor in an MA TESOL program in central Japan. Russell, Tomoko, and Gabe were all students enrolled in the same course (Sociocultural Theory). All authors voluntarily stated both orally and in written form (via Google Forms) that they wished to collaborate in this project and were informed that participation was completely optional and not related to their course grades in any way. Information about the authors' teaching contexts, nationalities, and degree of teaching experience can be found in Table 1.

Table 1

Participant Information

Name	Nationality	Teaching Context/Position	Years of Teaching Experience	Reflection Partner
Dan	British	Tenured associate professor at a private university	20 years	Tomoko
Russell	British	Part-time lecturer at a private university	7 years	Gabe
Tomoko	Japanese	Part-time teacher at a public junior high school	17 years	Dan
Gabe	Brazilian-Canadian	Full-time lecturer at a private university	15 years	Russell

Positionality

Although this study was conducted within a graduate school class, the aims of the non-judgmental and strengths-focused dialogues were to emphasize the personal interests and curiosities of practicing teachers and deemphasize the notion of “good teaching” as

a monolith. Therefore, the course instructor (Dan) took part in the reflective process not as an instructor, but as an equal participant who would avoid prescriptivism and instead attempt to support the other teachers (and in particular, his partner, Tomoko) in coming to their own reflective understandings. Additionally, from the theoretical perspectives of both sociocultural theory and teacher wellbeing, teachers' professional contexts, personal learning histories, and individuals' emotional lenses have an immense impact on the degree to which they feel they are able to thrive as professionals. As such, we felt that it was important to include our real names and professional circumstances in this study so that the reader may get a deeper and more well-rounded understanding of the discoveries that we made throughout this project.

Procedure

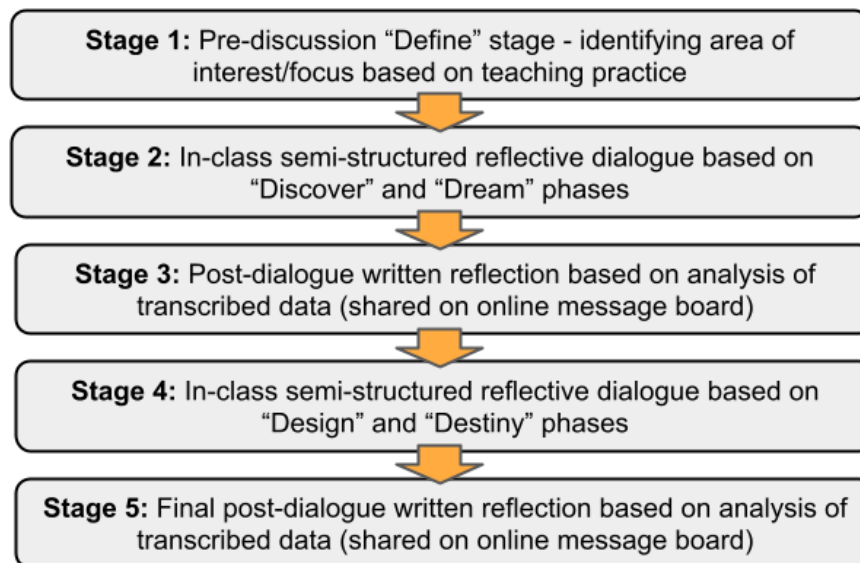
The first stage of the project was to familiarize all participants with the concept of appreciative inquiry as well as the non-judgmental philosophy and interactional techniques of Edge's continuing cooperative development. Then, before the reflective dialogue sessions began, each team member was asked that during their teaching in the month prior to the first session, they identify and consider a particular area of interest that they wished to focus on. This could have been something broader such as "student motivation" (Dan), or a more focused topic like "vocabulary instruction" (Russell) or "managing writing feedback" (Gabe). Within more recent appreciative inquiry literature, this actually represents an additional stage (from 4D to a 5D cycle) of "Define," in which participants "choose the affirmative topic or focus for the inquiry" (The Center for Appreciative Inquiry, 2026, para. 4).

Once these points of personal interest had been identified, participants were assigned pairs in the following class and conducted reflective dialogue sessions utilizing interview protocols informed by the "Discovery" and "Dream" stages of the 4D cycle (Appendix A). Each dialogue session was conducted in a semi-structured format that made sure key points were addressed while also allowing for exploration of any additional points of interest that emerged from the participant reflections. These sessions were audio-recorded and later transcribed. In the case of Dan and Tomoko, Tomoko's in-person dialogue sessions were conducted primarily in Japanese (her L1) in order to allow for easier expression and deeper reflective insights (all

recorded/transcribed excerpts were later translated into English firstly using AI and subsequently checked by Tomoko and Dan). Following the first session, all participants were asked to analyze their transcribed data from the first session by identifying and discussing areas of personal interest or professional salience in relation to their previously-established “Define” focus. and subsequently share written reflective posts on the class Moodle page based on their personal takeaways and realizations. In the next class, this process was repeated based on the “Design” and “Destiny” stages (Appendix B) and concluded with one final written reflection. A visualization of this process has been included in Figure 2 for clarity.

Figure 2

Our Appreciative Inquiry Reflection Process



4. TEACHER REFLECTIONS

In the following sections, each member of our team will share the discoveries and insights that they gained from this process and highlight the impact that this type of

non-judgmental, strengths-based intervention had on their personal development as a teaching professional.

Dan's Reflection

The reflective dialogue sessions that Tomoko guided me through impacted my teacher development and self-awareness in two distinct ways: 1. reframed language learning/teaching connections as strengths rather than weaknesses, and 2. catalyzed my teaching beliefs and goals into positive concrete action. In the following section, I will outline these two areas of growth whilst providing concrete examples of how they were facilitated by strength-based reflective dialogue.

Language Learner and Teacher Identities as Merged

The strengths-based focus of the 4D cycle along with the non-judgmental approach that Tomoko took with me afforded me interactional space with which I could potentially reframe various elements of my language teacher and language learner shelves in more positive ways. Tomoko was repeating my utterances and gently nudging me to lay out my beliefs while encouraging a focus on what I offer rather than what I do not. In the following excerpt, we discussed how I felt my lack of ability as a Japanese speaker helped me become a better teacher by enhancing the empathy I felt towards struggling students. Tomoko subtly reframed my self-deprecating beliefs as being based on my insecurity or “complex” about Japanese proficiency (something that I perceived) rather than my Japanese being poor (an objective flaw). She also arguably attempted to highlight a growth mindset (Dweck, 2006) perspective as she foregrounded the notion of process over result in her comment, “*You think so? But, you know, the progress to get...*”, withholding direct judgement but also echoing the very same attitude I try to encourage in my students.

Excerpt 1.

Discover and Dream stage, November, 2025

Dan: So, I believe my weakness is my strength in a way. My weakness in Japanese is my strength as an English teacher.

Tomoko: You think so? But, you know, the progress to get...

Dan: Yeah. Or maybe my insecurity as a Japanese learner. Kind of complex or whatever.

Tomoko: Complex.

Dan: ...is my part of my strength as an English teacher.

What I later came to understand through my analysis of our session is that I tended to frame this type of gradual development in my students as a sign of positive growth while simultaneously citing a similar trait in myself as evidence of inadequacy. Consequently, this became a kind of “aha moment” (Kato & Mynard, 2015) that, at least in part, catalyzed a positive perspective change.

Excerpt 2.

Reflective Post #1

I always knew there was some connection, but my conversation with Tomoko helped me understand more clearly **how** [my language learning and teaching] are connected... Through talking with Tomoko, I realized that the less pleasant parts of my language-learning journey have actually contributed to the more fulfilling, self-efficacious aspects of my teaching.

(Reflective Post #1 - emphasis original)

From Thought to Words to Action

However, in line with appreciative inquiry’s focus on transformational change, my dialogues with Tomoko were not limited to “navel gazing” (Hooper, 2020) or abstract academic musings, but rather led to later concrete pedagogical action based on my discoveries. The most significant example of this came from our first dialogue where Tomoko asked about one classroom moment that symbolized my love for teaching. I described one student, Rin (pseudonym), who managed, through hard work and determination, to build her class performance from a B average to a S (excellent) grade in her final presentation.

Excerpt 3.

Discover and Dream stage, November, 2025

Dan: And I remember now very clearly when I told her she got a S.

Tomoko: Oh, really?

Dan: She just did so much better than most of the [fluent] kids. She just really worked hard. And when I told her, she jumped. She was so happy. And I was like, this is why I do this. This is why I love teaching.

Later in our dialogue, Tomoko and I discussed how one of my goals in an ideal situation would be for students to realize, even if they lack confidence, what a positive impact they can (and often do) have on others around them (see Excerpt 2).

Excerpt 4.

Discover and Dream stage, November, 2025

Tomoko: So, what would give you the greatest sense of satisfaction or joy as a teacher?

Dan: So, a student who maybe wasn't feeling very empowered, becoming a role model to other people, and realizing that they were a role model. Realizing, "Oh, wow, I am having this much positive impact on other people."

At that time, something clicked in me, and I realized that the profound impact that Rin had on me through her success was probably unknown to her. This was something that I could resolve easily through a simple email and something that could be potentially empowering to her as a learner and a person. By complete chance, however, I did not need to write the email to her as, by chance, in the following week I ran into Rin on campus for the first time that academic year and I was able to share the positive impact that her effort had had on me as a teacher.

Excerpt 5.

Reflective Post #1

As I resolved to do based on my first discussion with Tomoko, I told her about how much her hard work and reaction to her high score really impacted me and

motivated me as a teacher. She seemed really happy and she told me that actually that event meant a lot to her as well. She shared that, during her job hunting, she referred to that event as an example of a time that she successfully overcame something with hard work. Finally, she kindly stated that she was really glad she had me as her first-grade teacher - I was quite moved.

This serendipitous moment and the feelings of positivity that appeared to be catalyzed from it in both Rin and I, subsequently encouraged me to foster more opportunities for positive awareness-raising classroom activities among peers in my classes. I, therefore, followed up with a class visit by my third-year seminar students to one of my first-year classes where the senior students described how they had overcome language learning challenges in the past and fielded questions from their juniors. I noticed a marked positive difference between the regular class atmosphere and how the younger learners interacted with these “near-peer role models” (Murphey, 1998). In keeping with my resolution to enhance learners’ awareness of their positive impact on others, I related to the senior students that, “I saw the way they were looking at you guys” and that it seemed like “you guys were like heroes to them” (Dialogue 2).

In summary, my dialogues with Tomoko felt safe and non-judgmental to me. She never imposed her perspectives on me or claimed that my beliefs were incorrect. At the same time, however, along with the appreciative inquiry-inspired protocol, she was able to gently nudge me towards considering more constructive interpretations of my teaching self and my professional practice rather than simply allowing me to fall into the trap of harsh self-criticism. This, in turn, from my perspective facilitated my awareness of key opportunities such as sharing positive impacts between teacher and student and between peers that I could then transform into tangible pedagogical action.

Russell’s Reflection

The two dialogue sessions with my (Russell) partner helped my development in two ways: (1) I was able to refine my approach to teaching vocabulary, and (2) I strengthened my practice of active listening.

Based on student interviews that I conducted, I learned that students perceived vocabulary development as their primary learning need. Although this confirmed my intention to prioritize vocabulary instruction in the following year, I was uncertain about how to achieve this goal. During the dialogue shown in Excerpt 1, I discussed creating a vocabulary corpus and considered looking into the literature on the New General Service List (NGSL), but expressed in line 01 my concern about the volume of words in the NGSL. The following exchange with Gabe allowed me to identify a manageable target of 100 words in line 05. In line 08, Gabe raised an important question about how I plan to achieve this new target. In line 09, I began brainstorming materials I could use, such as audio recordings of interviews and student conversations, as well as tools such as AI to help develop my vocabulary corpus.

Excerpt 1.

Design and Destiny stage, December, 2025

01 **Russell:** Obviously, there's like 2000 words, and I can't.

02 **Gabe:** 15 weeks. Yeah. I'm not good at 2000 words in 15 weeks, right? Kids remember 120 words for a week.

03 **Russell:** But I could introduce 10 words that could help them. And I don't know, over 15 weeks, maybe a hundred words over 15 weeks...

04 **Gabe:** Yeah.

05 **Russell:** After 15 weeks, do you still, how much of the 100 words do you remember?

06 **Gabe:** Mm-Hm.

07 **Russell:** Right.

08 **Gabe:** Yeah. That's a really good idea. And I mean, the NGSL is like, some words are more useful than others...what resources or time materials or support might help you move your vision...

09 **Russell:** Yeah. So yeah, the interviews would help...looking through students' conversations. I've had, I've done audio recordings every week this semester...and then have AI figure out these are the common words they need, and then start from there.

10 **Gabe:** Yeah, that's a really good idea. Those are really good moves...

Additionally, my time in the “listener” role strengthened my active listening strategies. Rather than directing or advising immediately, I practiced asking open and strength-based questions while also giving Gabe the interactional space to articulate and explain their thoughts. Gabe was describing their struggles with grading students’ writing during the semester and the time it takes to complete it. Because I also taught writing classes and had experience grading student writing, I felt the urge to share my own approach. However, congruent with the “listener” role, I resisted that impulse and instead focused on listening and asking probing questions, as shown in Excerpt 2. My questions in lines 01 and 05, along with continuers such as “Okay” in lines 03, 07, and 09, helped my partner continue developing their ideas. I believe my questions in lines 11 and 13 helped keep the conversation productive by focusing on what is going well in the classes. This practice enhanced my active listening skills. Later, when I applied this approach in class, I found that students were often more willing to speak in English, possibly because they had greater interactional space before responding. I intend to continue refining my active listening in the classroom while further developing the approaches that emerged from these dialogues.

Excerpt 2.

Discover and Dream stage, November, 2025

01 **Russell:** Do you think that's a- do you feel that's sufficient for you? Would you like to spend more time or less time?

02 **Gabe:** Less time.

03 **Russell:** Okay.

04 **Gabe:** Yeah.

05 **Russell:** What's your ideal time you would like to spend?

06 **Gabe:** To be honest, I think less would be better, but I think I struggle with, I don't think I have a number of like...

07 **Russell:** Okay.

08 **Gabe:** ...of the number. But I feel, again, I struggle with it because some of my students afterwards, they tell me that it was really valuable.

09 **Russell:** Okay.

10 **Gabe:** And it's kind of, that's why I end up taking so long, I think.

11 **Russell:** Yeah. So, what goes well? What do you think is going well with the grading?

12 **Gabe:** I think, again, for about half the students, they really take it to heart...they're really excited that they're getting good grades in essay writing...

13 **Russell:** Do you have an example of a student that gave you positive feedback...good experience from your grading?

Although my partner and I were not particularly close beforehand, the dialogue felt comfortable and productive. We were both respectful and allowed each other space to speak without dominating the interaction. I think this balanced dynamic contributed to the reflective quality of the dialogue and made it easier to openly discuss our concerns.

Tomoko's Reflection

Through our initial dialog in the Discover and Dream stages, I (Tomoko) found my prior experiences to have profoundly shaped my pedagogical approach to English language instruction. I had been treated disrespectfully multiple times in the past, which shaped my perception of language learning. If I had been able to study English in a place where I felt comfortable, I would have been less hesitant to talk to people from all over the world, and my attitude towards learning English would have been completely different.

Excerpt 1.

Discover and Dream stage, November, 2025

Tomoko: My own experience. Learning English in middle and high school was basically useless. Since I hadn't used it at all as an adult, I had to relearn it all. I think six years were wasted. so, from that experience, I want to give my students an environment where they can speak English without feeling embarrassed.

Dan: So, in a way, you're trying to fix something that went wrong in your own past through your teaching now.

Tomoko: Yes, I want to change things now. but even if I change my classes, I don't know what the long-term outcomes will be. Also, since the exams haven't changed, even if the classes change, adjusting to the exams is still a challenge.

In excerpt 1, I talked about English education in Japan and saw English education in Japan as a tool for exams, with little intrinsic value. As Dan paraphrased my words, "You're trying to fix something that went wrong in your own past through your teaching now", I realized that my negative experiences had driven a desire within me to remedy these problematic issues in my own classes. This insight, based on my own experience, gave me a strong motivation to change the current English education system as an English teacher. Next, the discussion shifted to involving students and working as a team, and how to conduct effective lessons through collaboration with students and other teachers.

Excerpt 2.

Discover and Dream stage, November, 2025

Dan: So, more collaborative learning.

Tomoko: Yes, a team. Sometimes I join, the ALT joins, and since our school is small, other teachers sometimes join too. It feels like the whole school is one team.

Dan: It's wonderful to have support from others.

Excerpt 2 foregrounds the positive role of collaborative teaching in my context. When Dan said, "It's wonderful to have support from others", I realized that effective teaching is made possible through collaboration with other teachers. For students who spend a substantial portion of their daily lives at school, teachers often represent the most significant adult figures in their social environment, second only to their parents in terms of frequency and depth of interaction. Therefore, the relationships between teachers have a huge impact on students. I have witnessed multiple times classrooms fall apart when the teachers were unable to communicate well with other teachers. This dialogue made me realize how fortunate I am to be in my current situation, and that classes are not something that I create in isolation, but rather something that everyone

works on together. Moving on to the dream stage, clearly expressing my desires allowed me to create a more concrete and refined image of the English teacher I wanted to be.

Excerpt 3.

Discover and Dream stage, November, 2025

Dan: What kind of teacher do you hope to become?

Tomoko: Well, I want to be one who respects each student, creates a safe environment for discussion, and builds a comfortable atmosphere.

Dan: So, you mean you want to be a teacher who can create a democratic teaching and a safe and secure atmosphere, right?

Tomoko: Yes, I really hope so.

In excerpt 3, I stated, “I want to be one who respects each student, creates a safe environment for discussion, and builds a comfortable atmosphere.” I believe this was the “aha moment” that changed my thoughts the most throughout the appreciative inquiry process. Up until that point, I had believed that my goal was to enhance students’ English proficiency through instruction tailored to each learner’s individual needs. Unexpectedly, however, this led to the comfortable place I had wanted in my own language learning history, as mentioned in Excerpt 1. True education is not simply about teachers instructing students what to do. I became aware of how and why I valued a supportive and inclusive environment where all learners, regardless of their proficiency level, can engage in learning safely and meaningfully. Therefore, I continue to work towards creating an inclusive classroom environment where all students feel comfortable participating, can boost their confidence, and change their attitude towards learning English.

In the second dialog in the design and destiny stage (Excerpt 4), I examined my pedagogical shift from the Audio-Lingual Method (ALM) to Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Since this April, I have been planning all the lessons myself implementing CLT. As a result, my students got good results on the official test in December.

Excerpt 4.

Design and Destiny stage, December, 2025

Tomoko: While I appreciate the students' comments, what makes me happiest is being able to see their progress in number[s]

Dan: Is this the best for you?

Tomoko: Yeah, this is the best. Here it comes! Everyone was so happy.

Dan: Well, regarding the result, do you consider it to be your happiest memory?

When Dan asked me, “Do you consider it to be your happiest memory?” I realized I may have focused solely on the student results and forgot what was important to me. Dan’s words brought me back to my senses. This was also an “aha moment” (Kato & Mynard, 2016) that led me to reconsider my framing of the purpose of my students’ education. Achieving goals is not the sole objective. The process itself holds significant value, as it constitutes the pathway through which results are attained. Even in the face of failure, meaningful learning opportunities can emerge. Through the act of verbalizing, I was made aware of my true feelings, which were deep within my heart.

In summary, the sense of security from not being judged or criticized allowed me to connect with my true feelings that I had kept hidden deep inside. I usually play the role of a “safe version of myself” to conform to the expectations and gazes of others, but this time I was able to listen to my own true voice. True feelings can include anxiety and weakness. I was able to confront these emotions directly, clarify what I currently need, and construct an achievable vision for the future.

Gabe’s Reflection

The interviewer plays an important role during an appreciative inquiry interview. In my (Gabe) experience, Russell’s calm demeanor and silence provided space for me to reflect deeply into each question. Moreover, he summarized and rephrased my ideas, allowing me to view the topic from a different perspective. This happened during the first (Discovery) phase. Originally, my goal was to reduce the amount of time I spent grading. Russell summarized that each essay required about one hour to grade, leading him to inquire about the ideal grading time. This was a critical moment that revealed my views on grading.

Excerpt 1.

Discover and Dream stage, November, 2025

Russell: What's your ideal time you would like to spend?

Gabe: To be honest, I think less would be better, but I think I struggle with, I don't think I have a number of like...

Russell: Okay.

Gabe: ...of the number. But I feel, again, I struggle with it because some of my students afterwards, they tell me that it was really valuable.

Russell: Okay.

Gabe: And it's kind of, that's why I end up taking so long, I think.

After the first session, we reflected on our experiences in the Discovery and Dream phases. Reviewing and reflecting on our dialogues reinforced my memories of students' positive feedback on collaborative and communicative activities. It encouraged me to discuss with other teachers and students about the writing courses to get new ideas on how I might improve the grading process.

Excerpt 2.

Reflective Post #1

...I still don't have a solution on what good feedback is and how much time I should spend on it. However, I will continue to ask my students if the information is valuable to them and how to find this balance.

During the second session, Russell guided me to explore ideas on how to realistically implement self-assessment. He asked powerful questions that helped me organize a plan to transition from teacher feedback to peer-feedback, and finally self-assessment. Moreover, a discussion with Tomoko inspired me to display student-produced work to provide concrete examples on my expectations of students' self-assessment work. This was another puzzle piece that helped me to plan a progressive transition that may help students learn to analyze essays.

Excerpt 3.

Design and Destiny stage, December, 2025

Russell: ...So looking ahead, what does continued development in self-assessment look like for you over the next few months, next year?

Gabe: Yeah, probably the next year because I think it's going to take a few trials.... Tomoko's idea to me just clicked... if I show a good example of feedback, the students that are struggling with it, they might click on what they're missing or how to look at an essay...

I was fortunate to work with a group of teachers from different backgrounds and working in different environments. This allowed me to reframe my perspectives and understand my own teaching holistically. Furthermore, I felt that having Russell give me dialogic space by providing non-judgmental support and listening critically was essential in deepening my understanding of my beliefs, approaches, and goals. Originally, my goal in this project was simply to reduce the time required for grading, but it evolved into ensuring the assessment stayed helpful in a sustainable manner.

As a first-time user of non-judgmental reflective dialogue, I struggled to balance between having a free flow conversation and remaining accurately on target. I believe that more experience would eventually allow me to more meaningfully flow through the discussion topics. The dialogue sessions were excellent opportunities for me to gain clarity on my beliefs and views on teaching. They helped put a clear goal that kept me searching for answers throughout the month. It was an invaluable first step, planting a seed that reframed my views and highlighted possible next steps to help me grow over the following months.

Excerpt 4.

Reflective Post #2

Russell did an excellent job asking questions that helped me overcome some challenges I had been struggling with. While he interviewed me, I realized that I had already been doing a lot of peer-assessment, and that I could transition from peer to self-assessment without requiring much more class time.

I am eager to experiment with self-assessment in my future classrooms, and I look forward to improving my teaching skills with the help of my peers and students. Hopefully, this will support my students to achieve their goals and improve their skills.

5. DISCUSSION

One notable point that we took from the data was that while this individually-tailored approach to CPD allowed us to examine areas of professional practice that we were curious about or invested in, this was by no means wholly positive in nature. Although the 4D cycle nudged us towards identifying and enhancing strength, it did not mean that the areas of classroom practice that caused us insecurity, frustration, or anxiety were absent from our dialogues. Rather, appreciative inquiry provided us “a lens through which [we could] reframe the challenges and opportunities in [our] specific teaching context[s] in new positive ways” (Yousefi & Hooper, 2025, p. 640). Our dialogues made no attempt to obfuscate the fact that we all faced real contextual constraints and struggles, but instead allowed us to foreground our self-efficacy and capacity for professional agency so that we might reframe them in more positive ways and highlight new possibilities. We see several instances of this in our RP data, with Dan, Tomoko, and Gabe coming to recognize the social resources they had access to in the form of their colleagues, students, and MA peers and how they could be operationalized in the future.

This was taken a step further with some teachers taking concrete action based on the new understandings they reached through reflective dialogue. Dan set about contacting past students who had inspired him in order to enhance their self-efficacy and invited near-peer role models to his class to engender the same feelings of being valued in them. Gabe went on to display student-produced work in his classes in order to scaffold other students’ development. In the case of Russell, the non-judgmental active listening strategies that we practiced were something that he went on to incorporate in his professional repertoire. In these ways, we can see that both the content and form of our dialogues stimulated positive directed action taken by teachers so that they could potentially move closer to what *they* defined as good practice. The

fact that each session was grounded in each teacher's professional interest and curiosity arguably increased the likelihood of dialogue translating into action and, in a wider sense, teacher wellbeing. As identified in existing research (Mercer, 2021; Mercer & Pawlak, 2024; Yousefi & Hooper, 2025), the perceived presence (or absence) of professional meaning and the satisfaction of basic psychological needs of autonomy, relatedness, and competence (Ryan & Deci, 2017) is a fundamental element underpinning teacher wellbeing. By having the *autonomy* (ability to act volitionally) to set the agenda for discussion, building *relatedness* (a sense of belonging and a feeling of being cared for by others) with professional peers, and in developing *competence* (self-efficacy) by identifying viable areas for agentic action within one's particular teaching context, one might argue that this type of appreciative inquiry-oriented RP approach could positively contribute to in-service teachers' psychoemotional wellbeing.

However, despite the potentially positive impact of appreciative inquiry on our CPD, this appears to be only one part of the puzzle, with each of us referring to the importance of psychological safety throughout our reflective dialogue sessions. All of us described how non-judgmental and supportive stances from our peers helped us to feel secure and delve deeper into our reflections, with Tomoko stating that they were able to move from presenting a "safe version of myself" to sharing their "own true voice" with their partner. As previously discussed, Russell took this step further by electing to integrate active listening and a non-judgmental approach into his interactions with students. Therefore, based on these insights, one might argue that although appreciative inquiry may represent a "lens" for reflection and self-efficacy, in order for it to be used to its greatest potential, psychologically safe conditions may need to be created for teachers. Sharing our teaching successes, worries, and puzzles can be an intensely face-threatening act (Edge, 2015), and even if, as in the case of appreciative inquiry, reflective dialogue is positive in orientation, without ground rules or guiding principles that build a sense of mutual trust, it is unlikely to be truly transformative. In such cases, we are in danger of even strengths-based reflective dialogue becoming purely superficial lip service, another example of what Thomas Farrell (Pang, 2017) refers to as "fake... reflection" (p. 4).

One final point of note relates to how the active listening techniques observable in both continuing cooperative development (Edge, 2002, 2015) and language learning

advising (Kato & Mynard, 2015), such as clarifying, paraphrasing, summarizing, and probing, worked in concert with the appreciative inquiry-oriented questions to facilitate deeper understanding and positive self-regard in the speaker. The listener's role in our dialogues was consistently active, seen in Tomoko's reframing of Dan's self-deprecation as a "complex" rather than a "fact" and also Dan's "powerful question" (Kato & Mynard, 2015, p. 24) as they asked, "...do you consider it to be your happiest memory?" In these cases, active listening/advising techniques allowed the listeners to gently stimulate deeper reflection while not imposing their will or preconceptions onto the speaker. Sometimes the listener's role was as simple as remaining silent, withholding advice, and giving simple backchannelling phrases like "okay" or "yeah" that encourage the speaker to continue while showing that they are being carefully listened to. In this way, we found that the listener role contributed a great deal to our reflective dialogues and created an environment that the speaker could get the most possible out of the appreciative inquiry questions during sessions that they felt they had full ownership of.

6. FINAL THOUGHTS

Naturally, this small-scale classroom CPD intervention features a considerable number of limitations when judged by the standards of a larger research project. The sample of participants is problematic both in terms of size and positionality, as we are essentially practitioner-researchers self-reporting on our own development. Furthermore, we are unable to draw upon any classroom data (e.g. lesson observations/recordings, student outcomes, stimulated recall) that we could use to triangulate our findings. Finally, the reported pedagogical actions that we took based on our reflective dialogue sessions were all short term in nature, and we can provide no evidence that this intervention led to any meaningful long-term transformation in professional practice. To address these issues, similar studies conducted in the future could feature a more longitudinal design including periodical check-in meetings to monitor teacher development over time. In addition, dialogue-focused studies could be integrated with collaborative analysis of concrete classroom data (Gill & Hooper, 2020)

so as to ensure a teacher-centered and non-prescriptive but empirically grounded approach to reflective practice and CPD.

However, despite these valid concerns from the perspective of research methodology, it could be argued that the accounts we have presented above highlight the potential value of reflective practice based on non-judgmental dialogue and appreciative inquiry principles for in-service language teachers. While we are by no means stating that such an approach should take center stage and discount the need for top-down CPD approaches such as formal training sessions and expert visits, we do claim that this type of individually-tailored and strengths-based dialogue can represent one important arrow in the quiver of an effective and balanced CPD program. If an institution wholly dictates the standards, focus, and locus of power within CPD, it frames CPD as something done *to* teachers rather than *with* teachers. Conversely, we suggest that teachers can derive a great deal of professional meaning, pride, and, ultimately, wellbeing from approaches similar to those we have introduced in this paper, that satisfy their psychoemotional needs and recognize the passion and wealth of professional knowledge that they carry with them each time they open the classroom door.

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APPENDIX A

Discover and Dream Guiding Questions

Discover Stage – Identifying Strengths and Successes

- Can you describe a recent lesson that made you feel proud or satisfied as a teacher?
- What do you think helped that lesson go so well?
- When do you feel most connected with your students in class?
- What classroom moments give you a sense of “this is why I love teaching”?
- Which teaching strategies or activities usually bring out your students’ best participation?
- What do your students seem to appreciate most about your teaching?
- Can you remember a time when a student’s progress really encouraged you?
- What personal strengths or qualities do you think support your teaching success?
- How have you grown as a teacher over the past year? What changes are you most happy about?
- When you face challenges, what helps you stay positive or motivated?

Dream Stage – Imagining Ideal Teaching Moments

- Imagine your teaching at its very best — what does that classroom look and feel like?
- If every class went as well as your best one, what would be happening?
- What kind of learning environment would you most like to create for your students?
- How would your students describe their experience in your ideal class?
- What kind of teacher do you most want to become over the next few years?
- If there were no limitations (time, curriculum, exams), what would your teaching look like?
- What would give you the greatest sense of satisfaction or joy as a teacher?
- How might your classroom community support more curiosity, creativity, or confidence?
- What values or beliefs would you like your teaching to express more clearly?
- What is one dream or vision for English education in Japan that inspires you personally?

APPENDIX B

Design and Destiny Guiding Questions

Design Stage – Co-constructing Strategies and Next Steps

- Based on what you discovered and imagined, what small change could move you closer to your ideal classroom?
- Which of your existing strengths could you build on to support this change?
- What kinds of activities or routines could make your “dream moments” more common?
- What resources—time, materials, support—might help you move toward your vision?
- What strategies have worked well for you in the past that you could adapt for this new goal?
- What would a realistic first step look like if you wanted to try this idea next week?
- How could collaboration with colleagues or students help you make progress?
- What would be the easiest, least stressful way to begin experimenting with this idea?

Destiny Stage – Committing to Sustainable Change

- What is one concrete action you will take in the coming week?
- How will you notice or recognize signs that this action is having a positive effect?
- What will help you stay committed to this change, even when classes get busy?
- How might you document your progress in a way that feels natural (e.g., journaling, audio memos, student comments)?
- Who could you share your progress with for encouragement or further reflection?
- What small indicators would tell you that you’re moving in the right direction?
- What ongoing habits could help you nurture this aspect of your teaching long term?
- Looking ahead, what does continued development in this area look like for you over the next few months?