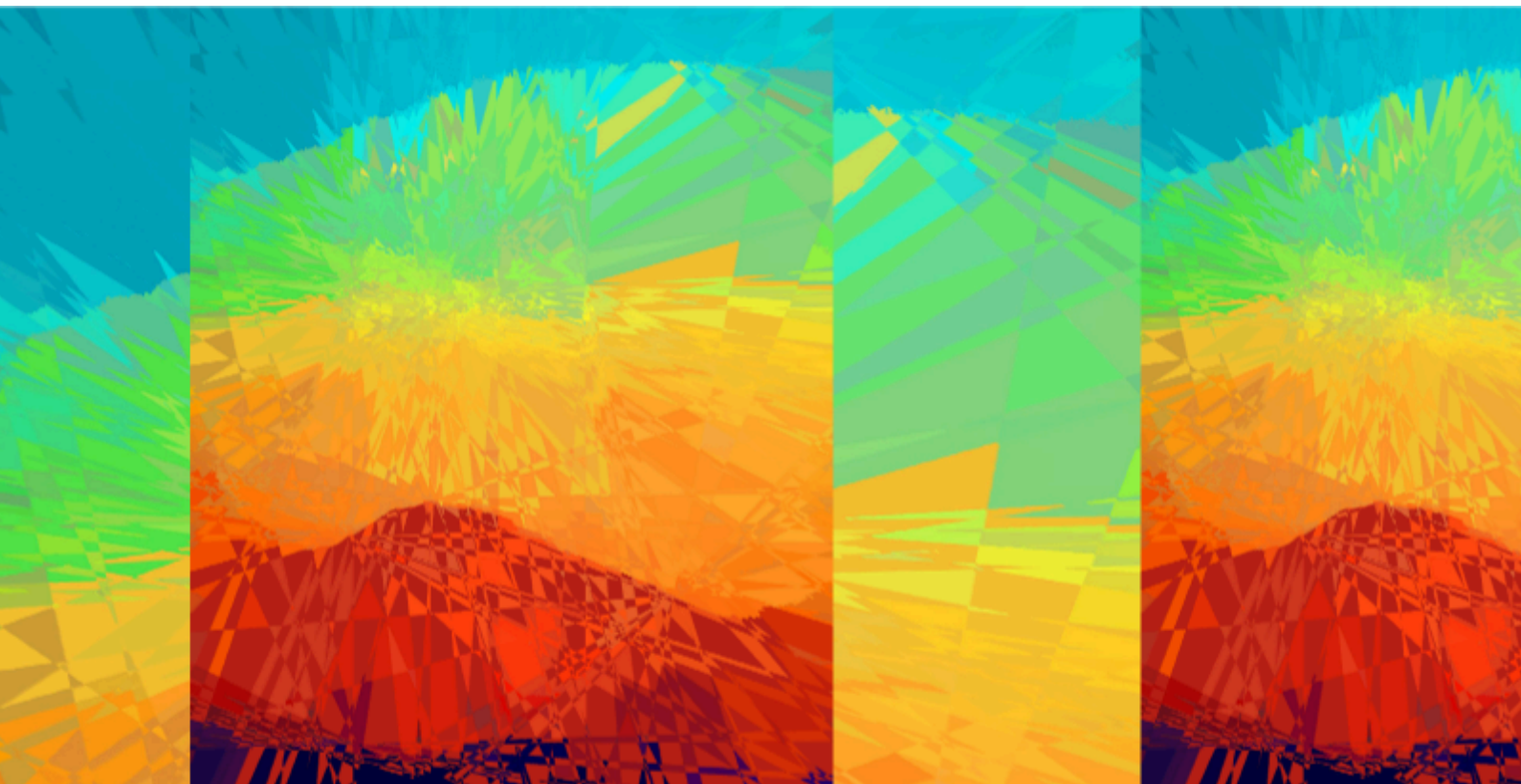


An international journal for teachers and language materials creators

Between the Keys

Volume 34.1 / Spring 2026



Report: Materials Writers SIG Table at the JALT Hokkaido Winter Conference by Jerald Halvorsen

Musings on Marketing: Developing a Video-Based Textbook Focused on Career Choices: *Working in Japan: Further Explorations* by John Rucynski

Key Lesson: AI as Scaffold, Not Shortcut: Redesigning an Oral English Presentation Task by Michelle Nemoto

Perspective: Sustainability Through Open Educational Resources by Douglas Perkins

Materials in Practice: PDF Course Materials in EFL Contexts: Rationale, Design, and Practitioner Feedback by David Lees



Between the Keys 34.1

Table of Contents

Letter from the Publication Chair	2
by Adam Littleton	
Report: Materials Writers SIG Table at the JALT Hokkaido Winter Conference	3
by Jerald Halvorsen	
Musings on Marketing: Developing a Video-Based Textbook Focused on Career Choices: <i>Working in Japan: Further Explorations</i>	6
by John Rucynski	
Key Lesson: AI as Scaffold, Not Shortcut: Redesigning an Oral English Presentation Task	14
by Michelle Nemoto	
Perspective: Sustainability Through Open Educational Resources	20
by Douglas Perkins	
Materials in Practice: PDF Course Materials in EFL Contexts: Rationale, Design, and Practitioner Feedback	28
by David Lees	
Messages: Additions to the MW SIG Showcase	37
Call for Submissions	39
Messages: Updates to the Meet the Maker Events Calendar	40
Contributors	42
Acknowledgements	44
Links & Resources	45
Copyright Statement	46

Perspective:

Sustainability Through Open Educational Resources

Douglas Perkins

The Present and Future of Teaching

Japan's overall population has been declining since 2007 (Rizzi, 2023), but perhaps more surprisingly, the Japanese youth population has fallen every year since 1982 (Nippon.com, 2022). The national government has examined and proposed various strategies to stabilize the numbers, but few positive effects have been achieved. Every year, negative population pressure causes approximately 450 schools around the nation to close their doors (Yamamitsu et al., 2023). Many public and private schools are struggling to fill seats. As schools shrink and merge, teachers are being asked to perform a myriad of duties, both bureaucratic and academic, including teaching classes they haven't taught recently or at all.

In present-day Japan, teaching at the primary and secondary level is declining in popularity (Sakuma & Shimazaki, 2024; Yamasaki, 2025). In fact, the profession is losing popularity faster than the youth population's decline. One approach to revitalizing the profession is to expand Open Educational Resource (OER) development into schools. OERs are teaching and learning materials that are either in the Public Domain or Creative Commons licensed. They have been a staple of international university education for many years (Gourley and Lane, 2009) and in more recent years international research has begun on high school deployment (García-Solano et al., 2023; Yassin, 2024). Progress along these lines in Japan could alleviate some teacher overwork while helping build teamwork and confidence among the country's educators.

It has been remarked that U.S. school reform efforts over the last two centuries have led to surprisingly few major changes to teaching practice (Cuban, 2013). Cuban (2013) claims that one of the "fundamental errors" is the overemphasis on changing "school governments, organization, and curriculum," and another is the mistaken assumption that policymakers have a "worldview" similar to that of teachers. Although Japan has arguably

been more successful in national curriculum reform (Kitamura et al., 2019), continued change is both inevitable and necessary, and the ideas presented here avoid falling into the trap Cuban outlined. Expanded OER use doesn't depend on distant edicts, and the choice of what materials to use and share can be left to individual teachers and departments.

Sustainability

From the Millennium Development Goals of 2000 to the Sustainable Development Goals of 2015, governments have been looking for ways to improve the quality and availability of global education (Kumar et al., 2016). Although some have criticized the SDGs as self-contradictory, in that Goal #8 targets continued economic growth, which is unsustainable given limited world resources (Hickel, 2019), most of the remaining goals refer to “sustainable development” as that which is designed “to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (United Nations Secretary General, 1987), echoing wording from the National Environmental Policy Act (1970) written nearly two decades prior.

The purpose of SDG #4 is to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2018). That goal might sound broad and distant to individual educators, but strong communities have the capability to make measurable progress toward it. As Japan struggles with population decline and teacher shortages, sustainability is clearly a matter of both global and domestic significance. Sustainable education consists of policies and practices that boost education quality, are long-lasting, don't depend on continued funding, are flexible for current use and future change, and can be exported to other schools and districts (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). It is advanced through distributed leadership, when schools and teachers are offered greater power over how their schools function (Hargreaves & Fink, 2003, 2006). Government-led education reform efforts rarely succeed (Munby, 2020), and research emphasizes the potential of teachers themselves to lead the way to better education (Harris & Jones, 2019). Thus, one step towards sustainable education is to advance teacher agency.

Open Educational Resources

As mentioned, OERs are materials relating to teaching and learning. These include regular classroom materials—handouts, slideshows, websites, booklets, etc.—that the authors have decided to share with everyone. Creating an OER is simple—the author need only add a license to the document (Weichler, 2020).

Flexibility is a key idea surrounding OERs. Because they are free to use and remix, educators typically customize things according to their own needs. For some elective courses, instead of a textbook, the teacher might create their own information packets and

slideshows. For other courses, the teacher might mostly use a MEXT-approved textbook and have separate files for projects and presentations. In the aftermath of COVID-19, most schools started (or continued) using some kind of online learning platform, such as Google Suite for Education or Microsoft 365 for Education. As such, many teachers today have at least basic experience sharing and collaborating in online document creation. For those who do not, collaborative editing using Google Docs or Microsoft Office is easy to learn (Javed, 2024; Mihaila, 2023).

When creating OERs, the author must consider three main points. First, open and accessible formats are necessary. Many teachers like to use Apple computers, but Keynote files are hard to open on Windows. As such, Apple users, and anyone using proprietary file formats, may need to convert their files to more accessible formats (e.g., converting the Keynote file to a PowerPoint file or uploading it to Google Slides). Also, when sharing a PDF, the author needs to also share the source file, so that future teachers can make their own modifications. Second, personal information cannot be included in OERs. Because OERs are designed to be shared online and publicly, students' names and pictures must be avoided, and school-specific information should be kept to a minimum. Finally, it is necessary to avoid non-free material, so content creators take care with downloaded pictures, long copyrighted passages, music, and video. The above considerations apply to any kind of public-facing materials development, so experienced authors are already prepared to create OER. For less experienced authors, a simple starting point would be to adapt previously-created OER work and share the results.

OER development began in the 1990s, and the term itself was formalized in 2002 (Bliss & Smith, 2017). Yet, adoption within Japan has been slow (Shigeta et al., 2017), and much of the domestic focus has been on massive open online courses (Open Education Japan, 2022). One way to estimate engagement in a topic is using Google Trends¹, which shows search term popularity by country over the last five years. Two December 2025 queries, one for “OER” and the other for “open educational resources” ranked Japan in 40th and 60th place, clearly showing the relative lack of engagement in the topic at present. OER textbooks are unseen at the high school level, partly due to the burdensome national certification process (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, n.d.). Although primary textbook certification takes years, supplementary textbooks and materials are less restricted, and teachers—particularly those at private schools that offer flexibility surrounding the course syllabus—can quickly create and integrate them into courses.

¹ <https://trends.google.com/>

Benefits of OERs

One major benefit of OERs is the ability to share with other teachers and schools. Many teachers in Japan today work under one-year contracts and leave their schools in less than five years (Green, 2019). Because OERs are free to everyone, teachers can take OERs with them when they find future work at other schools. Also, they can share materials at conferences or post them online. This gives individual teachers greater stability in their own classrooms and incentive to collaborate.

A second benefit is that actively using OERs decreases the teacher's and school's dependency on publishing companies. Many high-quality supplementary OERs can be used standalone; they might go well with a specific textbook, but they don't depend on that particular textbook. Consequently, when textbooks go out of print or new versions are released, teachers feel no rush to recreate supplementary materials because their OERs are still perfectly usable.

OERs are one important element of the greater effort to build Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). Research in education has solidly established the importance of a shared vision for school change (Aldridge & McLure, 2024; Hallinger, 2011). When teachers agree on what kind of school they want to create, they're more likely to succeed, and one way to accomplish this is through PLCs. These communities play a key role in sustainable education (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006) because they involve teachers working together both within and between schools to reflect on, share, and collaboratively develop methodology, materials, and ideals that help them all provide a better education to their students (Stoll et al., 2006). Research has shown that subject departments in schools can raise student achievement through professional community development (Gates & Watkins, 2010; Lomos et al., 2011), and because OER production is visible and tangible, OER growth can act as a focal point for some PLC work. Successful use of OERs by PLCs has been reported in various locations; for example, teachers in Mexico found that sourcing quality OERs was less time-consuming than expected (García-Solano et al., 2023), and students in Egypt have reported clear benefits of OERs as supplementary materials to support their primary non-OER textbooks (Yassin, 2024). These were small studies in non-Japanese environments, but nevertheless they show the possibility and benefits of greater OER use in the broader educational community.

Discussion

Many schools in Japan are struggling to both recruit students and retain teachers. The former issue is one that will unavoidably remain a serious concern for many decades, but the latter challenge can be more effectively addressed. There are many ways to boost

teaching popularity, such as improving working conditions and raising salaries. These two approaches should not be understated in importance but are outside the scope of this paper. Of significance here is the potential that OERs hold to provide useful and reliable educational resources to teachers in what is, for many, a fluid and precarious professional environment. On the one hand, OER use in Japan at the primary and secondary level is currently minimal, and from that one might conclude that OERs are somehow unsuitable for these environments. On the other hand, it can also be argued that with a change in perspective, and increased teamwork within departments and across schools, progress can be made. Teachers and schools that are looking for inspiration from successes achieved abroad are well-situated to enact rapid change by collaborating to build better quality materials to help themselves and their students. In the words of Creative Commons (n.d.), “When we share, everyone wins”.

References

- Aldridge, J. M., & McLure, F. I. (2024). Preparing Schools for Educational Change: Barriers and Supports – A Systematic Literature Review. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 23(3), 486–511. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15700763.2023.2171439>
- Baseel, C. (2023, December 7). Tokyo makes high school free for all families, even the rich ones. *SoraNews24*.
<https://soraneews24.com/2023/12/07/tokyo-makes-high-school-free-for-all-families-even-the-rich-ones/>
- Bliss, T. J., & Smith, M. (2017). A Brief History of Open Educational Resources. In R. S. Jhangiani & R. Biswas-Diener (Eds.), *Open: The Philosophy and Practices that are Revolutionizing Education and Science* (pp. 9–27). Ubiquity Press.
<https://doi.org/10.5334/bbc.b>
- Creative Commons. (n.d.). *When we share, everyone wins*. Creative Commons. Retrieved April 4, 2025, from <https://creativecommons.org/share-everyone-wins/>
- Cuban, L. (2013). Why so many structural changes in schools and so little reform in teaching practice? *Journal of Educational Administration*, 51(2), 109–125.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/09578231311304661>
- García-Solano, R., González Calleros, J. M., & Olmos-Pineda, I. (2023). Effective Strategies for Finding Open Educational Resources in High School. *Apertura*, 15(2), 104–119.
<https://doi.org/10.32870/Ap.v15n2.2393>
- Gates, G. S., & Watkins, M. (2010). The Place of Autonomy in School Community: Taking a Closer Look at Teacher Collaboration. *Journal of School Leadership*, 20(3), 272–303.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/105268461002000302>
- Gourley, B., & Lane, A. (2009). Re-invigorating openness at The Open University: The role of Open Educational Resources. *Open Learning: The Journal of Open, Distance and e-Learning*, 24(1), 57–65. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680510802627845>
- Green, D. (2019). Foreign Faculty in Japan. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 52(03), 523–526. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S104909651900043X>
- Hallinger, P. (2011). Leadership for learning: Lessons from 40 years of empirical research. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 49(2), 125–142.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/09578231111116699>
- Hargreaves, A., & Fink, D. (2003). Sustaining Leadership. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 84(9), 693–700. <https://doi.org/10.1177/003172170308400910>
- Hargreaves, A., & Fink, D. (2006). Redistributed Leadership for Sustainable Professional Learning Communities. *Journal of School Leadership*, 16(5), 550–565.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/105268460601600507>

- Harris, A., & Jones, M. (2019). Teacher leadership and educational change. *School Leadership & Management*, 39(2), 123–126.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2019.1574964>
- Hickel, J. (2019). The contradiction of the sustainable development goals: Growth versus ecology on a finite planet. *Sustainable Development*, 27(5), 873–884.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/sd.1947>
- Japan's Proportion of Children to Adults Lowest in the World. (2022, May 18). *Nippon.Com*.
<https://www.nippon.com/en/japan-data/h01320/>
- Javed, H. (2024, October 25). How to Collaborate on Google Drive Documents From Android and iPhone. *How-To Geek*.
<https://www.howtogeek.com/how-to-collaborate-on-google-drive-documents-from-and-roid-and-iphone/>
- Kitamura, Y., Oomomo, T., & Katsuno, M. (2019). *Education in Japan: A Comprehensive Analysis of Education Reforms and Practices* (Vol. 47). Springer.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-2632-5>
- Kumar, S., Kumar, N., & Vivekadhish, S. (2016). Millennium development goals (MDGs) to sustainable development goals (SDGs): Addressing unfinished agenda and strengthening sustainable development and partnership. *Indian Journal of Community Medicine*, 41(1), 1–4. <https://doi.org/10.4103/0970-0218.170955>
- Lomos, C., Hofman, R. H., & Bosker, R. J. (2011). The relationship between departments as professional communities and student achievement in secondary schools. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 27(4), 722–731. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2010.12.003>
- Mihaila, R. (2023, September 7). How to Collaborate in Real-Time on a Word Document. *MUO*. <https://www.makeuseof.com/collaborate-real-time-word/>
- Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology. (n.d.). Procedures up to the Use of Textbooks. *MEXT*. Retrieved March 16, 2025, from <https://www.mext.go.jp/en/policy/education/elsec/title02/detail02/sdetail02/1383719.html>
- Munby, S. (2020). The development of school leadership practices for 21st century schools. *European Journal of Education*, 55(2), 146–150. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejed.12394>
- National Environmental Policy Act, Pub. L. No. 91–190, 4321 42 (1970).
<https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/91/s1075/text>
- OE Japan History*. (2022, February). OE Japan. <https://oejapan.org/history/>
- Rizzi, A. (2023, June 6). A look at Japan's demographic collapse, through the eyes of its youth. *El Pais*.
<https://english.elpais.com/international/2023-06-06/a-look-at-japans-demographic-collapse-through-the-eyes-of-its-youth.html>

- Sakuma, A., & Shimazaki, N. (2024). "Why are We Running Short of Teachers Even as the Birthrate Declines?": A Case Study of the Teacher Shortage in Public Schools in X Prefecture in Japan (N. Murray, Trans.). *Educational Studies in Japan: International Yearbook*, 18, 191–210. <https://doi.org/10.7571/esjkyoiku.18.191>
- Shigeta, K., Koizumi, M., Sakai, H., Tsuji, Y., Inaba, R., & Hiraoka, N. (2017). A survey of the awareness, offering, and adoption of OERs and MOOCs in Japan. *Open Praxis*, 9(2), 195. <https://doi.org/10.5944/openpraxis.9.2.568>
- Stoll, L., Bolam, R., McMahon, A., Wallace, M., & Thomas, S. (2006). Professional Learning Communities: A Review of the Literature. *Journal of Educational Change*, 7(4), 221–258. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-006-0001-8>
- Toda, S. (2023, August 26). Osaka Pref. To make all high school tuition free, eliminate income limit in Japan first. *The Mainichi*. <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20230826/p2a/00m/0na/016000c>
- UNESCO Institute for Statistics. (2018). *Quick Guide to Education Indicators for SDG 4*. UNESCO Institute for Statistics. <https://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/quick-guide-education-indicators-sdg4-2018-en.pdf>
- United Nations Secretary General. (1987). *Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development* (No. 42nd Session Item 83 (e); p. 374). United Nations. <http://digitallibrary.un.org/record/139811>
- Weichler, J. (2020, January 14). How and why use Creative Commons licensed work. *OpenSource.Com*. <https://opensource.com/article/20/1/what-creative-commons>
- Yamamitsu, E., Bateman, T., & Kato, I. (2023, March 30). School closures spread as Japan struggles with depopulation. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/asia-population-japan-children/>
- Yamasaki, H. (2025). Japan's Teacher Shortage at the Beginning of the 21st Century: Declining Competition in Teacher Recruitment Examinations and a Shortage of Regular and Non-Regular Teachers. *Educational Studies in Japan*, 19, 5–16. <https://doi.org/10.7571/esjkyoiku.19.5>
- Yassin, E. (2024). Examining the relation of open thinking, critical thinking, metacognitive skills and usage frequency of open educational resources among high school students. *Thinking Skills and Creativity*, 52, 101506. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tsc.2024.101506>

Contributors

Author: Jerald Halvorsen

Report: Materials Writers SIG Table at the JALT Hokkaido Winter Conference

Jerry Halvorsen teaches at universities in Hokkaido. He grew up in the Midwest of the United States in Minnesota and Wisconsin. He is a coauthor of *Click for Better English* (2007 Nan 'Un Do) and author of *Homerun! Team History MLB* (2011 Perceptia Press). He is also a past president of the Hokkaido chapter of the Japan Association for Language Teaching and a past chairperson of the Hokkaido International School Executive Board.

Contact: j.halvorsen0108@gmail.com

Author: John Rucynski

Musings on Marketing: Developing a Video-Based Textbook Focused on Career Choices: *Working in Japan: Further Explorations*

John Rucynski has been teaching English for 30 years and is currently an associate professor at Okayama University. He has co-authored four textbooks, including *Surprising Japan!* and *Working in Japan: Video Interviews with 14 Professionals*. In addition, he has edited two volumes on the role of humor in language acquisition and intercultural communicative competence. His most recent editing project was the anthology *A Passion for Japan: A Collection of Personal Narratives*.

Contact: jrucynski@gmail.com

Author: Michelle Nemoto

Key Lesson: AI as Scaffold, Not Shortcut: Redesigning an Oral English Presentation Task

Michelle Nemoto teaches English communication and skills-based courses at multiple Japanese universities. Her teaching focuses on building student confidence and fluency through task-based and communicative approaches. Her interests include generative AI in language education, oral presentation task design, scaffolding in second language learning, and the use of music to support engagement, memory, and adult neurogenesis in EFL contexts.

Contact: chellsensei@kindai.ac.jp

Author: Douglas Perkins

Perspective: Sustainability Through Open Educational Resources

Douglas Perkins is an English teacher at Keio Shonan Fujisawa Junior & Senior High School. He has taught at several schools in Akita, Tokyo, and Kanagawa for almost two decades. He is passionate about the development of high quality free educational materials. He makes and shares many of his own classroom materials and is an active contributor to Wikimedia Commons and similar sites.

Contact: douglas@keio.jp

Author: David Lees

Materials in Practice: PDF Course Materials in EFL Contexts: Rationale, Design, and Practitioner Feedback

David Lees works as an Instructor at Kyoto University. He has long since lost his hobbies to the requirements of the service, but he does fancy himself a somewhat satisfactory pioneer of technical materials, methods, and language-learning technologies.

Contact: lees.davidpeter.5u@kyoto-u.ac.jp