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Challenges and opportunities for expatriate faculty teaching graduation seminar classes in Japanese universities

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Abstract

This paper considers the issues facing expatriate instructors teaching English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) graduation seminars (commonly known as the “zemi” in Japan) in Japanese universities and aims to establish better conditions to build Communities of Practice. Since the term “graduation seminar” is widely used globally, and might lead to preconceptions from readers, zemi is the term that will be used in this paper as a common example of Japanese English. This class is one that typically involves aspects of academic mentoring, pastoral care and socialization that differentiate it from regular classes. Lacking any personal experience of the zemi, teachers educated overseas are likely to have different expectations of the system than their domestic colleagues and students, creating a significant challenge in how they design and implement programmes. To investigate these issues, 14 semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with expatriate teachers of EMI zemis. Common themes described by informants included difficulties in creating a cohesive syllabus with limited support, challenges posed by thesis supervision, and mixed feelings towards mentoring and pastoral care. The data also revealed unique opportunities afforded to foreign instructors of these classes, which were unlikely to be available if they had not been entrusted with teaching a zemi. This paper seeks to fill a gap in the literature and provide insights into how foreign instructors experience the zemi. The knowledge gained can be employed to help develop Communities of Practice for such teachers. It is also hoped it will be of significance to those interested in comparative education, faculty asked to teach within educational systems of which they do not have personal experience, and anyone who works with Japanese learners, either in Japan or as international students.

Keywords: Zemi, seminar, Community of practice, Mentoring, Thesis supervision, Qualitative interviewing, Japan

Introduction to the Japanese zemi system

In Japan, it is a common requirement for senior university students to enrol in a two-year seminar class, known as *zemi* in Japanese, to produce an independent research thesis under the mentorship of a chosen professor. Although the ostensible goal of the zemi class is academic, in practice the class often incorporates non-specific yet significant

elements of socialization intended to sponsor personal growth, and the experience of zemi carries considerable cultural weight in Japanese academic life. In recent years, there has been an increasing number of expatriate faculty working in Japanese universities (Huang, 2018), partly due to the continuing internationalization of higher education and the subsequent growth in courses and programmes incorporating English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) (Bradford, 2018). Correspondingly, a growing number of expatriate faculty use English as the medium to teach a zemi.

Given a lack of personal experience of the zemi environment, compounded by a dearth of research literature and some cultural differences in the conception of higher education, the task of designing a course that accommodates the goals of the student, institution, and instructor can be a challenge for foreign faculty members. To overcome these challenges and seek out opportunities in zemi instruction, building a *community of practice* (CoP) (Wenger, 1998) may be particularly suited to this situation. In a CoP, teachers can interact with one another, share their struggles and successes, and learn together how to deliver effective zemi courses which are rewarding for both students and teachers.

This study arose from the interactions within a small, informal CoP that discussed aspects of practice in teaching the zemi class. Participation in the group was enthusiastic, but a lack of appropriate background research hindered its development. Indeed, to aid in the creation of a more formalized and effective CoP, it was considered important to understand more deeply the specific issues which face foreign faculty entrusted with zemi cohorts in various universities. In this paper, we report the findings from qualitative interviews with 14 expatriate teachers who use English to teach zemi courses. It is intended that this paper will make a contribution towards filling the gap that exists in this area of the literature and establish better conditions for the creation of communities of practice.

Historical origins of the seminar in higher education

The roots of the mentoring method in institutional education lie in Germany where research seminars under the tutelage of an experienced professor evolved through the late 18th and early nineteenth centuries (Karlsohn, 2016; Tachikawa, 1996). Although mentorship and Socratic dialogue had long been part of education, it is generally agreed that German universities' acknowledgment of students as independent researchers, rather than simply recipients of knowledge, marked a new stage in formal education. The seminar "takes the form of a relationship between teacher and student in which the latter already appears as productive. At the same time, the teacher does not transfer [knowledge] directly, but rather leads, supports and evaluates the production" (Schleiermacher, 1956/1808, as cited in Karlsohn, 2016, p. 5). This idealist view of a research class, in which mentor and apprentices are united by the search for new knowledge quickly spread globally.

The zemi in the Japanese higher education context

In Japan, influences of the German seminar system led to the widespread establishment of the zemi class. Nishino (2016) identifies the first seminar class at Keio Gijuku in 1899, but Hitotsubashi University used the term even earlier, describing seminars in 1897 as

“students receiving guidance on research and producing a graduation thesis under the direction of a specific instructor in their field of specialization” (Hitotsubashi University, 2010, p. 3). In pre-war Japan, early seminars were informal discussion salons meeting on an ad hoc basis often in the professor’s own home. Although a far cry from the courses taught today in an age of mass education, the following description of an early class by Eichi Sugimoto (1901–1952) remains pertinent:

It wasn’t simply academic enquiry in a narrow sense. We would share our outlooks on the world, and even on love. Sometimes, we would spend the day outdoors at a picnic; at other times we would go on overnight trips to the mountain or sea. In this way, the seminar was an academic training ground in the broadest sense. (Hitotsubashi University, 2010, p. 5)

From these groups, a formalized system, in which students choose a professor to oversee a research project for the award of an undergraduate degree, evolved over the post-war period. Zemi classes are now prolific and often required, although not all universities require participation for graduation, and significant differences exist between different universities and faculties (Noguchi & Anderson, 2017).

While the production of a graduation thesis is the usual focus of the zemi, the scope of the class, reflecting its heritage, is generally agreed to be concerned with significantly more than academic study alone. The zemi retains the principle of mentorship that includes academic training, but also attempts to foster personal growth through socialization, and the picnics and field trips that Professor Sugimoto described are still a feature of many classes today. A body of research has described the potential benefits of mentoring to students, teachers, and faculty (Horowitz & Christopher, 2013; McKinsley, 2016). McKinsley, for example, has written of the responsibility for students “to become autonomous, integral adults, ...[who] need examples, guides, and sounding boards as they establish their own values and goals” (p. 33).

However, as financial pressures have swelled class sizes, reduced the numbers of permanent faculty, and increased the role of online study, the opportunities for mentoring have been radically reduced in many western institutions. The fact that many Japanese universities have upheld a formalized mentoring system may be seen as positive.

Expatriate instructors’ experiences of the zemi

Given its high status in the university system, the modern Japanese seminar is a surprisingly amorphous pedagogy that can pose challenges even to Japanese teachers. In an introduction to his zemi, a Japanese professor at Meiji university who had completed his formal education in the USA writes:

What is zemi (seminar)? To be honest, I did not have the answer when I started to teach at this school...I remember that I asked my older colleague what I should do for zemi, and that the answer was “You can do whatever you like” – I was at a loss in the end. (Suzuki, 2015)

Suzuki’s post reflects a potentially common anxiety about how to approach a class that carries a lengthy tradition, high institutional and student expectations, and considerable weight in terms of grades. It also illustrates that while the freedom afforded in a zemi is

potentially liberating, it can also be constricting to be faced with a blank canvas to fill with something meaningful. Most Japanese faculty are able to draw on their personal experience, but foreign teachers usually lack such references (Hutchinson, 2021).

It was once rare for foreign teachers to be asked to teach a zemi, but this has changed as institutions seek to present themselves with a patina of globalism, following a concerted push from central government in recent years (Hashimoto, 2018). Foreign instructors often teach the zemi in English, either through choice or to fulfil an institutional need for English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) courses, a trend that is gathering momentum around Japan as the country seeks to attract foreign students to offset population decline. This begs certain questions over how foreign instructors approach the zemi, how they feel about it, and whether common practice can be identified.

To date, the most common focus of the class has been the production of a written thesis, and the majority of the literature published in English focuses on this aspect, with several papers suggesting dissatisfaction with students' awareness of research skills and/or linguistic competence for the task. Some concerns mentioned in the literature are summarized below:

- It may not be achievable for students to write an adequate thesis in English given their lack of experience of long-form academic writing (Hanks, 2017; Hurrell et al., 2015)
- Students have difficulty in understanding authentic materials required to produce an academic paper in a second language (Dikilitaş & Bostancıoğlu, 2019; Noguchi & Anderson, 2017)
- Cultural differences exist over attitudes to scholarship and plagiarism in Western and East Asian academic circles (McMurray, 2018; Noguchi & Anderson, 2017; Shimada, 2017).
- Students have trouble creating research questions (Shimada, 2017). Shimada also indicates dissatisfaction from students, showing data that only eight percent of graduating students were satisfied with their submitted thesis
- Research writing may not be a skill relevant to students' future lives (Furmanovsky, 2001).

Some papers also offer suggestions on how such challenges can be overcome including strategies to construct a thesis more in line with Western academic norms (Noguchi & Anderson, 2017). Adamson et al. (2019) advise bi-lingual supervision when possible. McMurray (2018) suggested that distribution of an effective rubric can forestall some issues, such as plagiarism in the thesis.

Less literature is available on the concept of the zemi as a wider holistic training ground for intellectual thought and attitudinal development. The importance of socialization has been noted by Poole (2010) and Toh (2014) as students can learn through group work and collaboration as "apprentices" (Poole, 2010, p. 10). Kelly discussed the role some professors have played in assisting students to find jobs after graduation (Kelly, 1993, as cited in Norris, 2004). A thorough investigation of learner-mentor experiences in the zemi class, albeit focused on Japanese instructors, comes from Yamada (2013), who stressed the importance of cultural integration in a discourse community,

and how mentoring styles can affect outcomes for students. Yamada illustrated how East Asian students studying in the West interact differently from Western peers with their professors, and discussed the impact that conflicting expectations may have on appraisal. Students who have been conditioned to a more hierarchical role, for example, may be more inclined to silence, which often leads to negative appraisals. This phenomenon of silence among East Asian students, and the preference of Western educators to reward vocal participants has been well studied (King, 2013; Nakane, 2007), but Yamada's detailed ethnographic study depicted positive interactions in the L1 setting. She was able to observe how a hierarchical relationship existed, and how some participants were silent in certain contexts, but also how social activities facilitated bonding that assisted the learning process: "participating in the zemi keeps the students encouraged, stimulated and motivated and thus facilitates their successful completion of their theses" (p. 51). Her conclusions showed how a successful mentoring process socializes students into their graduation thesis and that socially interactive aspects of the class could reduce the negative effect of hierarchical relationships. She has called for more understanding of differing attitudes to interaction among teachers of Japanese students, in Japan and abroad, who may be unaware of their greater expectations for socialization and psychological support.

Theoretical framework

A Community of Practice is a theoretical framework of knowledge that provides an alternative to traditional top-down approaches to learning and innovation. The concept of CoP, originating in work by Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998), provides a template to understand the learning that takes place in communities of practitioners. Originally, the framework focused on interactions between expert and apprentice, but more recently refers to "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). For a CoP to function, it should meet three criteria:

1. Domain: It has an identity defined by a shared domain of interest that includes commitment and a shared level of competence
2. Community: members share information and engage in activities to assist each other to solve problems, innovate, clarify identity within the group, among other functions
3. Practice: Members are practitioners and create and share a repertoire of resources

CoPs exist formally and informally in any field or endeavour, and function with differing motivations, from clinicians converting empirical evidence into practical application (Li et al., 2009) to members of alcoholic support groups sharing strategies to remain sober (Lave & Wenger, 1991) to improving the professional lives of part-time ELT instructors (Strong, 2022). A synthesis of some suggested functions of a CoP are detailed below:

- To steward knowledge and experience through innovation, sharing, refining, recycling, identifying gaps, documenting
- To solve problems and develop better practice

- To build identities of self or institution or field
- To acculturate new members

Obstacles to effective CoP function

Wenger (1998) stated that the architecture of a CoP stands on a process of participation and reification, where participation refers to acting and interacting within the group and reification corresponds to the creation of artefacts (tools, lexicon, rules, methods, documents, concepts and theories and similar). How members negotiate meaning and create identity within the domain is based on the convergence and interplay of these processes. As stated above, our study arose from engagement in an informal CoP focused on aspects of practice and identity in teaching a zemi. Unfortunately, limited membership and scarcity of research placed limitation on our ability to participate and sponsor reification. Further, Wenger (2010) described the notions of joint enterprise, whereby members share a collective understanding of the community, its subject and purpose; and shared repertoire, a collection of communal tools, methods, standards and so on. The effective embodiment of these concepts was also hindered by the limited scope and resources of our group.

Underlining our concern, a review of CoP research by Smith et al. (2017) identified a lack of documentation of epistemic and discursive practices within groups and interactive processes that are insufficiently differentiated within Wenger's model. They write that "more attention is needed to highlight the specialized ways of knowing, thinking, and doing that people need to internalize in order to participate in a particular social practice" (p.221).

It was in order to address these shortcomings in the effective function of our CoP; to gather more voices; to document knowledge and experience and strengthen the foundation of empirical research; to clarify and inform participation and reification; and to better provide for joint enterprise and shared repertoire that the research project was initiated.

Research method

To assist us in gathering the necessary information to build an effective CoP, the key research question formulated for this research project was:

What did the expatriate zemi teacher informants consider to be the main challenges and opportunities when teaching zemi classes?

The method used in this study was qualitative interviewing. This approach, conducted with a small number of informants, was chosen as interviews can "provide insights into people's experiences, beliefs, perceptions, and motivations at a depth not possible with questionnaires" (Richards, 2009, p. 187). Semi-structured interviews were used, which incorporated some pre-planning but allowed for "negotiation, discussion and expansion of the interviewees' responses" (Mann, 2016, p. 91). We identified several "big questions" that would "provide the framework of the interview" (Richards, 2003, p. 69), in addition to some prompts and potential probes that we felt might provide useful guidance, but

these were not necessarily utilized in each interview. The interview guide is shown in the Appendix.

The target informants were expatriate university teachers working in Japanese universities who had responsibility for zemi courses, especially those who had started relatively recently. The informants, therefore, had a “shared domain of interest” (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015), a key characteristic of a CoP. In addition to directly contacting some potential informants, we placed a call for informants in the newsletter of a local academic society. In this sense, the sampling was primarily *purposeful*; however, there was also an element of emergent sampling (Patton, 2002) as we were introduced to more informants by participants. In total, we interviewed 14 teachers—six female and eight male—from 10 different institutions with a range of academic backgrounds and experience of zemi (Table 1).

Each interview was scheduled to last for approximately one hour, the optimum interview length according to some researchers (Bonn, 2014; Richards, 2009); however, some continued for a further 20 or 30 min where the informants were happy to discuss issues in greater detail. Each interview was audio-recorded, using the smartphone application *Otter.ai* to produce contemporaneous draft transcriptions. These were later transferred to the qualitative data analysis application *Transana* (Woods & Fassnacht, 2018), where corrections were made manually to create more polished versions for analysis.

We conducted a thematic analysis of the data, which was guided by the following six-phase procedure set out by Mann (2016):

1. Familiarization with the data
2. Coding

Table 1 Information concerning the study’s informants and their zemi context

Informant	Nationality	Age	Teaching/ zemi experience		Academic background	Zemi theme	Approx. no. of students
Rosa	Colombia	40s	25/	5.5	Japanese literature	Women’s studies/ social issues	6
Joseph	Canada	50s	25/	2.5	TESOL	Language	8
Bill	US	40s	25/	3.5	TESOL	Global issues	10
Danijela	Australia	30s	7/	0.5	TESOL/Cultural studies	Cultural studies	6
George	US	50s	30/	3	English literature/TESOL	US studies	12–23
Jane	US	40s	22/	1.5	English/TESOL	Intercultural communication	8
Jeff	US	50s	30/	7	Creative writing/TESOL	Creative writing	4–6
Sylvaine	Canada	40s	16/	4	Linguistics/ history	Research methods/ social issues	11–15
Stan	US	70s	40/	20	Japanese history/TESOL	Media literacies/Japanese culture	15
Sally	US	50s	25/	3	Social studies	Female leadership	5–6
Suzanne	UK	40s	12/	1.5	History/Japanese Studies	Japan’s relations through history	8
Thomas	UK	40s	10/	6	Literature	Japanese history & society	15
Robert	Canada	40s	20/	11	TESOL	Model UN	18
Ron	Canada	50s	25+ /	6	Applied linguistics	Applied linguistics	6+

3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Writing up

After initially familiarizing ourselves with the data during the actual interviewing and data processing stages, we independently coded the transcripts using Transana. After the coding, we collaboratively began to identify themes. As the number of informants grew, our themes were reorganized and recategorized accordingly. There was also a certain degree of *winning* of the data (Guest et al., 2012) before the final six (a number recommended by Creswell & Creswell, 2018) themes were determined. As the draft findings were being formulated, it was important to validate the data using member checking (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Informants were asked to confirm that the excerpts used did not misrepresent their intended meanings. Each informant was allocated a pseudonym to make it easier to compare their views and feelings with others.

Limitations of the method included the size and characteristics of the sample, along with some inherent drawbacks of qualitative interviews. The number of informants was relatively small, with some coming from the same institution. Further, it has been pointed out that a weakness of data collected in interviews is that they are “indirect information filtered through views of interviewees” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 188). Because of this intrinsic characteristic, interview informants are prone to “selective recall, self-delusion, perceptual distortions, [and] memory loss” (Hall & Rist, 1999, as cited in Mackey & Gass, 2013, p. 174). Nevertheless, it was felt that the rich data gained through in-depth qualitative interviews would yield valuable accounts of how foreign instructors tackle the challenges and embrace the opportunities of university zemi courses.

Findings

The six themes we identified could be roughly divided into two sets each containing three individual themes. The first of these focused on the ‘nuts and bolts’ of the zemi, namely the organizational system; the academic content; and graduation thesis supervision. The second set included the unique interpersonal aspects of the zemi exploring the social side of the zemi; pastoral responsibilities; and overall feelings towards the zemi as opposed to general classes. In this section, we will describe each theme and incorporate informants’ voices to recount their unique experiences.

The zemi system and selection process

There is some variety in the way that different university departments organize their zemis. Most prefer to run the class over the final two years of students’ enrolment with students selecting their class just before, or at the beginning of their third year. However, we encountered some variations. For example, at Danijela and Jeff’s university, students begin in their second year, making zemi a three-year experience.

Another aspect that varied between institutions was class size. At Jeff’s school, teachers are only expected to take five or six new students each year, while Joseph and Bill tended to have around ten. However, in some contexts such as George’s, the numbers

often climbed over 20, having serious repercussions for thesis supervision (discussed below).

While considering the process by which students chose their zemi, we also became curious as to why Japanese students would choose to take a zemi taught by an expatriate teacher. After all, zemis have traditionally played a facilitative role with recruitment (Kelly, 1993), an area with which foreign teachers are likely to have little experience. Our informants felt that there was a plethora of reasons why students may make that choice. One response that was almost universally given was the desire for students to improve, or at least maintain, their English:

I do think that a lot of students choose my zemi because I'm, I'm only in English all the time. [Robert]

Several teachers revealed that their zemi was more popular than average. Bill suggested that students chose his zemi based on its good reputation, along with positive experiences with his first and second-year classes:

I think our classes have a good reputation. So they think it'll be fun. [Bill]

At least three of the informants felt that students' selections were based on what they thought may be an easy option. Joseph, suggested that:

They choose it based on things like this: this teacher is easy, doesn't give a lot of homework; or this teacher is, you know, he- we have a lot of parties. [Joseph]

For instance, Stan reflected on why his zemi had always seemed to be a popular choice, revealing a speculated reason which had previously been unclear:

I always had large numbers of students, over 20 something. One year, more than 30. Oh and I thought it was my charisma and general fascination as a teacher. Turned out that mine was one of the seminars that didn't have a graduation essay. [Stan]

The minutiae of the zemi selection processes, the structure of different departments, and sometimes the inevitable internal politics were also raised by individual informants. These, while important, were often specific to each institution. The next theme we will explore is one relevant to every informant, the question of academic content.

Academic content

In order to understand the pedagogical choices informants made for their zemi in terms of syllabus design, materials, and methods, we felt it important to understand how these teachers identify. Some expatriate faculty in Japan start as content specialists. However, a sizable proportion begin their careers as English language teachers, and their teaching load may still consist largely of language classes. This was also the case in our informant group. Some—like Bill, Joseph, and Stan—stated without reservation that they identified as language teachers:

I'm, you know, I'm an English teacher. [Bill].

Jeff, on the other hand, betrayed some reservations when asked to what extent he identified as a language teacher:

Half or 80%, 70 or 80% probably...I like English teaching. I like English education...[but] I like the field of creative writing better than I like the field of foreign language pedagogy. [Jeff]

Sally, Thomas, and Rosa strongly identified as content specialists who have some background in English teaching due to being asked to cover those classes.

My field is not English, and my field is, my academic field is not related to language. So I'm teaching language because it's, you know, we have to, to get a job in Japan, especially universities...So, I think- I feel that I'm much better teaching content than language. [Sally]

We wondered to what extent the way teachers identify impacted their course planning, the kind of teaching methodology they employed, and the activities they used. Of particular interest was the balance between content and language, a persistent point of discussion in content-based language teaching (CBLT) and content and language integrated learning (CLIL). As expected, for the content specialists Sally, Thomas, and Rosa, content was the primary concern:

For me [English] is just a tool. Okay, so it's a tool for teaching the content. [Sally]

For Rosa, a Spanish speaker with native-like English fluency, her personal feelings are complicated by an institutional need for students to use English, despite her finding this largely unnecessary for most academic tasks:

So I don't want it to become an English task, I don't care if they, you know, I do care, but I don't care if they speak proper English or not because I don't speak proper English. So what I do is I just allow them to, to do it in Japanese if they feel more comfortable that way. [Rosa]

However, it was a commonality in the interviews that the principal focus should be on content:

*Obviously, for a seminar, I would like to make content the main...focus. [Joseph]
I don't...focus on form at all except in correcting students' writing, pointing out circling things they should address. [Jeff]*

Sylvaine, however, felt the students lack of academic skills to some extent precluded this, to her frustration:

mostly for me that zemi should be more about content than it should be about anything else...however, very quickly, I've come to realize like, even though students have three years of writing, they don't remember any of it....So when they get to their zemi they still don't know what to do. So, over time, my class has become less content based and less discussion based and more and more, just focusing on, you know, sort of creating surveys and structuring a paper. [Sylvaine]

Perhaps the biggest decision new zemi teachers face is the overarching theme of their two- or three-year zemi course. For content specialists, it is probably clear what to teach, although Rosa felt the students' limited interest in her speciality made this

not only challenging but actually against the spirit of how she envisions the class and her role of academic guide:

the seminar is not like a top down class, but, it's not the class where you go and teach what you know but it's actually a place where you share, like a, like a collegiate, you know, work through topics together. [Rosa]

Some, such as Joseph and Ron, choose to focus on applied linguistics or aspects of English Language Teaching (ELT) that reflect their professional and academic background. Other informants focused on topics unrelated to their academic background but with which they had gained expertise in their career. For example, Robert's zemi cohorts studied about and participated in Model United Nations events. Moreover, some teachers are not completely free to choose their own topic and must find one that fits the needs and desires of departmental stakeholders. For instance, although Bill's academic background is in TESOL, he teaches a global studies zemi and, while he now speaks enthusiastically about it, he revealed that:

So they kind of were pushing me even though..... it's not my field. [Bill]

Once the theme is decided on, the next step is often to try and map out a syllabus for a two-year course. This in itself presents challenges for many faculty who are accustomed to planning only 15-week courses. As Bill pointed out:

The biggest issue was for me, and it still is an issue, is planning out a two-year schedule. [Bill]

Even after a coherent course structure has been successfully developed, other challenges arise. When some students, but not all, are absent for periods of study abroad, it becomes difficult to keep everyone on the same page—metaphorically and literally. Also, the interruption caused by recruitment season in Japan provides a significant challenge, as students at the end of their 3rd year and beginning of their 4th year are overwhelmingly focused on securing a job. George commented on how this issue impacts lesson and syllabus planning:

And the fourth year is a problematic year because every class 25% are absent, so you can't have anything connected or build up systems. [George]

Another challenge that was often raised was the lack of support or sharing within departments. Expatriate teachers are not likely to have experience of doing a zemi themselves at university, unlike most of their Japanese colleagues. They also have fewer non-Japanese colleagues to get advice from and share ideas with. For some, like Bill and Joseph, they were the first foreign faculty to be given a zemi, so they did not have experienced colleagues to consult. Collaboration or simply hearing about what others are doing in their zemi should be invaluable but is often absent:

I'm not sure that I do seminar- zemi here in the way that you're- I should be doing it- we are supposed to do it. Just because I don't really have...we don't really talk about that. [Jeff]

I remember when I entered I asked everyone...what do you do with a zemi? Like what is a zemi? And like, no one gave me a decent answer. I mean almost every-

one. I felt like that they ran from the question. [Thomas]

A final point that was frequently alluded to was the challenge of finding appropriate materials. Authentic English-language materials, whether that be textbooks, or readings from books or journals, are difficult for many Japanese students, a situation which both Bill and George had experienced:

This last year, my second year, I did this book with 15 students, and...they were kind of grumbling and grouching that it was too difficult. So this year, instead of doing this... I sort of went off script and...I got this global issues...graded reader. [Bill]

When I first did it. I wasn't sure what the hell to do so I photocopied some pages from this, that...I'm still struggling with that. [George]

Another option is to produce original texts but, as Thomas pointed out, this can be incredibly time consuming.

This section has described informants' views on how they go about planning and executing their zemi courses, along with the inherent challenges they have faced. In the next section, we focus specifically on the main objective of most zemis—the graduation thesis.

Supervision of the graduation thesis

Students in Japanese universities often have to complete a thesis to gain the necessary compulsory credits for graduation. The thesis can be seen as the culmination of two or three years of study under a zemi teacher. From the data we collected, in EMI zemis, a paper of around five to seven thousand words appears to be the norm. Teachers seem to have a certain degree of freedom with when to begin the thesis; some start midway in the third year, while others begin at the onset of the fourth year. All our informants agreed that the process of thesis supervision presents a number of challenges.

The main issue for those informants with high student enrolments in each cohort was the time they had to dedicate to providing effective feedback, especially when deadlines approach in the final stages. For teachers like George or Thomas, who may have to check over 20 different 6000-word papers in December and January, as well as keeping on top of all their other responsibilities, thesis supervision becomes a serious drain on their resources, curtailing their ability to devote as much time and energy to each student as they would like:

I would rather have less students and be able...to offer closer attention. [Thomas]
It's a numbers game... five or seven I could spend ages, you know, shaping it and 'check this book', 'come to my office, talk'. [George]

Jane doubted whether the skills cultivated through the thesis process were relevant for many students, while Stan, Jane, and Robert were unequivocal that doing a thesis was simply not worth the heavy workload and pressures:

None of them are ever going to need this skill later in life....most of them are going to work at companies. [Jane]

The graduation essay is a terrible burden on the students and the faculty. [Stan]

Even without high student numbers, issues of student motivation and distraction from non-academic activities provide challenges for thesis supervision. Several informants mentioned that non-attendance and lack of progress by students are serious issues. The major source of distraction was, once again, the demands and pressures of the recruitment season.

their main goal is to find a job...so the first fourth year spring semester, they're look- job hunting. That's their main goal. Zemi? I feel like a broken record. And I feel like [I'm] just being a jerk, like 'come to class,' 'do your writing every month, five- 500 words,' 'you're present- presenting on this day.' [Bill]

It becomes absurd, and it can get- you know you can get 50% of the class, more or less, absent...So it is sad- it's sad but you can't get upset by these things. [George]

While almost all informants had reservations about a written thesis, some were exploring, or at least considering, alternative graduation projects. Robert commented that:

For a number of years I was just frustrated with the process of thesis writing. And the students, they weren't learning a lot from it. [Robert]

Robert has successfully implemented an optional portfolio assessment, which almost all of his students now choose to do. Instead of an academic thesis, students create a reflective, digital record of their experiences at university, which Robert suggested develops skills that are more relevant to students' future careers. Nonetheless, it was not evident from our interviews that a majority rejected the value of the thesis as a demonstration of academic ability. Rosa in particular spoke with passion about the need to retain the thesis as the main focus of the class and offered another perspective on why the class is sometimes a frustration for both parties:

I do like the final paper I think it's I think it's an important process...I think many of the frustrations with the (thesis) is the fact that it is an English test, isn't it, and how hard is it to write in a language that's not your own, it's really hard, so if on top of doing all of this thinking process, etc, etc, you have to write it in English well of course, of course it's going to be hard, you know. So, I don't know maybe that's the bad part about it, if they were asked to write it in Japanese, maybe it wouldn't be so bad. [Rosa]

Finally, Sylvaine brought up the issue of the increasing sophistication and ubiquity of machine translation and the difficulty of using a written paper as the means to judge language proficiency in English departments:

I'm actually making students write on paper again. I mean themselves, because I want to see, what are you actually capable of in 30 minutes. Yeah because you handed me a five page essay and, you know, an hour is not, that's not normal, that's not been my experience for the past 20 years, students need more time than that. So either you are exceptional, or you're using machine translation. [Sylvaine]

Social aspects of the zemi

Arguably the characteristic of the zemi that most sets it apart from regular classes is its social side, which seems to be present to some extent in the majority of cases. As discussed above, the concept of socialization within an academic fraternity is something that is deeply rooted historically in the zemi culture of Japan but is possibly unfamiliar to expatriate teachers, who may or may not welcome it. Having said that, all our informants mentioned that they offered or joined various zemi social events including dinner and drinks at a restaurant, a barbeque party at the teacher's home, or a cooking party in the teacher's office. There was a feeling amongst the informants that the social side was an important part of the zemi experience and important for building fruitful relationships:

as you know, any class that is more connected is a much better class right? That's-that's a rule...So I think the social aspect is really good. [George]

However, we also received the impression that while most of our informants accepted and welcomed this social aspect to some degree, there was often a limit to which they wanted to be involved.

*I feel it's troublesome sometimes but for me... I think...it's necessary. [Sally]
[socialising with students] is something I felt uneasy about anyway...because there's a cultural difference there...It's just something that I don't feel very comfortable with. [Suzanne]*

Overall, our informants at least partially embraced the social side of the zemi, which, while it may be expected to some extent, is not compulsory. Another side of the zemi is the pastoral duties that zemi teachers might be expected to carry out, which we look at next.

Pastoral responsibilities

Zemi teachers often carry responsibility for various aspects of their students' relationship with the university. They may have to perform such tasks as relaying information not related to the zemi itself, discussing issues regarding job hunting, and monitoring their students' grades and credits. Through our own experiences and this study's interviews, we have discovered that zemi teachers also often perform the role of counsellor or sounding board for advice regarding personal issues, many too sensitive to report here. This is not unlike the role of a secondary school teacher, and this may be totally alien to expatriate university teachers, as the following comments illustrate:

*Yeah...I think the seminar might be more like the homeroom of a junior high school, high school, okay, because you're kind of responsible for a lot of things. [Sally]
Their zemi teachers kind of are thought of as like their mentor or, or their, you know, parental figure a little bit more than other classes...And I feel like I'm a Mr. Cheer Up person at times. [Joseph]*

But this side of the zemi made some information uncomfortable, and they felt it probably should belong outside of their expected duties.

One of my fourth year students was crying about some other teacher, and I had to go talk to the teacher on her behalf. I felt I shouldn't have to. [Joseph]

This university has an advisor advisory system right...So yeah. I think it's good but you know that that makes it kind of a little bit unclear. Like sometimes I wonder, so what...should I be doing? [Sally]

Overall feelings about the zemi

When discussing informants' feelings about the zemi, it clearly emerged that there were significant non-academic goals that are less likely to be required in regular courses. It was not just about learning how to produce a long-form piece of academic writing in an L2, or developing presentation skills. As Bill and Jeff explained, there were other, possibly less tangible goals to aspire to:

I think just interpersonal relationships, getting to know, getting- studying with classmates and a teacher for two years, you know, getting to know each other, getting to know classmates well and interact with them, and have multiple different types of experiences. [Bill]

for students to be happy, find themselves...some people find creative writing as like a forum, a way to do that. [Jeff]

The issue of peer respect also emerged with some informants expressing a feeling of gratitude or acceptance at being given the opportunity, and shown to be trusted, to have a zemi.

I love the autonomy, and I...love not having a boss breathing down my neck. And I like being respected enough to get on with it. [Bill]

Zemi, I like it, I like it. I'd feel empty without it...I feel accepted. [Jeff]

All informants were, on the whole, positive about the zemi, but perhaps none as much as Thomas, who, after initial reservations, has come to appreciate his zemi tremendously:

As I was talking to you, I was kind of able to think about how my feelings towards the zemi have changed...because it's probably the class I was least confident about when I started, and it's one of the classes I certainly enjoy the most now. And probably like I'm most comfortable teaching. [Thomas]

Discussion

The research question that guided this study was *What did the expatriate zemi teacher informants consider to be the main challenges and opportunities of teaching zemi classes?* In the section above, six themes that emerged from the interview data were described, and we will now consider the most significant challenges and opportunities that the zemi appears to present expatriate teachers with.

Many of the difficulties faced by our informants involved the creation and organization of a two- or three-year programme culminating in a graduation thesis. The fact that none of the teachers we spoke to had experienced the zemi class as students indicates that many non-Japanese teachers struggle to understand what the overarching objectives of the class should be. However, as pointed out by Suzuki (2015), this issue may not be exclusive to teachers educated overseas.

There was a particular focus on problems connected to supervising the thesis, with the high student numbers found in many *zemis* only exacerbating the inherent challenges of thesis supervision for some instructors. The feelings expressed by our informants partially concord with previous commentary in the literature (Furmanovsky, 2001; McMurray, 2018). With significant increases in the number of students around the world either studying in English speaking countries, or in EMI courses, there have been several guides published to help both supervisors of L2 English students navigate undergraduate thesis writing, which may be of great assistance to new *zemi* teachers (e.g. Bailey, 2018; Bitchener, 2018; Smiley, 2019).

A common theme throughout discussions of the thesis concerned whether an extended written paper is indeed the best medium for a final graduation project, or whether alternatives “more relevant” to graduates’ needs exist. At least three informants expressed misgivings about the merits of doing a thesis, and one had already discarded the thesis altogether. All three argued that there is a disconnect between the skills that a thesis project helps develop and those that are required in students’ post-graduation careers. This finding somewhat surprised us, and we feel criticism of the thesis as irrelevant may be an overstatement as undergraduate thesis projects have been shown to develop a variety of transferable skills including, but certainly not limited to, written and oral communication, project management, and independent work (Burnett, 2009; Greetham, 2019). Ultimately, the question of whether academic research and writing skills remain relevant for undergraduates in 2020 might well be seen as a deeper question extending beyond a second language context. After all, a great many students studying in their first language complete a thesis irrespective of whether or not they intend to pursue an academic career. In our discussions when interpreting the data of these interviews, we postulated that the extra challenges posed by the second language thesis—in particular the laborious editing, but also certain cultural differences, low motivation, and the widespread use of translation software, might contribute to foreign teachers’ heightened dissatisfaction with the project. It would be interesting to explore whether this dissatisfaction with the thesis was prevalent through the larger body of *zemi* supervisors in Japan, including, of course, the Japanese national majority.

Despite the challenges outlined above, all of our informants ultimately held largely positive feelings towards their *zemi* duties. One common thread that ran through our interviews was the closer relationships and bonding that was possible through participation in social and other extracurricular activities. Compared to regular classes, the *zemi* class allows teachers to create special communities, and they seemed to take pride and satisfaction in helping students through the trials and tribulations of their undergraduate studies towards their successful entry into the job market and beyond. The fact that this is not always an opportunity given to expatriate teachers was seemingly not lost on our informants, who appeared grateful to be entrusted with taking a *zemi* class and possibly flattered by the higher status that it seems to infer.

Conclusion

An important impetus for this study was to establish a stronger architecture to support participation and reification in a Community of Practice focused on the graduation seminar class. What has been achieved towards this aim? As Parrish (2022)

writes: “There are many steps to setting up a successful CoP... but a key element is identifying the issue or concern and then turning that into a line of inquiry.” The authors feel, that in codifying the experiences of a number of practitioners in more detail than currently exists in the literature, we have brought some much-needed clarity to this question, and as well as establishing a significant body of documented evidence to precipitate further discussion and research, leading to the potential creation of artefacts such as methodology, codes of practice, classroom materials and similar. Further, a significant difficulty for overseas-educated faculty in Japan has been the formation of identity as a zemi teacher, a position many find daunting given the educational and cultural significance of the class. Through these interviews, we feel we have made positive steps toward the establishment of greater clarity as to what the zemi is or is not, what kinds of individual variation exist within the domain and what the shared problems are. We feel this evidence establishes a good foundation for the acculturation of new teachers and provides for a more direct pathway to good practice.

The data gathered in this study depicts a narrow but relatively detailed picture of foreign teachers entrusted with a zemi class, and a number of concrete conclusions can be drawn from our interviews which may help in the development of effective CoPs. Firstly, it is clear that the majority of foreign teachers are initially confounded by their lack of conceptual familiarity with the class and few receive institutional support. Nonetheless, it is clear that many uncertainties are widespread and teachers can draw on communal knowledge through joining or setting up a CoP. From our discussion, it can be seen that the freedom accorded to mentoring professors is one of the zemi’s traditions and potential strengths, but it is perhaps questionable if that freedom is best utilized. Most of the teachers we spoke to seem to have muddled through a few false starts to arrive at a balance of expectations that they and their students are comfortable with, although we suggest they might have arrived there more smoothly with greater guidance and support if more access to institutional or online CoPs was available.

A second point relates to the evolution of the graduation thesis, the writing of which seems to provoke significant frustration and a notable absence of positive commentary. We would like to investigate this issue further to see if a trend away from a research thesis can be identified more concretely in second language education and in the broader field of humanities in Japan. Finally, we were heartened to see a powerful commitment to one of the original principles of the zemi—that of an academic community which develops social bonds that in some ways supersede research objectives. Future research will need to incorporate students’ voices to look at these issues from the viewpoint of the most important stakeholders in university education.

With the continuing push to internationalize tertiary education in Japan, it is likely that the number of expatriate teachers charged with taking zemis is set to increase, and many of these teachers could benefit from more support of different kinds. Therefore, further research and the development of artefacts in this area is highly desirable.

As stated above, owing to the relatively small number of informants, the findings of the study should only be considered suggestive and exploratory. They will hopefully be corroborated or challenged by gathering data from a greater number of informants

again through qualitative interviews or, since some specific areas of focus have now been identified, a data collection method more amenable to gathering data from a larger number of informants such as focus groups or questionnaires.

Appendix

Interview guide

The following questions were used as a flexible interview guide to prompt informants to talk about various aspects of the experience of teaching a zemi. Some example follow-up questions or probes are also listed, though this is not an exhaustive list, and these questions were not necessarily asked to every informant.

Could you tell me about...

- the department in which you work?
 - How many students/faculty are there in your department?
 - In what year(s), and for how long, do students take the zemi?
- the process by which students choose their zemi?
 - Are there any restrictions on choosing a zemi?
 - Are you satisfied with the process in your university?
- the actual content of your zemi?
 - Do you teach from your specialized area of research?
 - Can you tell me about the materials you use?
- the assessment and coursework?
 - What kind of grade do they receive?
 - Is it possible to fail?
- any specific problems with students meeting academic goals?
 - What is the impact of the recruitment season?
 - Have you experienced issues related to a lack of language proficiency?
- the students who join your zemi?
 - Do you have any insight as to why they chose your zemi?
- any functions of your zemi beyond academic goals?
 - Is the social aspect important in your zemi?
 - How do you feel about having to provide pastoral support?

- departmental and/student expectations about how you will conduct the class?
- Is there much difference from regular classes in terms of the relationship with students?
- your overall feelings about the zemi system?
 - What is something you'd like to change?
 - Would you prefer to have zemi or extra regular classes?

Abbreviations

CBLT	Content-based language teaching
CLIL	Content and language integrated learning
EMI	English as a Medium of Instruction
ELT	English language teaching
L1	First language
L2	Second language
TESOL	Teaching English as a Second or Other Language

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Ethics approval and consent to participate

All participants in data collection were asked, and provided, consent for the use of statements made during interviews.

Consent for publication

All participants in data collection were asked, and provided, consent for the publication of statements made during interviews.

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