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Challenging Assumptions
Looking In, Looking Out

Elementary to Secondary English Articulation: Challenging Teacher Beliefs

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Although the Japanese government has been discussing the introduction of English as a subject into elementary schools, there is no documentation as to how those who had learned English in elementary schools continued to learn in junior high schools. Using multiple data sources, this study offers implications as to how to strengthen English curriculum articulation between elementary and high schools so that students will be better English learners. It also sheds light on how teacher beliefs influence student learning.

日本では、教科として英語を小学校に導入することが検討されてきたが、実際にこれまで小学校で英語教育を受けた生徒が中学校でどうなったのかはほとんど研究されていない。さらに、中学校の英語教員が英語教育についてどのように考え、小学校で英語を学習してきた生徒をどう伸ばしているのかはほとんど知られていない。この研究は、複合的調査方法を用い、教師の英語教育観 (beliefs)、授業実践、英語学習に対する生徒の態度と結果を明らかにする。

Kleinsasser (2001) argues “articulation in foreign (second) language instruction refers to how an educational program efficiently and effectively attains its goals in an environment where students are involved in foreign (second) language learning” (p. 193-194). Although the Japanese government has been discussing the introduction of English as a subject into elementary schools, there is no documentation as to how those who had learned English in elementary schools continued to learn English in junior high schools. Moreover, little is known about how junior high school English teachers view English language teaching and how they actually improve the abilities of students who have already learned English

in their elementary schools. Using multiple data sources, the study revealed teachers' beliefs about English language teaching, their practices, students' attitudes about learning English, and outcomes.

Literature review

We first review studies on early foreign language education in other countries to identify issues and then move on to two recent studies in Japan which focus on the issue of articulation.

Issues of early foreign language education in other countries

Heining-Boynton (1990) reviewed foreign language education in elementary schools in the USA which had been conducted in the 1960s and identified six issues. These included: (1) lack of qualified teachers, (2) few clear goals, (3) traditional teaching methods, (4) weak articulation, (5) lack of assessment, (6) lack of support from parents. Additionally, Rhodes and Oxford (1987) conducted a nationwide survey looking at the results of foreign language teaching in elementary and secondary schools in the USA. They found the following six issues: (1) lack of funds, (2) lack of qualified teachers, (3) lack of teaching materials, (4) weak articulation, (5) poor academic counseling, (6) lack of opportunities for teacher training. Curtain & Dahlberg (2004) conclude that the same kind of issues have not been solved during the last 40 years in the USA.

Similarly, studies in other countries such as Korea (Kobayashi, 1997), Australia (Fujiwara, 1997), Netherlands

(Matsuka, 1997) point out lack of qualified teachers, lack of teaching materials, and weak articulation between elementary schools and middle schools. In short, among several issues, the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) selected articulation as a curriculum priority for the 1990s (Byrnes, 1990).

Research in Japan

Regarding the issue of articulation, only a few studies have been done in Japan.

Shirahata (2001) compared two groups of students—those who studied English for three years at their elementary school and those who did not after entering the same junior high school. He used three tests to assess their abilities for discrimination of phoneme, pronunciation, and fluency. He found no difference between the two groups.

Matsukawa (1997) compared two groups of students—those who studied English for two years, twice a week, at their elementary school and those who did not after entering the same junior high school. She used two kinds of tests. In the first test, she asked 14 personal questions such as “Who is your favorite actor?” and measured student response time, accuracy, and fluency. In the second test, students looked at pictures and graphs, and spoke freely for 3 minutes. She found that those who studied English in their elementary school did better in the two tests. They answered quickly, accurately, and tried to answer some questions by guessing unknown words. Besides, they used more words in a sentence, spoke with confidence, and answered questions smoothly.

In short, these two studies are not conclusive. While Shirahata (2001) did not find any difference between those who studied English in elementary school and those who did not after both groups entered the same junior high school, Matsukawa (1997) found that those who studied English in elementary school outperformed those who did not in their junior high school.

Research Issues and questions

Previous studies on early foreign language education reveal that articulation between elementary schools and middle schools is one of the major issues in foreign language teaching throughout the world. As for the issue of articulation in Japan, only two studies were conducted, but the results were not conclusive. Furthermore, these two studies have weaknesses in terms of method as follows.

- (1) Previous studies mainly relied on quantitative data including surveys and a couple of tests.
- (2) More qualitative data including interviews and observations need to be collected to investigate how teachers understand language teaching and how they actually teach.
- (3) These studies were conducted only on first-year junior high school students. Thus, a longitudinal study is necessary to understand how students' attitude change over three years.

Mindful of those issues, three research questions were formulated for this study.

- (1) How do junior high school teachers understand English language teaching?
- (2) How do they actually teach English?
- (3) How do students change their attitude toward English learning over three years? Consequently, do their English communication abilities improve?

Method

Selecting a junior high school for research

Goto (2004) researched English classes and compared programs among three elementary school (X, Y, Z), which were located in the *Toukai* region. She found that students in Z Elementary School stood out in their abilities to use English. In this school, 1st and 2nd grade students received two-20 minute classes a week, while students from 3rd to 6th grade did one 45 minute class a week. In addition, they watched a 15-minute English TV program twice a week, and the content of English class was related to other subjects (e.g., mathematics). What is more, teachers had a regular meeting to discuss English class, and junior high school teachers taught some of the classes.

For this research, S Junior High School was chosen, which consists of Z elementary school graduates who received English instruction for six years and W elementary school graduates who only received a few English lessons in *Sogo* class. The first and the third grade level had five classes (33 to 38 students per class) and the second grade level had four classes (38 to 39 students per class). The total number of students was 513. The research period was from June to October 2004.

Table 1. English teachers

	Sex	Age	Length of teaching	Teaching grade level	Survey	Class observation	Interview
Teacher A	Female	40	15 years	3rd	X	X	X
Teacher B	Female	36	12 years	1st and 2nd	X	X	X
Teacher C	Male	28	7 years	1st	X		X
Teacher D	Female	26	2 years	1st and 2nd	X	X	X

Table 1 describes four English teachers in S Junior High School. The average age was 32.5 with 9 years of teaching experience. In addition, two 1st-year classes were team-taught three times a week; twice by two junior high school teachers and once by a junior high school teacher and a Z elementary school English teacher. Three other classes were team-taught twice by two junior high school teachers, but the third class was taught only by one junior high school teacher, which was called a regular class. All second and third-year classes were taught three times a week by one teacher (regular classes). An assistant language teacher (ALT) visited each class about once a month. Also, one of the junior high school English teachers sometimes went to Z Elementary School as a volunteer English teacher (VET).

Data collection and analysis

Multiple data sources, including interviews, class observations, and questionnaires, were used to describe how teachers viewed English language teaching (in both elementary schools and junior high schools), how they actually taught, and what students thought about the English language instruction they received (both in elementary schools and S Junior High School).

As Table 1 shows, a teacher survey was conducted in June. 25 questions were developed regarding English language teaching, assessment, differences between those who learned English and those who did not, and English language teaching in elementary schools. A student survey was conducted twice (June, September). In the first survey, 12 questions were asked of students (those who graduated from Z Elementary School) from two classes in each grade level. Questions included students' attitudes about learning English in Z Elementary School and S Junior High School, purpose of studying English, likes and dislikes of activities, and so on. In the second survey in October, those students were asked to evaluate their abilities in four skills compared to those in April.

Two classes from each grade level were observed three times (twice from June to July, and once from September to October). In total, 18 class observations were conducted by the first researcher. Following McDonough & McDonough (1998), the researcher usually sat at the back of the classroom, occasionally walking around and taking notes in the field note. All the classroom observations were tape-recorded. The researcher listened to the tape and added more details to the field note later on.

Interviews were conducted with all four teachers in October 2004. Based on Sato (2000), 15 questions were made regarding the goals of English language teaching at S Junior High School, beliefs about English language teaching, assessment, textbooks, issues of English language teaching in junior high schools, teaching English in elementary schools. Six students from each grade level (in total 18 students who graduated from Z Elementary School) were interviewed in each group in July and October. Each group interview lasted 30 to 40 minutes. Based on Sato & Takahashi (2003), six questions were asked of these students. All the interviews were tape-recorded with permission, and transcribed by the first researcher for data analysis.

Both qualitative data (interviews, observations) and quantitative data (surveys) from teachers and students were analyzed and integrated to create evidence of teachers' assumptions and beliefs about English language teaching, their practices, students' attitudes about learning English, and outcomes.

Results

Teachers' views about English language teaching

About early English language teaching

All English teachers in S Junior High School agreed with starting English education in elementary schools on some conditions. For example, two teachers reported that English should be an official subject in elementary schools. Teacher A said:

I don't agree with English activity in elementary school because it is a game, playing with English, singing an English song, and so on. It is different from English in junior high school as a subject. Students in junior high learn English grammar and vocabulary through the textbook. (Interview, Teacher A)

In addition, three teachers claimed that the standardized curriculum should be made. For instance, Teacher C reported:

Teachers in both Z and W elementary schools should teach the same activities (teach the same expressions and words) and should have the same curriculum. If they are different, English teachers in junior high school have to bridge the gap. (Interview- Teacher C)

In short, these four junior high school teachers agreed to introduce English into elementary schools on condition that English should be a subject and its curriculum should be developed. Nonetheless, they further revealed problems of early English language teaching.

Problems of early English language teaching

These four teachers reported the six problems of English language teaching in elementary schools. They were (1) curriculum, (2) evaluation, (3) introducing words, (4) articulation between elementary schools and junior high schools, (5) English language teaching license in elementary schools, (6) burden to students. To take an example, Teacher B pointed out the issue of articulation between elementary schools and junior high schools.

I'm looking after my students, teaching English, counseling my students, and coaching students in a club. I'm very busy every day. So I cannot afford to articulate the curriculum between elementary school and junior high school. It is impossible. I think a special person who can articulate the curriculum should be hired. (Interview- Teacher B)

Teacher D reported in his interview that "If English is taught as a subject, students have to learn a lot of things. It will be a burden to students."

In brief, junior high school teachers revealed these six problems regarding the introduction of English language teaching in elementary schools.

Teacher's views about English teaching in JHS

When these teachers were asked about the goals of English language teaching in their junior high school, they implied that they did understand the importance of oral communication skills (listening and speaking). However, they reported that reading and writing skills are more important for junior high school students. Teacher C's comment represents these teachers' views.

I want to teach English to improve students' communicative skills like English classes in their elementary school. But I must develop students' skills to recognize English words through reading and writing. (Interview- Teacher C)

Moreover, Teacher A insisted that junior high school students should not study in the same way as elementary school students.

Listening is not enough for junior high school students. Having them read and write helps them learn English. They should not study in the same way as elementary school students. (Interview- Teacher A)

According to the guidelines by MEXT (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology) in 2003, the main goal of English language teaching is to develop students' attitude to actively participate in communication in English with the main focus on the development of practical oral communication skills. However, these teachers placed more emphasis on reading and writing over listening and speaking. It seems that they stress the importance of teaching English to prepare students for high school entrance exams.

Class Observation

Teacher A, B, and D's classes and the TT's class (Teacher B and an English teacher from Z Elementary School) were observed. In total, 18 classes (two classes from each grade level, three times during the period) were observed. In TT class for the first-year students, an elementary teacher and a junior high school teacher collaborated and focused on a communicative activity. However, in regular classes regardless of the grade level, teachers mainly used a textbook and there were few opportunities for students to use English communicatively. In particular, the second and the third-year teachers put more emphasis on reading and writing, which corresponds to their views about English language teaching. The following data were taken from the filed note.

1st-year Team-teaching class (Teacher B and English T from Z elementary school)

- (1) Greeting (Good morning. / How is the weather today?)
- (2) Warm-up (Ss sang an English song<*Mori no kumasan*>) = 5 mins
- (3) Review (Ss repeated some words to review grammar<plural>) = 8 mins
cats /s/, dogs /z/, books /th/, dishes /iz/ ...etc
- (4) Introducing new material and practice pronunciation (T explained how to do the activity) = 10 mins
e.g., Please answer my question. 11 dogs – 1 dog + 8 dogs = what?
- (5) Activity (Ss made Qs of calculation, let their partners answer Qs.) = 20 mins
- (6) Review of the activity (Ss wrote a formula of calculation by themselves) = 5 mins
- (7) Evaluation (Ss evaluated themselves) = 2 mins
- (8) Greeting (That's all for today. Good bye everyone.)

2nd-year regular class (Teacher D)

- (1) Greeting (Good morning. How are you? How is the weather today? etc.) = 3mins
- (2) Pair talking (Ss talked with their partners, "What will you do this weekend?") = 10 mins

- (3) Oral introduction <textbook>
(T explained some pictures in English, Ss guessed what they were.) = 10 mins
- (4) Pronunciation of 11 new words (Ss repeated after T about 5 times each(1)) = 10 mins
- (5) Check the meaning of key expressions (in pairs and T) = 10 mins
T: ~について教えてくださいませんか? S: Can you tell me about~?
- (6) Chorus reading of the textbook (Ss repeated after T read) = 7 mins
- (7) Greeting (That's all for today. Good bye, everyone. See you.)

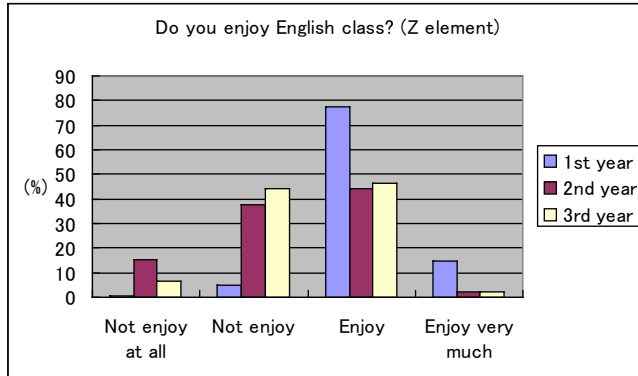
As the observation data above indicate, except for team-taught classes for first-year students, there were few genuine communications among students. Instead, teachers in regular classes regardless of the grade level relied heavily on the textbook with more emphasis on grammar, reading, and translation (either orally or in writing).

Students' attitude toward English learning over three years

The first student survey was conducted in June. 12 questions were asked of students (those who graduated from Z Elementary School) from two classes in each grade level. Questions included students' attitudes about learning English in Z Elementary School and S Junior High School, purposes of studying English, likes and dislikes of activities, and

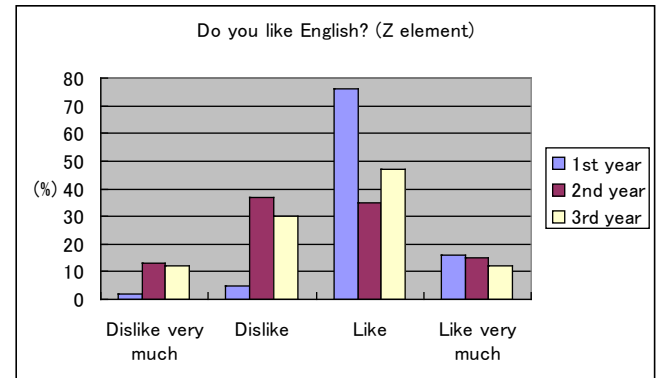
so on. Table 2 shows the percentage of students of each grade level who enjoyed English at S Junior High School. Similarly, Table 2 indicates the percentage of those students who liked or disliked English.

Table 2. Do you enjoy English class?



%	Not enjoy at all	Not enjoy	Enjoy	Enjoy very much
1st year	0.5	5	77.5	15
2nd year	15.5	37.7	44.4	2.2
3rd year	6.6	44.4	46.6	2.2

Table 3. Do you like English?



%	Dislike very much	Dislike	Like	Like very much
1st year	2	5	76	16
2nd year	13	37	35	15
3rd year	12	30	47	12

The results above clearly show that more than half of the second and third-year students did not enjoy English classes and many of them came to dislike English.

Furthermore, students' comments indicate that the second and the third-year teachers emphasized memorization of grammatical points for tests at the expense of communicative activities. For example, two second-year students commented in a group interview. They reported that they did not like English because class was teacher-centered and boring.

I don't like the way the teacher teaches. I am bored of listening to teacher talk. I want to think and do something by myself. When I was in elementary school, English class was student-centered. Now we are forced to do everything by the teacher. It is a teacher-centered class. (Interview, 2nd-year student)

I am totally bored. We did the same thing every day like a conversation—"What did you do yesterday?" (Interview, 2nd-year student)

Third-year students reported that they had to study for tests in junior high school while they enjoyed free conversation in elementary school.

I hate English. English in junior high school is for studying. English should be for a means of communication. (Interview, 3rd-year student)

I don't know. I enjoy learning through games. But I don't like just learning grammar or reading the textbook. (Interview, 3rd-year student)

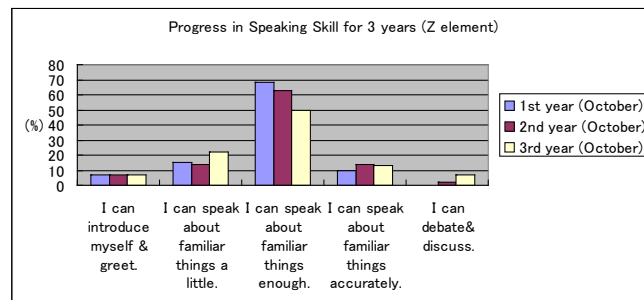
We are obliged to memorize a lot of things for tests in junior high school. When I was in elementary, we had freedom. (Interview, 3rd-year student)

In summary, 2nd and 3rd-year students implied why they came to dislike English in this junior high school. As one student responded, students seem to want more opportunities to use English as a means of communication as they did in their elementary school.

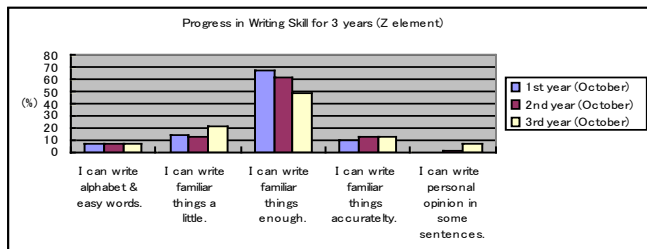
Change of perceived English abilities

In the second survey, students in all three grade levels were asked to self-evaluate their English abilities in four skills. Surprisingly, the results indicate that students did not think they improved their English abilities much. Only some students reported that they improved their writing skills. Table 4 shows how much they think they improved their speaking skills. In a similar manner, Table 5 indicate how much they think they improved their writing skills.

Table 4. Speaking skills (Progress in speaking skill for 3 years)



%	I can introduce myself & greet.	I can speak about familiar things a little.	I can speak about familiar things enough.	I can speak about familiar things accurately.	I can debate & discuss.
1st year (October)	7	15	68	10	0
2nd year (October)	7	14	63	14	2
3rd year (October)	7	22	50	13	7

Table 5. Writing skills (Progress in writing skill for 3 years)

%	I can write alphabet & easy words.	I can write familiar things a little.	I can write familiar things enough.	I can write familiar things accurately.	I can write personal opinion in some sentences.
1st year (October)	7	15	68	10	0
2nd year (October)	7	14	63	14	2
3rd year (October)	7	22	50	13	7

In addition, some students gave reasons why they thought they improved their writing skills in this junior high school.

Especially I can improve writing skills that I didn't learn in elementary school. Also I could learn some meanings of new words. (Interview, 3rd-year students)

I could improve writing skills. I could communicate by writing. And also I could express my feelings and opinions by myself. I consulted a dictionary or asked my teacher. (Interview, 3rd-year students)

As one of the 3rd-year students commented, they did not learn how to write in English in their elementary school. Considering the fact, it makes sense why only writing skills show some difference among four skills.

Implications

This study revealed that students who received English instruction for six years in their elementary school failed to improve their communication abilities in their junior high school due to weak articulation. In particular, junior high school teachers' assumptions and beliefs about English language teaching prevented their students from developing their communication abilities. The results from multiple data sources showed that these teachers relied on traditional practices to prepare students for tests except for team-taught classes for first-year students. As a result, many students came to dislike English and felt that they did not improve their communication skills. This study offers the following implications.

- (1) Without articulation, students' continual progress in language learning is not attainable.
- (2) Teachers are resistant to a curriculum change toward communication-oriented English and rely on their familiar practices (see Sato & Kleinsasser, 1999; 2004).
- (3) JHS teachers need to develop a coherent curriculum to improve students' communication abilities over the three years (see Sato & Takahashi, in press).
- (4) Teachers need more opportunities for continuous teacher development to change their beliefs and practices (see Sato & Kleinsasser, 1999; 2004).

In conclusion, Lange (1997) states that “It is for the student that articulation is important. It is our moral obligation to provide a program that allows for continual progress in language learning” (p. 40). When English is introduced into elementary schools in 2011, the whole English curricula from elementary schools to senior high schools need to be revised to strengthen articulation for our students.

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