

Positive and negative perceptions of the EFL/ESL teaching experience and their implications for school administration in Japan

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教師が職業に起因する要因でストレスを感じながら教育の場で十分に力を発揮するのは難しい。また、そのことは日本の教育の質の低下にもつながりかねない。本稿では日本で英語教育に携わる教師の職場内外におけるストレス、あるいはそれを癒す要因を、教員との対談を基にし、Narrativeの手法を用いて分析する。分析の結果はそれらの要因として人間関係に起因するもの、すなわち、先生と生徒、生徒の親、同僚、管理職との関係を第一の要因と認め、労働条件、すなわち、収入、時間超過勤務、雇用の安定性に関する要因を第二の要因と認めた。また、教育現場の教師に影響する第三の要因として教師の持つ社会的使命の概念も認められた。

Increasing administrative demands have placed new requirements and more responsibilities on teachers. The Educational Council in Japan, an affiliate of the Ministry of Education, Science, and Culture (2005) recommended that administrators must ensure that teachers have a socially acceptable personality, comprehensive knowledge, and instructional skills. In addition, the report noted the importance of English education in an emerging era of worldwide globalization. Because English has become the most widely used lingua franca, maintaining high-quality English education in Japan is important. Greenberg (1969) asserted that affective aspects of teachers affect the quality of education. Thus, the quality of English education by EFL/ESL teachers is likely influenced by affective factors. The overemphasis of teaching methodology in teacher training programs, however, ignores affective factors that teachers need inside and outside the classrooms.

Bolin and Falk (1987) argued that efforts to improve teacher education from the outside ignore teachers' intentions. In fact, some teacher unions denounced the Council's report (e.g., Teachers' Union of Aichi prefecture, 2005; Teachers' Union of Yamaguchi prefecture, 2006), concluding that the requirements addressed, if implemented, would impose additional stress on teachers, who already feel pressured inside and outside schools.

Lortie (1975) pointed out that the majority of irritants and problems that teachers cite the most frequently originate from three sources: their duties, interpersonal relationships, and factors related to income, prestige, and school conditions. The most influential factor, however, is interpersonal relationships. A teaching profession is emotionally exhausting because teachers have many interpersonal interactions throughout the day in their life (Truch, 1980), the majority of which are relationships with students, colleagues, parents, and administrators. They are significant sources of teacher's stress (Boyle, Borg, Falzon, & Baglioni, 1995). To some extent, stress may facilitate achievement and aid learning, but excessive stress may negatively affect teachers and students. Exploring typical sources of stress among EFL/ESL teachers in Japan provides a means for identifying the support that these teachers need and determine ways to lessen job-related stress.

Method

To identify common sources of stress and ways to lessen their effect, this interview-based study gathered a rich and detailed description of the stress and encouragement felt by EFL/ESL teachers in Japan inside and outside the work place. Narrative

inquiry is particularly suitable for studying teaching, learning, and gathering data (Carter, 1993). This methodology has been increasingly used as a means for investigating teaching experiences among TESOL teachers (e.g., Casanave & Schecter, 1997; Sakui & Gaies, 2002; Vandrick, 1999) as well as for exploring language learning (e.g., Duff, Wong & Early, 2002; Kanno, 2000; Li, 2000; Morita, 2000).

I audio taped 30-minute interviews with selected respondents after school in their classrooms or in a local coffee shop. I used an unstructured interview guided by two principal questions that provided opportunities for the contribution of diverse responses.

1. What were the most stressful times or events that have occurred during your teaching career?
2. What were the most encouraging times or events that have occurred during teaching career?

Sample

The sample consisted of 10 EFL/ESL teachers, four female and two male native Japanese teachers and three male and one female native English teachers. All teachers were employed in junior high schools and high schools in Japan. Six respondents were my friends or acquaintances who introduced the other four respondents to me. (See Appendix 1 for a description of the respondents.)

Findings

To organize and display the data collected, I grouped the responses for each research questions into categories.

Narratives from participants provided many useful insights about factors that stress or encourage teachers. Boyle, Borg, Falzon, and Baglioni (1995) and Truch (1980) found that factors, which affected teachers emotionally, were related to students, teacher colleagues, administrators, and parents, factors that respondents in this study clarified. As identified by Lortie (1975), other factors affecting teachers were related to income, work overload, and employment security. A summary of interview responses is found in Table 1. (For example, 8 of the 10 sample members identified students as a source of stress; the 3 within parentheses indicates the number of native English participations who also identified stress.) Six respondents in this study identified teaching as a social mission as an encouraging factor.

Table 1. Summary of interview responses

Factors	Subfactors	Stress	Inspiration
Interpersonal attributes	Students	8(3)	8(4)
	Colleagues	5(2)	0
	Parents	4(0)	0
	Administrators	4(0)	0
Working conditions	Income	0	2(0)
	Work overload	4(1)	0
	Employment security	3(3)	0
Teaching as a special social mission		0	6(2)

Interpersonal attributes

The subfactors of interpersonal attributes included students, members of students' families, teacher colleagues, and school administrators. EFL/ESL teachers reported that

factors related to students could stress or encourage them. This finding was supported by respondents, regardless of gender or nationality.

Students

Eight of the 10 participants identified student-related factors as potentially encouraging. The following teacher comments illustrate this potential.

Toshihiko: "The most inspiring time was when I observed students improve their behavior and increase their English proficiency."

Ryoko: "The most stressful time occurs when students disobey me, and my lesson does not go well. I'm stressed when students don't understand what I teach, fall asleep in class, or chat with friends. I feel stress when I don't understand what students think or when I can't act as the students' model in the classroom. Student behavior and academic achievement of good students encourage me to continue teaching. These students study very hard."

For Ryoko, Student misbehavior results in frustration and stress, yet it provides insights about her teaching skills. For her, students act as a positive factor, but they sometimes evoke stress. Negative feelings resulted toward teaching occurred when she could not control classroom behavior. Similarly, Jim agreed that students evoke feelings.

Jim: "The most stressful time that I recall occurred when I had difficulty conducting the class. I was working at a school whose students were entirely out of control. The first task each day was seating students at their desks. Some students resisted sitting promptly and strolled throughout

the classroom making noise. Because of their misbehavior, I could not teach the other students. The most encouraging moments are when students say, ‘I like English, because English is interesting,’ or ‘I like studying English.’”

Colleagues

Few positive affects found in this study were related to teaching colleagues. Collegial relationships seemed to influence teachers more negatively than positively, regardless of the teacher’s gender or nationality. Five respondents negatively identified their colleagues. The following quotation from Maiko illustrates this finding.

“When I was a school committee member, one female on the committee did not do anything. It was true of every job for which she was responsible. I can’t forgive such teacher behavior because teachers serve as behavioral models.”

Tom and Beth expressed feelings about a Japanese colleague. Tom remarked,

“Lack of interaction between ALT’s (Assistant Language Teachers) and Japanese English teachers discourages me from teaching. My Japanese partner doesn’t seem willing to coordinate with ALT’s. We don’t talk much about our lessons. Perhaps he is busy, but the absence of interacting is stressful.”

Beth commented:

“The most stressful time in my teaching career was when my coordinator changed a textbook without

notifying me. I liked the textbook and believed it was effective for improving students’ proficiency in English. This incident depressed me.” Japanese teachers were stressed by their colleagues’ behavior. Among native English teachers, stress more often resulted from a lack of interpersonal interactions, particularly with Japanese colleagues.

Parents of students

Excessive intrusions by parents of students were cited by teachers as discouraging or negative. Four respondents negatively identified their colleagues. The following comments are representative of the stress resulting from interactions with parents of students. Toshihiko stated:

“The greatest stress occurred when I was the curriculum coordinator of a school. Parents were very strong-willed and their opinions affected school policies. Parents acted as if they had the right to say anything to us.”

Kyoko noted:

“The other most stressful experience in my teaching career occurred when I tried to resolve some student problems. My effort was going well, but the parents of the students involved intruded and made it difficult, mentally and physically, which stressed me.”

Four Japanese teachers who taught English identified parents of students as sources of stress. No native English teachers cited parents as a source of stress, probably because teachers

who contact parents of students are more likely to be Japanese.

Administrators

Respondents identified school administrators, usually principals, as rule-conscious, who often isolate themselves from teachers. Thus, they do not exert a strong influence on teachers. Respondents stated that, when principals believe that teachers are substandard, they try to exert control. This practice often negatively influences teachers and discourages them from continuing in the profession. Four respondents referred to administrators and all negatively identified them. A principal's action stressed Kyoko, and an administrator's negative influence almost discouraged Tomoya enough to stop teaching, who then commented:

“The most stressing time happened when I opposed the school's policy about English education. The principal became angry, which stressed me enough to consider leaving the profession.”

Another teacher, Kyoko, said

“The most stressful time during my teaching career happened when the principal accused me of something for which I was not responsible. He did not permit me to explain how the incident occurred.”

Only Japanese EFL/ESL teachers commented about principals. It is probably because school principals are often not fluent in English, which may hinder them from communicating with native English teachers.

School working conditions

Income

Income seemed to affect two Japanese female teachers positively in this study. The following quotation from Maiko illustrates this.

“I never felt like quitting. Teaching is a good job for females because there is no gender discrimination regarding promotion or salary.”

Few companies in Japan offer equal career opportunities and salaries to males and females. Male and female teachers in Japan, however, usually receive equal opportunity for career advancement and increased salary. This condition may encourage females to choose a teaching career.

Employment security

In Japan, teachers in public school are not usually transferred to a different prefecture and tenure is guaranteed. These working conditions usually affected Japanese teachers positively, particularly those teachers who have a family to support. Unlike Japanese respondents, native English teachers did not seem satisfied with working conditions at their schools. Tom remarked:

“I feel like quitting when I think about my future. I'm worried about job security for teaching in Japan.”

Likewise, Brian stated:

“One factor that stresses me is the absence of secure employment for non-Japanese teachers in

Japan. Contract conditions seem arbitrary, which discourages me from contributing to English education.”

Both Tom and Brian have a family to support, so their concern was understandable. McKay (1992) concluded that the role of native English teachers is not to change the educational structure but to attempt to increase students’ English proficiency. She recommended that such people leave the school or the country, or negotiate with the school administration when encountering an unsatisfactory teaching situation. As for the first two suggestions, they are not necessarily practical for non-Japanese EFL/ESL teachers with families to support. With regard to the second suggestion, it may not be easily adopted by non-Japanese EFL/ESL teachers because the school administrators are often not fluent in English. Teachers, however, cannot perform their best if stressed, which could undermine the quality of English education in Japan. To maintain the quality of English education, stress on native English teachers should be minimized.

Overload work

Work overload sometimes produces negative mental or physical disorders, which can result in teachers leaving their jobs. Four respondents identified negative influence of overload work. Consider the following remarks of Beth and Maki. Beth said:

“The most stressful time was when I engaged in making a new English curriculum. I had to work overtime while I had the other job outside school.

This experience harmed my health and I felt like leaving the school.”

Maki noted:

“It was when I was working at a school in which students were out of control, which negatively affected my physical and mental health and meant a lot of extra work besides completing the daily routine. Then I wanted to quit the job.”

Since the adoption of the new educational policy in 2002 that included a five-day work week system, public school teachers must present more lessons each day, and, as a result, tend to work overtime to complete after-school routines (Teachers’ Union of Hyogo prefecture, 2003). Also teachers suffering from mental and physical disorder derived from overwork are increasing in number (Teachers’ Union of Shimane prefecture, 2006).

Teaching as a special social mission

Lortie (1975) argued that teaching is generally regarded as a valuable service that provides a special moral worth to society. Six respondents shared this notion. The following quotes illustrate this trend. Ryoko stated:

“I want to teach practical matters that also help students after they leave school. I want to contribute to society by teaching. Teachers should be models for students, so I act the same in my private life as I do in my teaching life. I always try to act as a model for students.”

Another student, Maiko, commented:

“I want students to be responsible for their behaviors and remarks. I want to inspire them to learn such fundamentals as social members besides teaching subject matters.” Because this factor did not negatively influence any teacher in this study, I categorized it as an encouraging factor that inspires teachers to continue teaching.

Conclusions

This study revealed several stressful and encouraging factors that affect ESL/EFL teachers employed in Japan. Stress among ESL/EFL teachers may negatively affect the long-term quality of English education in Japan. This study found that regardless of gender and nationality, interpersonal attributes, especially students, are the most frequent source of stress and the most important source for encouraging teachers. Teaching colleagues, parents, and administrators generally influenced teachers more negatively than positively or not at all. Working conditions, particularly work overload, were often sources of stress among EFL/ESL teachers. The absence of employment security was identified as a source of stress, particularly among teachers with families to support. To regard teaching as a special social mission affected EFL/ESL teachers positively.

Findings of this study have implications for EFL/ESL teachers in Japan. First, because language education is promoted by interpersonal interaction, a class should be divided into two or three at the time of English lesson so as to provide more opportunities for EFL/ESL teachers and

students to interact. This potentially encourages EFL/ESL teachers by providing easier classroom management and direct students' reaction. Second, to lessen stress from working conditions as well as interpersonal factors, each school should establish a process for problem solving. Experienced teachers with English fluency could suggest solutions and encourage EFL/ESL teachers to negotiate with administrators to solve problems. They could also support EFL/ESL teachers by helping them apply more effective strategies for classroom management and build interpersonal relationships with students. Furthermore, since problem solving depends upon communication among teachers, colleagues, and students (Lortie, 1975), school administrators should provide more opportunities for teachers to discuss potential solutions with colleagues and students.

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Appendix

Brief biography of participants

Jim: Jim is a white male in his early 40's born in the United States who works as an ALT at a public junior high school in the Kansai area.

Toshihiko: He is a 46-year-old male who is a vice principal of a junior high school. He taught English in junior high school for 24 years in the Kansai area.

Maki: A 46-year-old female, Maki has taught English in public junior high school for 23 years in the Kanto area.

Tom: Tom is a 33-year old male born in the United States who teaches as an ALT in a private junior and senior high school in the Kansai area.

Tomoya: Tomoya is a 43-year-old male who teaches English full-time at a public high school in the Kansai area.

Maiko: A 39-year-old female, Maiko has taught English full-time for 15 years at a private senior high school in the Kansai area.

Brian: A 45-year old male born in Great Britain, Brian is an ALT who teaches English at a public high school in the Kanto area.

Ryoko: A 26-year-old Japanese female, Ryoko teaches English part-time in a private school in the Kanto area.

Kyoko: Kyoko, a 38-year-old female, formerly taught English full-time for 15 years in a public junior high school teacher. Now retired, she teaches part-time in the Kanto area.

Beth: Beth is a 37-year-old white female from Canada who teaches English part-time at a private high school in the Kansai area.