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Teacher and Student Learning in the Workplace: The Impact of Performance Tests

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Although teacher development in the workplace has been emphasized in the recent literature, little is known as to the relationship between teacher learning and student learning. This study aims at revealing how English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers learn to teach and how teacher learning influences student learning in a Japanese public high school. Using multiple data sources including interviews

(teachers and a group of students), classroom observations, surveys (teachers and students), and documents (including teachers' materials and students' performance tests), the study delineates how EFL teachers interact with their colleagues to improve students' communication skills in English in this school context. This study implies that changing assessment would be effective in promoting teacher and student learning. However, without school culture improvement it is difficult to sustain teacher and student learning.

学校の中で教師が学んで成長することの大切さが、最近の研究で強調されている。しかしながら、実際に教師の成長が生徒の学習成果にどのような影響を与えるのかは、ほとんど研究されていない。この研究調査は、複合的調査方法（インタビュー、授業参観、質問調査）を用い、日本の高校の英語教員が生徒のコミュニケーション能力を高めるために、どのように協力して何を学んだのかを明らかにする。結論として、評価を変えることは教師の成長と生徒の学習成果に一定の効果があるが、教師が継続的に学び合うような学校文化の発展なしには、生徒の学習成果をさらに高めることは困難であることを主張する。

[W]e will fail...to improve schooling for children until we acknowledge the importance of schools not only as places for teachers to work but also as places for teachers to learn. (Smylie, 1995, p. 92)

Research Issue

This study aims at revealing how English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers learn to teach and how teacher learning influences student learning in a Japanese public high school. Although teacher development in the workplace has been emphasized in the recent literature, little is known how teachers learn to teach (Grossman, 1992; Little, 1990; Sato, 2000) and how teacher learning influences student learning (Smylie, 1994; Sykes, 1999). More recently, in the area of ESOL teacher education Freeman (2001) included “Teacher learning and student learning in TESOL” as one of the research issues for the TESOL International Research Foundation, by saying that “teachers must engage in their own professional learning in order to improve student learning” (p. 608).

Teacher learning here means inservice teacher learning in schools in contrast with preservice teacher training from prescribed workshops or new curricula (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Sato, 2000; 2002; Smylie, 1996). Teachers do not learn by being told what to do. Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin (1995) assert:

Teachers learn by doing, reading, and reflecting (just as students do); by collaborating with other teachers; by looking closely at students and their work; and by sharing what they see. This kind of learning enables teachers to make the leap from theory to accomplished practice. In addition

to a powerful base of theoretical knowledge, such learning requires settings that support teacher inquiry and collaboration and strategies grounded in teachers’ questions and concerns. To understand deeply, teachers must learn about, see, and experience successful learning-centered and learner-centered teaching practices. (p. 598)

School teaching cultures that support teacher learning seem to be crucial for professional development. Feiman-Nemser & Floden (1986) define school teaching cultures by saying that “Teaching cultures are embodied in the work-related beliefs and knowledge teachers share--beliefs about appropriate ways of acting on the job and rewarding aspects of teaching, and knowledge that enables teachers to do their work” (p. 508). After Feiman-Nemser & Floden (1986) posed a future research issue to examine the existence of diversity in teaching cultures systematically, further studies identified typologies of common teaching cultures. For example, Rosenholtz (1989) identified two types of school cultures, which influenced teacher and student learning. The first type was called “learning-enriched” and the second one was called “learning-impoverished” school cultures. For literature review, three other studies that examined teaching cultures in high schools in different contexts are worth reviewing.

First, Kleinsasser (1993) applied Rosenholtz’s (1989) work with high school foreign language teachers. Data was collected from 37 teachers in 11 high schools in US contexts through interviews, observations, and surveys. Two distinctive technical cultures emerged. The first type was called “routine/uncertain cultures,” where most schools belonged. In this type of schools, teachers 1) were uncertain about their instructional practice, 2) were engaged in day-to-day routine, 3) had few conversations about instruction, and 4) relied on traditional approaches. In

contrast, the other type was called “nonroutine/certain cultures,” where 1) teachers were confident about their instruction, 2) their daily practices were not predictable, 3) they collaborated across the departments, and 4) they incorporated more communicative activities. In short, Kleinsasser (1993) revealed the strong relationship between school cultures and teachers’ practices.

Second, Sato (2000; 2002) conducted a yearlong study in a Japanese private high school. Sato revealed one particular school culture and how teachers learned to teach in that context. Multiple data sources (interviews, observations, a survey) identified the strong relationships among the school context, teacher beliefs, practices, and interactions. Major findings included:

- Teachers rarely talked about instruction and teaching issues.
- Teachers were uncertain about teaching.
- Managing students and various task assignments took precedence over teaching.
- Teachers reinforced their routine practices and some innovative practices remained unnoticed.
- Many teachers collaborated to get things done and to prepare students for university exams.
- Most teachers were engaged in few teacher learning opportunities within the school and outside the school to receive new ideas.

The study clearly described a routine/uncertain school culture. Although these teachers collaborated, they did so to prepare students for university exams. Furthermore, the findings provided strong support to Little’s (1990) claim that collaboration may lead teachers to reinforce existing practices and indicated that this type of collaboration eroded teachers’ motivation to learn to teach in a school context.

Third, McLaughlin & Talbert (2001) did a longitudinal study on how various secondary school contexts influence teachers’ work lives and their practices. They selected 16 high schools in two states in the USA. They identified four types of teaching cultures and found that different cultures existed not only among schools but also across departments in the same school. In strong teacher communities, teachers shared a sense of common mission. There were two kinds of these. One type was called “teacher learning community” where teachers collaborated to re-invent practice, while the other type was called “traditional community” where teachers enforced traditions. In contrast, in weak teacher communities, teachers acted independently and communicated little with colleagues about teaching. They also found two types of these weak communities. In one type teachers innovated alone, while in the other type teachers enacted traditions or lowered their expectations toward students.

In summary, in collaborative school cultures teachers talk about teaching on a daily basis, share a repertoire of resources, and jointly develop their practice for their professional development. Nonetheless, most schools lack a strong teaching culture and teachers are isolated and communicate little with colleagues about their teaching. McLaughlin & Talbert (2001) claim that “[p]rofessional communities in today’s high schools differ in strength and in their cultures of practice—differences that matter profoundly for teaching and learning” (p. 65). Then, how can teachers develop their school cultures? How can teachers generate learning opportunities in a school and improve their instructional practices? How can teacher learning affect the outcome of student learning? One of the strategies to promote teacher and student learning might be changing assessment (Falk 2001; Fullan, 2001; Hargreaves, Earl, Moore, & Manning, 2001).

Context and Data Collection

Context

This is an on-going study, which started in September 2001. In addition, this is a collaborative study between a researcher (Sato) and a practitioner (Takahashi). Takahashi, a member of the study group organized by Sato, asked him for advice, because her public senior high school was assigned to experiment with a two-year project (“communication power-up plan” in Japanese) from the prefectural Board of Education. Sato was interested in the project and asked for permission to do research. It took him six months to be finally accepted as a researcher by the principal of this school to collect data. The goal is to improve students’ communication skills throughout English education (three years in junior high school and three years in senior high school) in accordance with to the present guidelines on communication-oriented English implemented by *Mombukagakusho* (the Ministry of Education, Science, Sports, and Culture).

Participants

In total 15 teachers, including two native English speaking teachers (assistant teachers), participated in this study. Years of teaching experiences vary from zero to 30 years, with an average of 14.4 years as of 2001. There were 10 teachers, including one native English speaking teacher, when the study started in 2001. Four teachers left the school and five new teachers came in 2002. There were 11 teachers in this English department.

Data collection and analysis

Multiple data sources including interviews (teachers and a group of students), classroom observations, and documents (including teachers’ materials and students’ performance tests), and surveys (teachers and students) were used to delineate how EFL teachers interact with their colleagues to improve students’ communication skills in English in this school context. Data collection started in September 2002. After the initial teacher survey, a student survey, teacher interviews, classroom observations are conducted each term (there were two terms in this school). At the end of the school year (March, 2002), a group of six students were interviewed by Sato. Both qualitative data (interviews observations, documents) and quantitative data (surveys) from teachers and students were analyzed and merged to create evidence of the school culture, teacher learning, and student learning.

School teaching culture

The first teacher interview (September, 2001) data revealed three distinctive characteristics of this school culture where most teachers perceived that: 1) teachers lowered their expectations of students’ outcomes and often complained about their students, 2) managing students and keeping classroom order were particularly important, and 3) they did not have enough communication about teaching issues or goals. For example, Kubo¹ confessed that many teachers had already given up.

To be honest, teachers in this school have already given up. Compared to other schools whose graduates go to prestigious universities, they think their students are hopeless. I mean, we cannot teach the same way. Anyway, they are not enthusiastic about teaching.

Interestingly, this school created two special classes out of six in each grade level to prepare some students for university entrance exams. The policy of this school seemed to separate some “good” students from the majority of “poor” ones. For example, Suzuki talked about two types of classes.

There are two types of classes. One is for those who want to get a job after graduating from this high school. The other is for those who want to go to universities. Anyway, most of our students are poor at English. I have no ideal or wonderful goals in this school.

Many teachers seemed to have no goals and to lower their expectations of students’ outcomes. In addition, teachers often complained about students. They seemed to pay more attention to classroom order than teaching practice, as Ando reported:

Teachers often complain about students’ lack of motivation...I think teachers are not evaluated much based on teaching. Instead, teachers pay more attention to managing students and keeping classroom order, because there had been many classes where teachers lost control with several students behaving badly until last year.

Moreover, many teachers reported that they usually did not talk about teaching. Hashimoto said.

We have daily conversations with other teachers, but usually don’t talk about teaching...We have a weekly department meeting and mainly talk about administrative things. We start to talk about something by saying “What shall we do?” but we always lack time.

In short, these teachers indicated that they worked in a weak school teaching culture. In particular, teachers’ lowering expectations for students is one of the characteristics of weak teacher communities (see McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001). Their views about the teaching culture of this school were consistent throughout the study. Then how did these EFL teachers learn to teach, and how did teacher learning influence student learning in this weak school culture where a new project was mandated by the prefectural Board of Education? In the following sections, Takahashi, one of the teachers, will tell her story, and EFL teachers’ comments from the second interviews will be examined. Finally, implications will be offered.

Teacher and student learning: Takahashi’s story

Oral Communication class for first-year students in 2001

Due to the uncertainty about teaching communication skills, English teachers in our department had been conducting a grammar class under the name of Oral Communication class (OC). However, only when the school was assigned to experiment with the project to improve students’ communicative skills in 2001, we finally started to have OC in a systematic way. OC was offered for the first-year students twice a week. The class size was about 20 students. One of the classes was a team teaching class with an assistant English teacher (AET) and the other was taught by a Japanese teacher of English (JTE). After finishing one unit in the textbook (*Impact Intro*, Longman), the students prepared for an oral presentation during one period. Then, in the next lesson, they performed a presentation in front

of the class. Four speech presentations, four pair-conversations, and one group presentation were made throughout the year. Three different assessment criteria (e.g., volume, eye contact, gestures) were set and showed to students before they prepared for the presentation. During the performance test, both teachers (a JTE and an AET) and students participated in the assessment.

Problems in Oral performance tests

Five performance tests (three speech presentations and two pair conversations) were made from April to July. However, little improvement was found in terms of fluency, delivery, and enthusiasm during this period. It took students one period to write a skit with only six to eight lines, and in their oral presentations, they spoke quietly and used few gestures. Thus, the teachers were frustrated to see the little student improvement, and some teachers started questioning the effectiveness of oral performance tests. They said, “Should we continue oral performance tests when they take too much time to prepare and the students don’t improve?” and “Are oral presentations effective for the students whose English abilities are not so high?” Moreover, we faced another problem that the students’ grades varied to a great extent, depending on the teachers. Some JTEs gave high marks to their students, while other JTEs were stricter in marking.

How to overcome the problem

In September, to solve the problem of the assessment, I asked Sato for advice. He advised me to have a weekly meeting and discuss the assessment criteria with other teachers. I called for a meeting for those who taught OC (six JTEs and one AET). In the

meeting, we watched several videotaped students’ performances and discussed the issue. We agreed that both JTEs and an AET would assess the performance test and talk about the differences. Another gradual but remarkable change was that we started to share some of the problems and ideas in the following meetings. For example, I videotaped students’ presentations in my class and lent it to Kubo. Kubo appreciated my help. This is his comment.

I showed Ms. Takahashi’s video to my students before presentations. It was very useful.

Students seemed to notice some of the good points and bad points about presentations and to raise their awareness about assessment criteria by watching others. They were also encouraged to make their own skits.

In October, students started to enjoy the presentation. They spoke in a louder voice and used more gestures and facial expressions. We were very pleased to see their improvement. One student commented as follows:

At first I didn’t enjoy making an oral presentation, but once I got used to it, it was so much fun to do, I enjoyed both making a presentation and watching the presentations of my friends.

In February, students made a group presentation for the first time. The topic was food. They were required to write a skit, deciding characters, personalities, place, time, problems, etc. Their performances were very creative and their skits became much longer than before. The students were able to use English in context.

Final grade of OC class

As for the final grade of OC, we discussed the ratio of each assessment criterion in a meeting. Although we used to rely only on term examination as a single assessment criterion, we decided to incorporate oral performance tests to count for as much as 40 % in the final mark for the first time. Thus, we had three assessment criteria for OC.

- 1) Term examination: 50 %
- 2) Performance tests: 40 %
- 3) Participation, assignment: 10%

Student survey

The students evaluated their own speaking and listening skills in April, October and February. These evaluations show that they noticed that their speaking and listening skills improved through the oral presentations. As Table 1 shows, the number of the students who felt “I could hardly speak” decreased from

19% to 1%. The number of students who felt “I could speak in a loud voice without any scripts” increased from 17% to 29 %. The number of students who felt “I could speak with gestures without any scripts” increased from 4% to 31 %.

For listening skills, as Table 2 shows, the number of students who felt “I could hardly understand” decreased from 28% to 4%. The number of students who felt “I could understand a little” decreased from 41% to 25%. The number of students who felt “I could understand half of the class” increased from 22% to 39%. The number of students who felt “I could understand most of the class” increased from 10% to 30%.

Since the students’ level of English was not high, we were afraid that pair activities and performance tests would be too difficult for them to enjoy. However, on the contrary, the students liked a student-centered and communication-oriented class better than a teacher-centered and grammar-translation class. These are some of their comments.

If we just listen to the teacher’s talk, it is boring. OC class was fun because we had many activities to do with other students. We helped each other.

Table 1. Speaking skills

	I can hardly speak.	I can speak a little using scripts.	I can speak in a loud voice without any scripts.	I can speak using gestures without any scripts.	I can speak with emotion without any scripts.
April	19%	59%	17%	4%	1%
October	5%	40%	30%	23%	2%
February	1%	38%	29%	31%	1%

(209 first-year students)

Table 2. Listening skills

	I can hardly understand.	I can understand a little.	I can understand half of the class.	I can understand most of the class.	I can understand everything.
April	28%	41%	22%	10%	0%
October	12%	35%	33%	20%	0%
February	4%	25%	39%	30%	1%

(209 first-year students)

OC was useful because we used English a lot. I talked about myself in pair activities. I used new expressions in making a presentation.

As the students made oral presentations, their communication skills gradually improved. As they became used to making oral presentations, they started to enjoy using English in classrooms.

Writing class in 2002

Students realized that the presentations they made in OC were based on the scripts and that role-play was not real communication. They seemed to want a challenge to participate in more spontaneous and natural conversations as their comments show.

I enjoyed presentations but I don't have confidence in speaking with a native speaker. I want to be able to have a natural conversation in English.

I want to be able to think in English so that I can speak more freely in a conversation. I hope we can have many interactive activities in class next year.

They wanted to continue to learn oral English and to have more spontaneous conversations. Since there is no OC for the second-year students, I had no idea about what to do. Then Sato advised me to try the approach used in his university. In this approach, writing activities and speaking activities are integrated through interesting topics related to their lives. Some teachers hesitated to try it, but finally all teachers agreed to incorporate this approach in their writing classes.

However, later in July, I found that the other two teachers who were in charge of the second-year students had the students write compositions but did not develop their writing into a speaking activity. This year we do not have a regular meeting because of a busy schedule. As a result, students in my class had many chances to use English but students in other teachers' classes did not. I have come to realize that without enough teacher communication, it is difficult to make a coherent program.

Summary, and the importance of Takahashi's story

Takahashi's story gave her personal insight to this study. In particular, she revealed how she interacted with other teachers to solve the issue of assessment and how she and other teachers felt about the project imposed by the prefectural Board of Education. In particular, Takahashi revealed how these teachers changed their views about performance tests. When students could not perform well for the first six months, teachers wondered if performance tests were worth doing. Then, after discussing assessment criteria and other issues in the meetings, they began to change their views about performance tests as they saw more and more successful student presentations. However, without enough communication, these teachers went back to their own ways of teaching in the next year.

In short, Takahashi's story gives a glimpse of how teachers learned to teach in this particular context. Johnson & Golombek (2002) claims:

It follows...that in order to recognize and document the activity of teacher learning and language teaching through the perspective of teachers, it is necessary to gather descriptive accounts of how teachers come to know their knowledge, how they use that knowledge within the contexts where they teach, and how they make sense of and reconfigure their classroom practices in and over time. (p. 2)

Teacher and student learning: What other teachers said

The second interviews were conducted at the end of the school year (in late March). The seven teachers who taught first year students were all interviewed. The data confirmed that teachers became positive about performance tests. All teachers said that performance tests were useful and students enjoyed creating a skit and presenting it. Moreover, several teachers noticed the progress students made in terms of fluency, delivery, use of gestures and eye contact, and enthusiasm. For example, Ishikawa reported:

Students developed presentation skills over the year. They could perform with gestures and emotions.

The only native English teacher, Mike, commented on the performance tests.

Students gained self-confidence. They still may be very shy. I think their confidence is growing. Certainly, they are learning new skills. They are becoming more and more interested in presentations. Once we did a group presentation, and there were some really original skits.

There were some collaborations among teachers. Teachers took turns making a handout for each presentation. Some teachers exchanged their supplementary materials with others. Furthermore, as Takahashi's story showed, teachers held several meetings to talk about assessment. Suzuki reported on it.

We talked about assessment. It was good we could cooperate with one another regarding assessment.

However, these teachers revealed some difficulties and teaching issues after they had experienced this project for one year. Interestingly, most of the teachers who became positive about performance tests indicated their concern about university entrance exams. There will be no oral communication classes in the second and the third years. Kubo commented on it.

We worked hard to improve students' communication skills, but we also have to prepare our students for university entrance exams.

Preparing students for university entrance exams has been a hidden goal in Japanese high schools (see Sato, 2000; 2002), and these classes were no exceptions. One year's innovating teaching experience did not seem to have much impact on their beliefs about English language teaching.

To take one example, teachers stopped holding meetings as they became used to performance tests. Though a few teachers such as Suzuki (see above) appreciated the opportunity to talk about assessment, one teacher explicitly expressed her reluctance toward extra meeting besides a weekly department meeting. Hashimoto said:

Creating another meeting was too much. That period on Thursday was the only free time for me. To be honest, I did not want that extra meeting to be held.

On the other hand, Takahashi confessed:

Unfortunately, we stopped having a meeting about OC classes in January. I could not talk with other teachers about teaching issues. I felt lonely and isolated.

What was worse, JTEs relied more on Mike about grading performance tests. Mike reported:

I had to do individual evaluations, I mean 240 students. But I don't know all the names and faces very well. Because I was writing down comments while I was watching, I missed some points. So, it was difficult.

Although JTEs agreed in the first meeting that they would cooperate with Mike about grading, most JTEs stopped cooperating shortly. JTEs except Takahashi expected Mike to take more initiatives in teaching oral communication classes.

At the end of the school year, teachers finally talked about students' final grades from necessity. Ando found a problem.

While we were talking about grading, we found a problem. Some students were good at presentations but poor at term exams. Others were poor at presentations but good at term exams. We agreed that we should talk about the ratio of each assessment criterion in the next school year.

Nonetheless, they did not get together to discuss the problem. And the next school year started in April. As Takahashi told in her story, most JTEs went back to their routine practices.

Implications

The study implied that promoting teacher and student learning would entail improving a school teaching culture. In particular, changing assessment would be effective but is not an easy task, because "[a]lternative classroom assessment is a new world for teachers, most of whom have very little (if any) assessment training, often lack fundamental measurement knowledge, and generally feel uncomfortable about the quality of their assessments" (Hargreaves, Earl, Moore, & Manning, 2001, p.53).

Although this is an on-going study, the data presented above offered the following implications.

- Teachers were resistant to changing their beliefs about English language teaching and learning.
- Changing assessment criteria and using performance tests was most effective to promote teacher collaboration and led to the improved student outcomes.
- Sustaining teacher collaboration was difficult without the improvement of the school culture by teachers involved in it.

In summary, students made progress in their performance tests as teachers collaborated toward more coherent assessment criteria. Falk (2001) affirms that “[i]nvolving teachers in scoring students’ responses to large-scale standards-based performance tests offers rich opportunities to enhance teacher learning” (p. 127), which results in better student learning, and summarizes the strengths of performance assessments.

- 1) learning about the strengths of diverse learners
- 2) providing a guide for teaching
- 3) changing the way teachers teach
- 4) promoting teacher collaboration and inquiry
- 5) meeting the challenge of responsive teaching: teaching to the child

Similarly, Fullan (2001) stresses the importance of “assessment literacy,” which constitutes the capacity of professional learning communities. In addition, most recent studies indicated that “[a]ssessment-led reform has become one of the most widely

favored strategies for promoting higher standards of teaching and learning” (Hargreaves, Earl, Moore, & Manning, 2001, p 50). Nevertheless, the study revealed the difficulty of creating continuous teacher learning opportunities in this workplace. Without enough discussion and sharing about student learning and teacher learning, and without solving teaching issues, a majority of teachers went back to their routine practices easily in this working environment where actual teaching practices and innovative assessment were little evaluated.

Note

All teacher names, except the authors, are pseudonyms.

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