



Beliefs about Learning and Teaching Communicative English in Japan

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This study examines Japanese university EFL student and teacher beliefs about learning and teaching communicative English in Japan. Over 300 students and 82 college teachers were given a 36-item questionnaire to assess their beliefs about (a) important instructional areas, (b) goals and objectives, (c) instructional styles and methods, (d) teaching materials, and (e) cultural matters. The results indicate that many students preferred traditional styles of ELT pedagogy including a teacher-centered approach (listening to lectures), learning isolated skills (pronunciation), and focusing on accuracy (Japanese translation). On the other hand, the teachers' preferences appeared to have shifted towards more recent pedagogy such as a learner-centered approach, integrated skills, and a focus on fluency. These results suggest that constant assessment of student beliefs is essential to link ELT theories and classroom practice.

Insert Japanese abstract here

English education in Japan has seen a number of changes over the past 15 years. The Ministry of Education (MOE) has initiated several reforms at the secondary school level aimed at changing the prevailing system



of English education, often dominated by grammar-translation pedagogy, to one with a stronger emphasis on communication. The first of two prominent reforms is the JET (Japan Exchange and Teaching) Program, in which native English speaking ALTs (Assistant Language Teachers) team teach public school English classes with Japanese teachers of English (JTEs) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2000). In 1999 alone 5,241 ALTs were appointed to junior and senior high schools throughout Japan (Ministry of Education, 1999a). The second MOE initiative was the 1994 introduction of a new high school subject, Oral Communication, consisting of three courses on listening, speaking, and discussion/debate. Many high schools have implemented this program and use oral communication textbooks screened and approved by MOE officials. Thus English education in Japan has progressed in the direction of teaching the language for communication.

At the university level as well, teaching and learning communication skills in English is now considered to be important. In November, 1999 the MOE asked one of its advisory boards to consider what language education ought to consist of, and in particular, to recommend how communication skills could be improved (Ministry of Education, 1999b). Recognizing that English is an important means of communication, the advisory board emphasized the need for increased English ability for all students, especially in the areas of listening and speaking (Ministry of Education, 2000). However, despite this stress on the communicative use of English, neither the MOE nor the advisory board has provided guidance as to pedagogical goals, objectives, or teaching methods for communicative English instruction. Therefore in practice these remain quite diverse, with unpredictable and unreliable outcomes. Unlike secondary school classes, university English classes need not use MOE-approved English textbooks, so there is a range of material and course designs. Thus both students and teachers continue to hold various beliefs about how English should be learned.

Learner and Teacher Beliefs about Language Learning

Learner beliefs about language learning is an important research area in ESL/EFL. As Horwitz (1988) pointed out, investigating learners' beliefs has "relevance to the understanding of their expectations of, commitment to, success in, and satisfaction with language classes" (p. 283). Although few researchers have examined students' beliefs about language learning (see Wenden, 1986; Horwitz, 1988; Mori, 1999), students hold various ideas and beliefs as to how they can better learn a language and how teachers can help them. It is worthwhile, therefore, to investigate how student beliefs differ from teacher beliefs because

such differences can influence the effectiveness of classroom instruction.

Learner Beliefs

A study by Horwitz (1988) investigated beliefs of university students in beginning-level foreign language classes. Using the BALLI (Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory) scale (Horwitz, 1985), Horwitz assessed student beliefs in five areas: (a) difficulty of language learning, (b) foreign language aptitude, (c) the nature of language learning, (d) learning communication strategies, and (e) motivations and expectations. Wenden (1986) also examined learner beliefs about second language learning by interviewing a group of adult ESL learners in advanced-level English classes in the U.S.A. and classifying their responses into five categories: (a) designating (language), (b) diagnosing (language proficiency), (c) evaluating (outcome of strategies), (d) self-analyzing (personal factors), and (e) theorizing (how best to approach language learning).

Teacher Beliefs

Other researchers have investigated beliefs and attitudes held by teachers (see Wolf & Riordan, 1991; Chiba & Matsuura, 1998; Renandya, Lim, Leong & Jacobs, 1999). Wolf and Riordan (1991), for example, conducted a survey on attitudes of foreign language teachers toward curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices. Their survey included two instructional approaches, a traditional approach and a teaching-for-proficiency approach. Teachers who preferred the traditional approach were likely to agree with such questionnaire items as “***In introductory classes students should focus only on the grammar mechanics of the language,***” and “***Direct translation into the native language is the most effective way to evaluate reading comprehension***” (p. 475). On the other hand, teachers who preferred the teaching-for-proficiency approach were likely to think that “***Teachers should evaluate communication activities by the success of the communication,***” and “***Teachers should include some communication activities in student evaluation procedures at all levels of instruction***” (p. 476). For this group the traditional teaching approach received either “disagree” or “strongly disagree” as responses while the teaching-for-proficiency approach elicited either “agree” or “strongly agree” reactions.

In a survey of teacher attitudes in Japan, Chiba and Matsuura (1998) reported findings from a Japanese university freshman EFL program where native English speakers and Japanese teachers team taught the

same classes. The researchers examined differences in ideas about course objectives, teaching styles, materials, and cultural concerns between native English speaking teachers and Japanese teachers of English, and the results indicated some differences in teaching styles between the two groups. The native English speaking teachers tended to believe more strongly than their Japanese counterparts that group work and game-oriented activities are effective for Japanese students. While most Japanese teachers of English felt that using the students' first language (L1) is helpful or necessary, most native English speaking teachers disagreed with the idea of using the students' L1 in English class. Furthermore, the Japanese teachers of English were relatively strict regarding their students' linguistic errors, whereas the native English speaking teachers tended to show more tolerance toward errors.

Research Focus

The present study uses a questionnaire to examine Japanese university EFL students' beliefs about learning and teaching communicative English and compares them with those of university EFL teachers. The research questions are:

1. What instructional areas do Japanese university EFL students and teachers believe are important in learning and teaching communicative English?
2. How do both groups think that students can best approach English in the Japanese university EFL classroom?
3. How do Japanese university EFL student beliefs differ from teacher beliefs?

Method

Subjects

Students

The 301 participants in this study were enrolled in English classes taught by the three researchers at three universities in Tokyo, Fukushima, and Kanagawa and thus constitute a convenience sample. They were all native Japanese speakers studying English as a foreign language (EFL). Their average age was 19.6 years old with a range of 18 to 26; 85 were male and 211 were female and five were of unknown gender. One hundred forty-two students (47%) were majoring in English, 84 (27.9%) in economics, 61 (20.3%) in education, 10 (3.3%) in international rela-

tions, and 4 (1.3%) in other fields.

Teachers

A convenience sample of 82 Japanese college and university English teachers collaborated in this study. The teachers included colleagues of the investigators as well as volunteers recruited at a professional conference and through the Internet. Forty-one were native English speakers and 41 were native Japanese speakers, with an average age of 42.1 ($SD=8.9$) and 45.8 ($SD=12.1$) respectively. The native English speaker group consisted of 29 Americans, seven British, three Canadians, and two Irish. Their average length of stay in Japan was 8.77 years, with a range of four months to 35 years. Sixty teachers (73.2%) were teaching General English, 55 (67.1%) were teaching Listening, 52 (63.4%) were teaching Speaking, 54 (65.9%) were teaching Reading, and 63 (76.8%) were teaching Writing. The length of their teaching experience ranged from two years to 45 years, with an average of 15.88 years.

Questionnaires

Two questionnaires were developed, one for the students and the other for the teachers. Each consisted of 36 statements followed by a 6-point Likert scale to indicate agreement or disagreement. The investigators decided to use a 6-point scale rather than a 7-point scale hoping that subjects would more clearly indicate either positive or negative attitudes toward each questionnaire item. The subjects were asked to read each statement and indicate their reaction by choosing a number from 1 (strongly agree) to 6 (strongly disagree). The questionnaires were constructed by modifying the questionnaire Chiba and Matsuura (1998) used previously, adding items to elicit subjects' beliefs regarding important aspects for communicative language learning and teaching.

The student version of the questionnaire was written in Japanese and elicited beliefs about learning. The teacher version was written in English and elicited beliefs about teaching. Although the wording of the two questionnaires was not the same, the statements in both aimed to assess a variety of beliefs in the following five categories: (a) important instructional areas in communicative language learning and teaching, (b) goals and objectives, (c) teaching styles and methods, (d) teaching materials, and (e) cultural matters. Aspects of communicative language learning and teaching included such instructional areas as listening, speaking, reading, writing, grammar, pronunciation, culture, and language function. The term "styles" in "teaching styles" simply

referred to methods of teaching and did not indicate aspects of individual differences such as cognitive styles (e.g., field-dependence vs. field-independence) or the affective styles (e.g., ambiguity tolerance vs. ambiguity intolerance) which have been investigated in language learning and teaching research (see Ehrman & Oxford, 1990; Reid, 1995).

Data Collection Procedures

The investigators distributed the student version of the questionnaire during regular EFL classes at three universities where they were teaching. Response was optional. The teacher version of the questionnaire was distributed as printed copies and on the Internet. Hard copies, with a return envelope, were handed out to approximately 70 college English teachers at a professional conference and at the schools where they worked. Nearly 90% of the teachers answered the questionnaire. The Internet home page address, attached to e-mail messages requesting collaboration, was sent out to approximately 200 teachers randomly selected from a member list of an academic organization for college EFL teaching. Only about 10% of those who received the e-mail responded to the web version of the questionnaire. The investigators speculated that one reason for the low return rate was that the e-mail request could be ignored relatively easily, especially when the e-mail receiver did not know who the senders were. Another reason was caused by technical problems with the software. The investigators received messages from several e-mail recipients reporting that they could not access the web page. Better ways of collecting data through the Internet need to be developed for future studies.

Data Analyses

As stated earlier, the students and teachers in this study answered two different questionnaires, the student version written in Japanese and the teacher version written in English. The stimulus statements in both versions were developed so that students and teachers could indicate their beliefs regarding common concepts. Consequently, the wording and perspectives of each statement were not always identical so it was impossible to compare the answers of students and teachers directly and statistically. For example, Item 12 in the student version was intended to elicit general views of the communicative English classroom through the statement, "**Speaking is an important aspect of learning communication.**" On the other hand, the statement in the teacher version was intended to investigate how many teachers taught speaking

in their class and was worded “*Speaking is an important aspect of teaching communication in my class.*”

The following sections compare the percentages of students and teachers who were positive or negative toward each questionnaire item. In addition, some perceptual differences between native English speaking teachers and Japanese teachers of English are analyzed in terms of teaching communicative English. For this purpose independent *t*-tests followed by a Bonferroni correction were used to determine the significance of differences between the responses of the English native speaker teachers and the Japanese teachers to nine items reflecting the four skills of English, cultural aspects, speech functions, and non-verbal communication: Item 6, Functions; Item 12, Speaking; Item 15, Grammar; Item 19, Listening; Item 23, Cultural differences; Item 25, Reading; Item 30, Non-verbal cues; Item 31, Pronunciation; and Item 35, Writing.

Results

Beliefs about Important Instructional Areas

As shown in Table 1, the students tended to consider the nine aspects of the questionnaire (i.e., functions, speaking, grammar, listening, cultural differences, reading, non-verbal cues, pronunciation, and writing) important for learning communicative English. However the traditional instructional areas (reading, writing, and grammar) were not considered as important as speaking and listening. The teachers' views were similar to the students' views except for pronunciation (Item 31). Here only 68.3% of the teachers indicated that they emphasized teaching pronunciation, whereas more than 91% of the students indicated that learning correct pronunciation was important.

Insert Table 1 about here

As shown in Table 2, the teachers' native language appeared to influence their responses. As measured by independent *t*-tests comparing the mean scores for the nine questionnaire aspects, the native English speaking teachers and the Japanese teachers of English gave significantly different responses to most of the items except for Items 15, 25, and 35. However, after application of the Bonferroni correction procedure (dividing the alpha level of .05 by the number of *t*-tests performed [nine], giving a very conservative significance level of .0056), only Items 12 (Speaking) and 30 (Non verbal cues) were sig-

nificantly different between the two groups of teachers. This difference suggested the presence of different attitudes regarding instructional areas other than grammar, reading, and writing, traditionally well-covered areas in educational settings in Japan, and should be investigated further.

Insert Table 2 about here

Beliefs about Goals and Objectives

Students and teachers displayed similar beliefs about the goals and objectives of English learning and teaching (Table 3). Most students believed that learning to respond to each other and to interact with their teachers are necessary (Items 7 and 11). A majority also believed that knowledge of Western-style learning strategies and communication styles is important (Item 17). Furthermore, nearly two thirds of the students believed that teachers should not focus on grammar (Item 22). Likewise, teachers tended to think that students should learn to respond to each other, have more interaction with their teachers, and adopt different learning strategies and communication styles. In addition, 59.8% of the teachers believed that they do not focus only on teaching grammar.

Insert Table 3 about here

On the other hand student beliefs were quite different from those of the teachers for six items. More than 67% of the students thought that their teachers should ask them what they want to learn in class. However, the teachers were divided about who should decide class objectives (Item 1). Furthermore, more than 67% of the students thought that Japanese translation is necessary for English reading comprehension, whereas nearly half (47.6%) of the teachers were against the use of translation for evaluating reading comprehension (Item 2). Most students felt that English should be a required course at the university level, whereas the teachers' beliefs were divided (Item 3). While 46.3% of the teachers agreed with this, 31.7% disagreed either strongly or moderately. Additionally, a majority of the students tended to believe that "interaction" and "communication" are the same or have quite similar meanings (Item 8) whereas 67% of the teachers disagreed. Moreover, the teachers' ideas about correcting grammatical mistakes were

different from those of students (Item 9). While 88% of the students indicated that they wanted their teachers to correct their grammar mistakes, 14.6% of the teachers indicated that they seldom correct their students' mistakes, with only 54.9% correcting mistakes. Furthermore, while nearly 90% of the students indicated that teachers should put more emphasis on listening and speaking (Item 10), the percentage of teachers who actually emphasized these areas more than reading and writing was much lower, at 59.7%. This final point was perhaps related to the instructional areas of the teacher, since the number who were teaching reading and writing combined ($n=117$) was a little greater than those who were teaching listening and speaking ($n=107$).

Beliefs about Instructional Styles and Methods

As shown in Table 4, there were similarities and differences between student beliefs and teacher beliefs regarding instructional styles. Both students and teachers agreed that group work and paired activities are appropriate for Japanese students. For Items 14 and 27, a number of students and teachers supported the ideas that working in a group is more effective than individual work and that paired activities are a productive use of class time. Many in both groups indicated that some knowledge of the Japanese language is needed for teachers to analyze students' mistakes and to explain grammar points (Items 33 and 36). A majority of both groups disagreed with the idea of game-oriented activities being childish, although a larger percentage of students (84.3%) than teachers (67%) disagreed with the idea.

Insert Table 4 about here

While a large majority of the teachers (92.7%) wanted feedback on how their students feel about their class, only 3.7% of the students strongly agreed that they want to talk to their teachers about their feelings and 8.6% moderately agreed with this idea (Item 13). In addition a high percentage of students (80.4%) supported the idea that listening to a lecture is an effective way of learning English, whereas the teachers' beliefs about this varied. Fewer than half of the teachers saw lectures as an effective means of teaching English and the percentage of teachers who either strongly or moderately agreed with this item was low (2.4% and 13.4% respectively).

Beliefs about Teaching Materials

Students and teachers also held different opinions regarding appropriate topics for teaching materials (Table 5). More than 95% of the students supported the idea that the most appropriate topics for learning English deal with everyday life (Item 29). However only 1.2% of the teachers strongly agreed, 20.7% moderately agreed, and 40.2% slightly agreed with this item and 36.7% held negative attitudes toward this choice of topic. Another discrepancy concerned learning and teaching about social issues (Item 4). More than 66% of the students agreed that learning about social issues is the most appropriate way to study English, whereas only 48.8% of the teachers held positive attitudes toward this idea. More than 50% of the teachers felt negatively about this idea.

Insert Table 5 about here

There were some also differences in beliefs about the nature of appropriate teaching material. A high percentage of students (88.1%) indicated that course material should be up to date (Item 20), and 88.3% thought that their level of English ability should be the most important consideration when selecting material (Item 34). On the other hand, only 56.2% of the teachers thought that up-to-date course material is important, while 42.6% disagreed. However nearly 77% of the teachers agreed that the ability of the students should be the most important consideration in selecting course material.

Beliefs about Cultural Matters

As shown in Table 6, the answers of the students and teachers were quite similar for questionnaire items relating to Japanese culture. There were similar responses with regard to the motivation of Japanese students (Item 5): 42.8% of the students and 45.1% of the teachers agreed that Japanese students are motivated to study English. Slightly more teachers (37.6%) than students (24.6%) thought that Japanese students can be impolite because they sometimes overgeneralize Western culture (Item 18), although a majority of students and teachers tended to disagree with this assertion. Both students and teachers tended to think that the teacher's authority is respected in the Japanese classroom (Item 26). Both groups tended to believe that it is necessary for foreign teachers to know Japanese culture when interacting with Japanese students (Item 32), but more teachers (92.7 %) tended to agree with this state-



ment than did students (81.1%) and the teachers showed a stronger degree of agreement. Furthermore, more than half of both groups (62.2% of the teachers and 64.8% of the students) thought that student reticence is a problem in class (Item 24). However, the wording of the statements on the two questionnaires was slightly different so direct comparison is difficult.

Insert Table 6 about here

Discussion

This study has identified some discrepancies between Japanese EFL learner and teacher beliefs about English language learning and teaching. A number of students reported that they preferred traditional aspects of language instruction, while the teachers preferred more recent instructional trends. As to what constitutes a traditional approach to language instruction, Renandya, Lim, Leong & Jacobs (1999) have analyzed the differences between the traditional paradigm and the current communicative paradigm in ELT methodology through a review of the work of Larsen-Freeman (1998), Genesee and Upshur (1996), Nunan (1988), Richards and Rodgers (1986), and Tudor (1996). According to Renandya et al. (1999), the traditional paradigm can be characterized by the following eight characteristics: (a) focus on language, (b) teacher-centeredness, (c) isolated skills, (d) focus on accuracy, (e) discrete point tests, (f) traditional tests, (g) emphasis on product, and (h) individual learning. In contrast, the current communicative paradigm is represented by a different set of characteristics: (a) focus on communication, (b) learner-centeredness, (c) integrated skills, (d) focus on fluency, (e) holistic tests, (f) authentic assessment, (g) emphasis on process, and (h) cooperative learning.

One of the attitudinal gaps identified between teachers and students concerned pronunciation (Table 1, Item 31). The students were quite interested in learning correct pronunciation; however the teachers reported that pronunciation is not strongly emphasized in their classrooms. Perhaps this is because current trends in EFL education focus on the development of communicative competence through integrated skills rather than through the teaching of isolated skills such as pronunciation. Unlike the grammar-translation and audiolingual methods prevalent some decades ago, one of the most important things in communicative language learning and teaching is to get one's message across. In communication a smooth transaction is valued more than

linguistic or pronunciation accuracy. However, since students seem to consider pronunciation important, teachers should determine whether their students want pronunciation practice, and if there are reasons why pronunciation is not emphasized in class, these reasons should be explained. For example some teachers might explain that fluency is more important than linguistic accuracy.

Item 1, *I often let students decide what they want to do in class* (Table 3), indicated the teachers' preference for a learner-centered approach where students determine class objectives. In addition many teachers wanted to know their students' reactions to their class (Table 4, Item 13). On the other hand nearly 60% of the students expressed negative attitudes toward the statement *I want to talk to my teacher how I feel about our class*.

Although lectures are seldom delivered in EFL classrooms except in English for Academic Purposes or other content-based classes, about three-fourths of the students believed that listening to a lecture is an effective way of learning English. Students may believe that listening to a lecture improves their listening comprehension skills provided that the lecture content and level of English are appropriate. In addition, student participation is not required during lectures so some students may feel less anxiety. However the teachers' reactions to giving lectures were diverse (Table 4, Item 28).

Most students rely on translation for reading comprehension and a majority of the students thought that translation into Japanese is necessary. This implies that they expect their teachers to use grammar-translation pedagogy since in many high school classrooms reading is taught through *yakudoku*, an instructional style characterized by Japanese translation with grammar instruction as a secondary focus (Gorsuch, 1998). Thus English reading comprehension is almost equivalent to translation into Japanese. Many students in this study experienced the *yakudoku* learning style in high school and this may have made them feel secure when using Japanese translation to comprehend reading materials. On the other hand, although the wording of the questionnaire item was slightly different, the teachers' attitudes toward the use of translation were both positive and negative. Although this might partially be due to differences between native English speaking teachers and Japanese teachers of English, most teachers expressed negative attitudes toward the use of translation, especially for assessing students' reading comprehension abilities.

In addition to student and teacher differences regarding instructional style, another important difference concerned making English a required subject (Table 3, Item 3). About 80% of the students strongly, moderately, or slightly agreed with the idea that English should be a



required course at university level in Japan. This may be because English is closely linked to the concept of internationalization. Internationalization was a buzzword in every educational institution in Japan throughout the 1990s and EFL students may assume that in order to become a *kokusajin*, (an internationally-minded person) they should have a good command of English. However, it has been noted that foreign language education at the secondary school level is most likely to affect students' understanding of internationalization (Parmenter, 1999) and even today only a few Japanese students have a chance to learn other languages prior to entering university. As of 1997, only 5% of senior high schools offered Chinese, 1.9% Korean, 3.5% French, and 1% German (Shimizu, 1999). It is thus quite natural for Japanese students to believe that English should be a required subject rather than other foreign languages

While more than half of the teachers in this study supported the idea of English as a required subject, 42% held negative attitudes toward this notion. In the mid-1990s many Japanese colleges and universities reformed their curriculum for general education using two key words: internationalization and computerization. Although many English teachers are aware that English is an important means of communication in the international community as well as in cyberspace, perhaps those who hold negative attitudes towards making English compulsory believe that English is not the only language for internationalization and the Internet. Another consideration is that some teachers may feel that if English were an elective subject, only highly motivated students would enroll in class.

Conclusion

This exploratory study investigated university student and teacher beliefs about English learning and teaching in Japan. It was found that a number of students preferred instructional methods characterizing more traditional types of ESL/EFL pedagogy such as learning isolated skills, focusing on accuracy, and learning through a teacher-centered approach. Furthermore, a majority of the students believed that learning correct pronunciation is important for communication, translation is needed for reading comprehension, and listening to lectures is an effective way of learning English. On the other hand, the teachers' instructional style preference has shifted to a more communicative paradigm, including a focus on communication, learner-centered activities, integrated skills, and a focus on fluency rather than accuracy. Many teachers let their students decide what to study in class, do not emphasize teaching pronunciation, and disagree with the idea that giving lec-

tures is an effective way of teaching English. Finally, the students' positive reaction to making English compulsory in universities is suggested to be based on or at least reinforced by the popular Japanese belief that *kokusaijin* (internationally-minded people) should be able to communicate in English because English is an international language.

It is very important for teachers to be aware that some of their students may not be used to or may not prefer the instructional styles they use in class. As mentioned, quite a number of students indicated a strong preference for conservative teaching and learning styles. When students enter university and encounter new teaching and learning styles, they may become anxious. Teachers can play an important part in easing their students' anxiety by explaining how the students can learn more effectively with the new approaches. Alternatively, teachers may also consider modifying their style to remove or lessen student anxiety.

Regarding future directions for research, this study has only identified some beliefs. Most of the questionnaire items used here could be categorized as Wenden's "theorizing" (1986). Further studies should therefore be conducted to examine Wenden's other types of beliefs, for example, "diagnosing" (language proficiency) and "evaluating" (outcome of strategies). In addition, future studies should use other types of questionnaire formats. Open-ended types of questionnaires, for instance, would elicit more authentic and more detailed beliefs.

Teachers should also consider how to integrate their students' beliefs into classroom practice. The results of this study provide some pedagogical suggestions for classroom instruction and curriculum design. As shown, students' beliefs about how they should approach English learning may differ from what teachers and researchers believe. In order for students to gain maximum benefit from the methods that their teachers use, constant assessment of learner beliefs is needed to evaluate and adjust current theories and practice.

Acknowledgments

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(Received April 6, 2000; revised November 17, 2000)