

## Characteristics of Elementary School Teachers' Views of English Classes Due to Differences in Educational Environments-Survey by a qualitative research method

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### Abstract

The purpose of this study is to understand differences in teachers' views on English teaching due to differences in English teaching experience and educational environmental factors. We conducted a survey of teachers of two schools that differed in the English language teaching environment. To understand the differences due to the experience of English teaching, we compared the results of the same survey conducted in the first year of the compulsory course. We conducted group discussions where teachers freely comment on the English class they watched and analyzed their remarks using qualitative research methods. As a result of the analysis, it was suggested that the viewpoints of interest in English classes differed according to the experience of English teaching and that the viewpoints emphasized in the teaching differed depending on the educational environment.

### 1. Introduction

What a teacher emphasizes in the teaching and how the reality of the lessons is interpreted significantly affects the ways the teaching is conducted. Understanding teachers' thoughts is critical to improve teaching and education. Public elementary school English education in Japan began with "Comprehensive Learning Time," introduced in 2002, which enabled teachers to include English conversation as part of international understanding education (MEXT, 1998). At that time, it was not a formal subject, so the goals and teaching materials were to be determined by the school. Because of this, there were differences in approaches among schools. Also, since the development of the system was left to the initiative of administrative agencies such as the local Boards of Education, there were differences in the financial support and support **systems** for teachers depending on in the region. As a result, there were differences in the practical experiences and English language teaching environments in different locations and schools.

From 2011, English education in public elementary schools became compulsory in the 5th and 6th grades, and English education was officially implemented at public elementary schools for the

first time (MEXT, 2008). However, as mentioned earlier, schools and communities had already instituted a variety of arrangements for English education. We need to know how this will affect future English education.

The purpose of this study is to understand the differences in primary school teachers' views on English language teaching due to differences in experience and knowledge of English teaching practice, and environmental factors such as teacher support.

### 2. Previous Studies

Numerous studies have shown that teachers' perceptions and knowledge are influenced by the educational context in which they are placed. Breen et al. (2001) showed that while individual teachers have different views of teaching practice, there is also a shared perspective of teaching practices among teacher groups. In a four-month longitudinal survey Hiratsuka and Brakhuizen (2015) found that the teaching system, for example team teaching, changed teachers' perceptions of the education.

Teacher cognitive research, which seeks to understand the perspectives of teachers, is based on practical pedagogical interests that can be useful in education and teacher education.

Nagamine (2014) states that in recent studies of language teacher cognition, interest in elucidating the context surrounding teachers as well as the process forming teachers' beliefs has increased.

Research on Japanese elementary school teachers as language teachers is steadily increasing, and it can be said that this is an area that has been attracting attention. For example, Nakamura, Shimura and Mitsugi (2017) surveyed Japanese elementary school teachers to gain a cognitive, emotional, and behavioral perspective on teacher perception and studied environmental factors. The result revealed that environmental factors, directly and indirectly, affect the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral perspectives. Also, for research on English language education in elementary schools based on temporal factors, Kobayashi and Miyamoto (2008) have determined changes in ideal teaching style considered by elementary school teachers. When few teachers were engaged in English, the opinion that Assistant language Teachers (ALTs) should teach English was dominant. However, over time, the opinion that homeroom teachers should be teaching has increased

For methods in teacher cognition research, quantitative methods have been the mainstream approach in recent years. However, because knowledge and beliefs in the minds of teachers are intricately connected and indistinguishable (Woods, 1996), qualitative research methods have become widely used. Nakamura, Shimura, and Hasegawa (2013) surveyed teachers with and without experience in English teaching using the same method as in Butler (2005) and established differences in the perspectives on English teaching. Butler (2005) qualitatively investigated whether teachers' ways of teaching differed between countries. Using Multi-vocal Visual Ethnography (Tobin, 1988) with teachers in Japan, Korea, and Taiwan, a group discussion was held in which the teachers freely discussed the lessons they watched on DVD. The results suggested that the teachers viewed the classes from different perspectives.

### **3. Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to understand the differences in teachers' views on English teaching due to differences in English teaching experience and environmental educational factors. For this purpose, the following research questions were set.

Research Question 1: What changes can be seen in elementary school teachers' views of English language education over the three years since elementary school English education became a compulsory subject (due to temporal factors).

Research Question 2: What changes have been seen in elementary school teachers' views on English language education due to differences in English education environment and teacher support systems (due to environmental factors).

### **4. Research Method**

One of the difficulties of research that seeks to understand a personal's perspective, such as teacher cognitive research, is that it is not possible to elicit unconscious beliefs from questionnaires and interviews (Basturken, Loewen & Ellis 2004). Therefore, in this study, we used the same method as Butler (2005) and Nakamura, Shimura, and Hasegawa (2013) mentioned above to elicit teachers' unconscious beliefs through group discussions among teachers.

Research Question 1 : To examine the differences due to temporal factors, we compared the data obtained in 2011 from Nakamura et al. (2013) with the data collected in this study.

Research Question 2: To compare differences due to environmental factors, we compared the characteristics of the data obtained from two different schools

#### **4.1. Participants**

The data for 2011, the first year of compulsory

elementary school English education, were obtained from Nakamura et al. (2013) as a group providing a basic positions (Group 1). That study (2013) collected data from teachers both with and without English teaching experience. In the present study, only the data from teachers with English teaching experience was used.

The data for 2014 were obtained from two schools with teachers who differed in their length of teaching experience and support system for the teachers. Group 2 is in a school located in a fishing village and works on English education throughout the town as a specialized curriculum school accredited by MEXT. Although they don't have a lot of English teaching experience, based on a curriculum shared in the community, all classes are conducted by team teaching with a homeroom teacher, ALTs, and support teachers. Group 3 is in a school located in an urban area with strong interest in education and with a history of 10 years of English education. The teachers teach English independently while sharing the teaching methods and teaching materials in English teaching with other teachers of English.

In both of the schools investigated in 2014, all the pupils and teachers engage in English education and present the results of that education in various places. However, the two regions differ significantly in their demographic and industrial structures, and also in their internationalization, depending on the percentage of non-Japanese people living or visiting the areas. The participants of this study were three teachers in each group, chosen to be as homogeneous as possible. Table 1 summarizes the teacher attributes.

Table 1

*Teacher attributes for each group*

	Group 1 Core city	Group 2 Rural Area	Group 3 Major city
T	2011.10.29 2011	2014, 07,22	2014,12,11

P	A : Male,40s	D: Male,30s	G: Male,30s
	B : Male.40s	E: Male,40s	H: Male,40s
	C: Female.20s	F: Male,40s	I: Female,20s

T = timing of implementation, P = participants

## 4.2. Experimental Method

After watching 2-10 minutes activities in an English lesson on video, group discussions were held for about 15 minutes to discuss what the teachers noticed and thought about them freely. These discussions of the three groups were conducted separately

The discussion was recorded with a video camera and an IC recorder. All teachers' utterances were transcribed and analyzed. Two researchers were present at the discussion, but they did not participate in the discussion to eliminate the prejudice of researchers and to maintain objectivity. The survey was conducted with the consent of the respondents with the approval of the ethics committee of the school where the first author worked.

## 4.3. Lesson Used for the Experiments

In this experiment, we used a commercially available DVD (Kanatani, 2011) that was created to introduce an English lesson conducted by the classroom teacher. In this lesson, the emphasis is placed on listening to English, and pupils are not required to speak English.

The lesson consists of four activities. Although it is a commercial DVD, the instructor conducts it in her homeroom class, and we can see the reaction and expressions of the pupils and understand the atmosphere of the whole class. With this, the researchers determined that this DVD was suitable for the study. Subtitles explaining the intent of the activity were presented on the screen, but were hidden from view during the watching.

## 4.4. Method of Analysis

All of the teachers' speech was transcribed, fragmented by chunks of meanings, and entered into separate cells of the spreadsheet software.

After that, we interpreted "what" each teacher focused on in the lesson and "what" they said about it.

Following the database conception method (Fujisawa, 1992), the focuses and features of interpretation were extracted by the sorting function of the software. We identified the characteristics of the teachers' views of teaching by comparing them. Table 2 shows a part of the analysis.

	Utterance	Focus	interpretation
G2 TE	Well, I want to see their self-evaluation ... What kind of words did the kids say most?	Pupil's self-assessment	Content of self-assessment

Figure 1 Example of the analysis.

G2 = Group 2, TE = Teacher E

#### 4.5. Presentation of Results

In qualitative research such as this, "thick descriptions" (Geertz, 1973) are required, so the presentation of the results requires much space, and it is challenging to present findings within a limited number of characters or spaces. Therefore, the way of showing the results requires some ingenuity. For example, Creswell (2014) proposes a joint display, a presentation method that summarizes the results in a table. In this study, teachers' points of the focus on the lesson were categorized, and interpretations of them were summarized by groups in a table with the remarks supporting the points. The results are shown in the Appendix

### 5. Results and Discussion

The points of focus of each group were extracted and categorized, and seven categories were obtained: "perspective," "instructor," "pupils," "activity," "language materials," "teacher beliefs," and "evaluation." The purpose of this study is to understand differences between the three groups, but some of the categories had characteristics common to the three groups

In the discussions about "pupils, "the three

groups have similar views like "consideration for the pupil's developmental stage," "consideration for the pupils' emotional and emotional aspects," and "emphasis on pupil's reactions." In particular, the teachers tended to evaluate lessons based on pupil's reactions.

Also, all of these groups spent a long time discussing how the evaluation should be done. This suggests that assessment is a challenge the teachers are currently concerned about. Besides, they valued interactive activities where pupils work independently, practical and creative teaching materials, and the possibility of applying the activities to other subjects.

The results obtained for each of the research questions are described below.

#### 5.1. Research Question 1

For Research Question 1, the characteristics of the teachers in 2011(Group 1) and in 2014 (Groups 2 and 3) were compared.

##### 5.1.1. Perspective on Class

There were differences between the groups in the perspectives on the class. Teachers in 2011 were convinced that the lesson they were watching was an advanced model class and were looking for useful points for their lessons. The two groups of teachers in 2014 observed the class objectively and critically, and compared them with their own teaching practices. This suggests that with experience of English teaching as a compulsory course, the teachers could afford to see the lessons while evaluating them appropriately.

The teachers in 2011 noted concerns about differences in English education among schools and regions. The teachers in 2014, mentioned the variety of classes and pupils, such as "the differences in classroom reality" and "the flow of thinking of individual pupils." This suggests that concerns about the diversity of the actual situation of schools and communities due to "Comprehensive Learning Time" have been alleviated, and it is possible to state that the

teachers' focus has shifted to the situation of the individual class and pupils.

### **5.1.2 Instructors**

Teachers in 2011 expressed concerns that the high English proficiency of the instructor could adversely impede pupils' understanding. Teachers in 2014 mainly talked about the relationship between teachers and pupils, her classroom management, and her efforts to create a desirable classroom atmosphere

From this, we may assume that the expected roles of the teacher are gradually changing from "a model of English use" to "a classroom teacher who has a good understanding of the pupils and has a close relationship with them" and is "a mediator promoting pupils' learning."

### **5.1.3. Activities**

Regarding the activities used in this lesson, as mentioned above, the comments of the teachers had much in common. Here, only the differences between the groups will be described.

The first thing teachers in 2011 mentioned was about the classroom environment. They shared an image that English classes were performed in a free space without desks and chairs, with a lot of movement. This ingrained image was mentioned many times throughout this group discussion. Teachers in 2014 had a flexible image modified to accord with the actual situation of the class and the pupil's reactions. This suggests that teachers' views of English classes are changing from a set image to a more flexible one.

### **5.1.4. Language Materials**

Teachers in 2011 emphasized the relationship between the language materials and the context in which they were used. This is consistent with the language guidelines in the Course of Study (MEXT, 2008). Teachers in 2014, discussed if the language materials were appropriate for the pupil's developmental stage and if it were meaningful to them. This suggests that teachers have increased

knowledge and interest in language learning materials.

### **5.1.5. Teacher Beliefs**

As the teachers talked while watching the DVD, they showed the teachers beliefs in English teaching. Among these, the only ones that differed by the group are described here. Teachers in 2011 were concerned that their pupils would "hate English" before going to junior high school, focusing on pupils' affective aspects. On the other hand, teachers in 2014 were focusing on improving English communication skills and the process of pupil's thinking, pupils' cognitive aspects.

The results suggest that concerns about pupil's affective aspects caused by thinking about junior high school had declined and that teachers' interests were shifting to the skills and cognitive aspects involved in learning activities.

## **5.2. Research Question 2**

For Research Question 2, we compared the data obtained in 2014 from the two schools with different characteristics (Group 2 and Group 3). Of the five categories in the Appendix, Groups 2 and 3 differed on 3 points: "instructor," "language materials," and "teacher beliefs."

### **5.2.1. Instructor**

Group 2 teachers, who are teaching all the classes with Team Teaching, saw teachers as classroom teachers, focusing on class management and learning rules,

Group 3 teachers, teach English by themselves, and their school has taught English for many years. One of the teachers in Group 3 mentioned that they have been showing their model lessons to new teachers in every new semester. And he stated that this helps create a standard image of lessons among teachers. This indicates that they have traditionally shared the experiences of English teaching through in-school training.

Teachers in Group 3 had a common view of teachers that the teachers' role is to promote child

learning not to convey knowledge, which was based on the educational goals of their schools. We may guess that this shared view may have been established during the collaborative process.

### **5.2.2. Language Materials**

2014 groups had greater insight and interest in the language materials, but teachers in Group 2 were discussing whether the difficulty of the language material was appropriate for the pupil's developmental stage and the curriculum shared in their community. Group 3, on the other hand, considered the materials from a different perspective not focused on the curriculum, whether the materials were meaningful to the pupils (usefulness) or related to their real life (relationship).

Group 2 teachers provide instruction based on a common curriculum created in the community, Group 3 teachers are relatively free to teach English, which might make the teachers see the language materials more freely from the curriculum.

### **5.2.3. Teacher Beliefs**

Group 2 teachers showed an interest in improving communication skills, based on the curriculum and goals commonly shared in the community. It was inferred that their view of teaching is rather teacher-led one.

On the other hand, in Group 3, the teachers showed a common belief in teaching that emphasized the cognitive aspects of pupils among teachers, which is a rather student-centered view. Also, as described above, it is considered that teacher collaboration in Group 3, such as in-school training and frequent information exchanges between teachers, fosters a commonly held view of instruction among teachers.

## **6. Conclusions**

As we explored the differences between the groups, we found some common features among the three groups. All groups focused on the pupil's

developmental stage, the emotional aspects, and the quality and quantity of the pupil's reactions. It may be that these were the viewpoints of teaching seen in elementary school teachers in general. The features they valued are points that should be emphasized in early foreign language education and may be considered to be advantages of English education in elementary schools. The teachers have concerns about the evaluation method and the importance of speaking rather than listening, we can say the ideal ways of evaluation, and the balance between input and output issues has to be addressed.

A summary of this research for each research question is given below

### **Research Question 1 : Temporal Factors**

It was suggested that in the three years since the introduction of compulsory English education, dependence on lesson models and concerns about a connection to junior high school have diminished and that teachers began to see lessons from a perspective based on their own teacher beliefs. Also, their interest shifted from the superficial aspects of the classroom environment to teaching contents, and the teachers began to see the instructor as a teacher who facilitates the pupil's learning rather than as an English user model. About language materials, they began to show more in-depth interest from the perspective of relations with pupils.

In elementary school English education, concerns about teaching by elementary school teachers who are not specialists in English have been widely discussed. Studies have shown that elementary school teachers themselves are also very anxious about English teaching mostly due to lack of knowledge and experience. Although Groups 2 and 3 are in a specialized English education environment, this study is likely to provide hints for future teachers' changes in elementary school English education.

### **Research Question 2 : Environmental Factors**

The two groups in 2014 showed different features that may be attributed to their educational workplace environment. In addition, teachers of Group 3, who are in highly collaborative environment, showed shared teacher beliefs among teachers.

However, these groups may be working and constrained by different factors besides differences in the English educational environment, and we cannot identify the factors that were found in this study. In the future, it is necessary to investigate what factors affect teachers by examining teachers in more diverse environments.

This study does not have enough data and cannot be generalized. However, to better understand the complex and diverse realities where teachers are currently located, it is appropriate to use case studies instead of examining a large number of subjects using questionnaires. Therefore, we think that accumulating such research will lead to an understanding of the teachers and eventually improvement of English education.

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C = category, G = group, P = perspective on class,  
I=Instructor, A = activities, LM = language materials,  
TB = teacher beliefs

## **Appendix**

### Result of Analysis