

JALT2007

Challenging Assumptions  
Looking In, Looking Out

# Learner voices: Reflections on secondary education

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440 EFL learners from various universities were asked what they liked, disliked, found helpful, and found not helpful in learning English in junior high school (JHS) and high school (HS). Data were coded and then analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively, and the results compared to those from an original 2002 study. Results were also shared with the participants themselves and their own subsequent analysis was incorporated into the study. The researchers noted how their teaching values and practices changed, and they provided suggestions for teachers and schools of all educational levels.

EFL(外国語としての英語教育)の学習環境で英語を学ぶ大学生440人に、中学校や高校時代の英語学習の中での彼らの好き嫌い、また、何が役に立ち、何が役に立たなかったと感じるかをたずねた。集計されたデータは質的そして量的に分析され、結果は2002年に行われた初期の調査と比較された。またそれらの結果は研究協力者にも共有され、彼らの分析も調査に取り入れられた。研究者は、授業中の重要性や実践方法をどのように変えるべきかについて言及しており、そしてすべての教育機関における教員や学校へ示唆している。

Learner silence is a concern among teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) in Japan. Sosa and Casanave (2007) describe learners who are “out of reach, disengaged, or uninvolved . . . lack[ing] motivation, interest, and purpose” (p. 240). Why are learners disengaged? One answer is that they are not expected to proactively engage in their own education for the 6 years spanning junior high school (JHS) and high school (HS). Teacher-centered, lecture-based education marginalizes involvement of learners and their voices as they sit silently without being given a chance to be heard. Typically, secondary school teachers spend much of the class period diagramming sentences and translating phrases while learners quietly take notes (Gorsuch, 2000; McVeigh, 2002; O’Donnell, 2005; Taguchi, 2005). In this style of learning, no one expects learners to actively participate in their language acquisition.

In contrast, watching their teacher and more able peers use the language with the expectations on them to follow suit would increase their attention and desire to engage because they know their turn is next. This practice is known as *intent participation* (Rogoff, Paradise, Arauz, Correa-Chavez, & Angelillo, 2003) and it complements the theory that learners learn by actually doing (Dewey, 1938/1997). Furthermore, while some learners may never have the opportunity to express their views, others may express themselves and either be ignored or not heard (Cook-Sather, 2006). By voicing their experiences, wants, and needs, learners can engage themselves toward positive contributions in “their own development and in the improvement of the strategies and structures that shape the possibilities of

schooling” (Thiessen, 2006, p. 346). Involving learners in the educational process democratizes education, in Dewey’s sense of experiential education (Dewey, 1916/2004), providing teachers with suggestions for change.

In soliciting learner voices, the present study draws on Dewey’s (1910) concept of reflective thinking. The four phases of reflective thinking are experience, description, analysis, and intelligent action. Dewey stressed that reflection includes the responsibility to take action. We asked our learners to reflect upon and describe their experiences in secondary education, analyze the results, and make meaning of their own conclusions. Likewise, as we reflected upon their experiences, and in the processes of description and analysis, we were transformed in terms of our classroom views and practices. In this way, learners’ individual experiences contributed collectively to the analysis, leading the insights of this study. Emerging from the myriad voices came the wisdom of the crowd (Surowiecki, 2004).

## Background

The present study is a follow-up to Murphey’s study (2002) where learners were asked to write open-ended letters of advice to JHS and HS teachers. In the original study, comments were grouped into categories of positive and negative experiences in secondary education, plus a request for wants. The results showed a large proportion of the comments to be negative toward experiences in EFL classrooms, particularly toward the heavy focus on grammar in HS. The letters strongly requested “more practical, interactive, and communicative pedagogy” (p. 2). The present study comprised more participants from a wider demographic background (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Comparison of administrations of original and present studies**

Original study	Present study
1 university	4 universities
Aichi Prefecture, Japan	Greater Tokyo Area, Japan
100 participants	440 participants
Freshmen	Freshmen, sophomores, juniors, seniors
English majors	20 majors
83% female	44% female

Another difference worth noting is the time period the participants were in secondary schools in relation to educational guidelines advocated by the Ministry of Education (MEXT) called the Course of Study. The very first Course of Study supportive of communicative ability for learners was issued in 1994 and in 2002 an Action Plan was issued to produce “Japanese people who can use English” (MEXT, 2002). Starting in 2003, the next Course of Study came into effect, placing more emphasis on communicative ability. Therefore the participants from the original study had their educational experiences under the 1994 Course of Study, while most of the participants from the present study came out of the 2003 Course of Study.

## Methods

### Participants

440 university learners participated in this study, representing 20 distinct majors in four general categories:

language arts, social sciences, medical sciences, and physical sciences. There were 245 (55.68%) males, 192 (43.64%) females, 182 (41.36%) freshmen, 101 (22.95%) sophomores, 95 (21.59%) juniors, 35 (7.95%) seniors.

### Instrument

A questionnaire was administered on the first day of class, taken home for completion, and returned the following week. The participants were told that one of the researchers would be presenting the data to JHS and HS teachers. They were also told that results of the study would be shared with them later. The prompt (see Appendix) asked what they liked and did not like, what helped or did not help, and what suggestions they had for teachers. The questionnaire had two separate sections to clearly designate comments for JHS and HS teachers. The reverse side collected the demographic information.

### Data analysis

Comments were first separated into three major categories: positive experiences, negative experiences, and wants. Comments were reread several times to allow subcategories to emerge and were then quantified by items within these subcategories. Early in the second semester, the data tables were analyzed by the participants in small groups during class and their analyses provided insights for this study.

## Results

Similarities between the past and present studies are that both sets of learners showed a decrease in the number of positive comments and increase in negatives from JHS to HS, and that both sets of learners equally “plea[d] for more practical, interactive, and communicative pedagogy” (Muphey, 2002, p. 2) (see Table 2).

**Table 2: Comparison of results of original and present studies**

Original data collection (2000*)	Present study's data collection (2007)
Decrease in the number of positive comments (14 to 2) and increase in negatives (19 to 36) from JHS to HS	Decrease in the number of positive comments (618 to 402) and increase in negatives (399 to 487) from JHS to HS
More total negative (55) than total positive (16) comments	More total positive (1,020) than total negative (886) comments
Top overall positive: Enjoyable activities (games, songs)	Top overall positive: Communication
Top overall negative: Grammar	Top overall negative: Teachers (Japanese)
Top overall request: more communication	Top overall request: more communication

Note: Data for Murphey (2002) were collected in 2000.

The top three positive experiences in JHS were chances to communicate, particularly with peers, a general enjoyment with their classes, and the chance to spend time with a native speaker assistant language teacher (ALT). The top three positive experiences in HS were grammar, communication,

and teacher, particularly referring to the personality of the teacher and the ability to present the material in an interesting way (see Table 3).

**Table 3: Positive experiences in secondary school by item count**

Top 10 things that learners said they liked or were helpful	618 items JHS	402 items HS
1. Communication	17%	13%
2. Grammar	5%	16%
3. ALTs / Native speaker teachers	12%	8%
4. Teacher (Japanese), Teaching style	7%	10%
5. Enjoyable	13%	3%
6. Song and Music	10%	3%
7. Reading	3%	8%
8. Games	7%	1%
9. Vocabulary	3%	3%
10. Listening	3%	2%
Total % accounted for in positive category	80%	67%

The top three negative experiences in JHS and HS were teachers, grammar-translation, and lack of oral communication (see Table 4). Teachers ranked high for negative experiences in their personality and pedagogy.

**Table 4: Negative experiences in secondary school by item count**

Top 10 things that learners said they disliked or were unhelpful	399 items JHS	487 items HS
1. Teachers (Japanese)	20%	19%
2. Grammar-translation	16%	17%
3. Lack of communication & speaking	13%	17%
4. Exams, Exams study	3%	15%
5. Hard / Difficult / Too fast	8%	9%
6. Dislike, Not fun, Yuck	12%	—
7. Reading, Too much reading	5%	7%
8. Memorize, Repetition	7%	—
9. Too much vocabulary	6%	1%
10. Level mismatch	4%	—
Total % accounted for in negative category	94%	83%

The top three wants in both JHS and HS were more chances for oral communication, an increase of enjoyment in activities and learning environment, and more inclusion of ALTs in class activities (see Table 5).

An analysis of comments about grammar was conducted to provide a detailed comparison regarding attitudes toward grammar. It turned out learners found grammar in JHS helpful for HS entrance exams, and in HS they found it helpful for university entrance exams (see Table 6).

**Table 5: Wants in secondary school by item count**

Top 10 wants that learners suggested to teachers or say they would have wanted to have	299 items JHS	257 items HS
1. More communication	24%	34%
2. More enjoyment	16%	9%
3. More ALTs / Native speaker teachers	8%	6%
4. Improved teachers	5%	5%
5. More reading strategies	3%	5%
6. More listening	2%	4%
7. More grammar	6%	—
8. More pronunciation	2%	3%
9. Stream learners	2%	2%
10. More vocabulary	3%	—
Total % accounted for in want category	71%	68%

**Table 6: Attitudes toward grammar from 192 comments from 440 learners**

Complete breakdown of attitudes toward grammar	Count (%) JHS	Count (%) HS
Negative affect / Dislike grammar	55 (13%)	46 (10%)
Useful for exams / Conditional support	41 (9%)	26 (6%)
Positive affect / Like grammar	6 (1%)	18 (4%)
Total Count mentioning grammar	102 (23%)	90 (20%)

## Discussion

Three generalizations for EFL learner needs were found: greater consistency, more communication and enjoyment, and better teaching. These generalizations are highlighted in learner reflections below.

### Greater consistency

*I see a tendency that they hate patterned classes with grammar lessons, which are prevalent at JHS and HS, and that they like stimulating communication-centered classes, which are offered rarely.*

—anonymous participants analyzing the data tables

*Motivation toward English study at JHS is higher and motivation decreases at HS. HS students want to study grammar, which is useful for exams, rather than singing songs and playing games.*

—anonymous participants analyzing the data tables

There was a drop in positive comments and an increase in negative comments from JHS to HS. It revealed that the current system in place now has JHS catching learner interest in EFL with songs and games while HS prepares learners to pass university entrance exams with heavy focus on grammar-translation. Interest generated in JHS gets disrupted by teacher-centered, depersonalized, and de-contextualized classes in HS. Universities then introduce EFL as a whole new subject where the language is a communicative tool.

Dewey (1913/1975) believed that making connections between education and learner interests was imperative for academic interests, thoughts, and endeavors to be sustained: “It is not enough to *catch* attention; it must be *held*” (p. 91). Currently there appears a lack of well-defined and consistent practice across the educational system. Instead of caught and held, learner interest is caught and dropped. Such an experience is so demotivating that the negative effects on learning can last a long time (Falout & Falout, 2005). The current practice of short-sighted, short-term learning goals offers mainly stumbling blocks in language acquisition, whereas a scaffolded and pedagogically consistent system of learning that spans the years of formal education would benefit a nation seeking the global flexibility of a *lingua franca*.

There is also a need for consistency across classrooms. Many of the participants were surprised by the disparity of experiences others had. Some did not experience games at all in secondary schools; others were surprised to find that ALTs were available in some schools but not in theirs, corroborating the findings in previous research (Gorsuch, 2002). Such inconsistencies might be creating differences in oral communication abilities, language learning expectations, and attitudes toward English.

### More communication and enjoyment

*I think “More communication” and “More enjoyment” have a connection because to communicate by talking is enjoyable. When I was a high school student, I liked communication class*

*the best. I enjoyed class through games and talking.*  
—anonymous participants analyzing the data tables

*What students want in English classes shows that many students enjoy communication classes. I can tell from my experience also. My classmates were having good motivation in communication classes in high school.*

—anonymous participants analyzing the data tables

When analyzing the results, learners who have always enjoyed EFL classes felt empathy with those who did not share positive experiences. These learners recognized that learning contexts matter, and that there is a relationship between communication and motivation. Overwhelmingly, the majority expressed desire for more chances and time to practice the skills of oral communication, and less time on grammar.

Grammar was considered a positive experience only to pass the entrance exams: “It was painful that we studied only grammar. But studying grammar was useful for me to get into a good high school.” Furthermore, half of the participants in this study were university freshmen, probably yet without extensive or effective exposure to a communicative-centered classroom. Asking learners “before they have a contrast frame of reference may simply result in evaluations that reinforce the status quo” (Murphey, 2002, p. 5). After acquiring a contrast frame of reference, their positive attitudes toward grammar-translation are likely to decrease (Hood, Elwood, & Falout, 2007).

Even those who appreciated grammar claimed it was not intrinsically motivating because grammar lessons are abstract, decontextualized, and rely on memorizing explicit rules. Only 5% of the participants felt positive affect toward studying grammar, and some of them noted a disproportionate exposure to grammar while expressing a desire for more communication. Grammar attained such a high proportion of positive comments because there is little else available in the HS classroom to comment on. Conversely, comments about enjoying song and music in HS did not rank high simply because the experience was rare. Learners want teachers to know their top request—for their *education*—is that English classrooms be filled with communication and enjoyment.

### Better teaching

*The classes where students only sit and listen to teachers' lectures are boring. I'm sure teachers hate it, too.*

—anonymous participants analyzing the data tables

*In order for students to enjoy English classes, learning from good teachers is necessary. In order to improve students' academic performance, teachers need to improve first.*

—anonymous participants analyzing the data tables

Our data ranked “Teachers (Japanese)” as the top negative experience. Students said that teachers need to improve themselves if they expect students to improve.

Many reported boredom and particularly requested more enthusiasm and less teacher-centered classrooms. Some noted the poor pronunciation of their teachers. Also in disfavor were teachers who were overly strict or who often shouted when angry. For these university students, negative attitudes toward and negative relationships with their teachers were, in retrospect, the most salient features of their secondary English education.

A wide range of studies from various fields show how positive interpersonal relationships between teachers and students are vitally important for student learning (den Brok, Levy, Brekelmans, & Wubbles, 2005; Rubin & Silva, 2003). Students who perceive their teachers as personable and approachable, a quality known as teacher immediacy (Christophel & Gorham, 1995), are more likely to find the teaching effective, resulting in higher motivation and better learning outcomes (Chesebro & McCrosky, 2002; Gorham, & Zakahi, 1990).

Learners also held teachers responsible for the pedagogy, claiming much of their class activities and assignments had no clear goals or purposes, unrealistic amounts to memorize, and impractical approaches to language learning. They reported having to memorize lengthy passages and transcribing the entire textbook: “English class at HS was only about memorizing. It was not language learning.” Learners needed more contextualized learning, language skills practice, and scaffolding: “What didn't help was just reading long texts because I couldn't understand the connection between the previous sentence and the following sentence, and couldn't figure out the context.” They found no value in their efforts beyond passing entrance exams:

“Simple cramming. It might have been good for exams but I don't remember anything now.” “I never thought, not even once, those classes useful when I actually speak English.” “I don't think my English skill will be useful when I get a job.”

This kind of instruction is listed as one of the causes of demotivation (Falout & Maruyama, 2004). Moreover, such practices cause learners to study language ineffectively, developing false beliefs which impede language learning (Falout, 2006). Our learners claim they do not see progress, however their situation is a predictable consequence. We do not recognize these previously stated teaching methods in the modern mainstream literature on second language acquisition theory and practice. The findings in this study suggest that these learners would have benefited from exposure to a greater variety of teaching methods, learning strategies, and skills practice.

### Teacher stories of transformation

“Learning, transformation, and change are always implicated in one another” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 57). Dewey (1958) wrote that transformative experiences do not simply build upon existing knowledge but cause a change in perspective where people find new meaning in something. By listening to our learners' voices we ourselves were transformed, changing our values and practice.

### Mike

I remember being made to feel that I wasn't a “real teacher” when I was a high school ALT because I brought my guitar to class, sang with my learners, played and laughed with



them. “Just an entertainer,” was whispered in the teachers’ room; they would get back to the serious business of drilling English after the *Mike Show* left town. I let the whispers bother me, and I put my guitar away years ago. Now I try to let my learners be my teacher and turn a deaf ear to the critics who would frown on enthusiasm. I am looking for ways to reawaken and nurture the enthusiasm for learning that our learners are telling us they want to feel again.

### Joe

Learners may often echo their teachers and elders in saying grammar is needed for learning English. However, our data show that many learners feel grammar is useful *only* to pass exams. The high stakes entrance exam system has produced a washback effect on English education and created a lucrative commercial industry focusing heavily on grammar instruction. The market offers a plethora of study materials, cram schools, and nationwide mock entrance exams. Ironically, later many adults go to English conversation schools to learn to really use English and enjoy it. The overwhelming request for more communication and joy shows that learners would devise a different market if more control were in their hands.

### Jim

Recently certain notions have fallen into or out of favor: grammar instruction is often vilified, whereas computers and communicative teaching are lauded in our profession. The latter two are certainly fine additions to the SLA toolkit, and I make liberal use of them. However, grammar does have its

place. There *are* learners who enjoy it (often, it seems, they are the type who enjoy puzzles, much as I do). Furthermore, the reality is that grammar is a part of the ubiquitous entrance exams, and it does provide a foundation in English. Yes, many dislike it or are not well served by extensive grammar, but there are certainly some who follow that less-traveled road. My ode, fellow travelers, is a caveat to make sure we hear all voices, even from those who have taken a road less traveled.

### Tim

MEXT may be afraid to take a stand on the wisdom of what the crowd says. They do mouth the wisdom of the crowds in saying they want to create “Japanese with English abilities” but they have not, for example, required listening on all university entrance exams, as China and Korea have done for many years, nor deregulated their highly controlled textbook market and let the wisdom of the market take over, moves that without a doubt would be unpopular in certain circles, but nevertheless benefit general education. At the classroom level, teachers can act upon the wisdom of what their learners say helps and does not help. As academic researchers may we humble ourselves and listen to the overwhelming wisdom of the aggregated voices of our learners. May we find more ways to let them speak and be heard. And most importantly, may we and our leaders have the courage to act upon their wisdom.

## Conclusions

*This [decrease in the number of positive comments and increase in negatives from JHS to HS] shows that there are overwhelmingly more things students dislike, and I think this is because students don't have much interest in studying English and this can be a problem in the future. I think the important point is to increase the interest in English study of each individual student. And in order to do it, teachers should design classes so students can get interested in studying English.*

—anonymous participants analyzing the data tables

*HS students prefer “Grammar” and “Exam study” to “Enjoyable” and “Communication” because they have to take university entrance exams. JHS students have high motivation because it's their first English class and their interest is especially focused on the “Joy” element. The common thing for JHS and HS is that they like classes which are different from regular classes.*

—anonymous participants analyzing the data tables

EFL teachers in Japan are concerned about learner silence. Ironically, what learners want most in the classroom is to communicate. This desire emerged as the consensus of learner voices from the present study. It shows a mismatch between learner attitudes and educational practice. JHS and HS teachers can help by speaking more English to learners, ALTs, and even themselves (Murphey & Sasaki, 1998), and

by encouraging them to participate in creating the system of their own learning. Communicating among teachers and classmates brings immediate and specific goals for using English, changing the purpose of classroom practice to meaningful interaction.

We believe the reflective thinking of educational experiences in this study increased learners' investment, interest, and agency in their own education. Seeking their fresh perspectives engaged our responsibility as teachers to reflect upon our classroom practices and make positive changes. We realize that in advocating learner voice, we need also to advocate the freedom of language teachers to act, something that Rivers (1976) champions in her call for teachers to follow learner interests:

We must find out what our students are interested in. This is our subject matter. As language teachers we are the most fortunate of teachers—all subjects are ours. Whatever the children want to communicate about, whatever they want to read about, is our subject matter. . . . The essence of language teaching is providing conditions for language learning—using the motivation which exists to increase our student's knowledge of the new language: we are limited only by our own caution, by our own hesitancy to do whatever our imagination suggests to us to create situations in which students feel involved. . . . We need not be tied to a curriculum created for another situation or another group. We must adapt, innovate, improvise, in order to meet the student[s] where [they are] and channel [their] motivation. (p. 96)

We rarely hear the voices of learners because they are on the periphery. Their voices need to come to the center for developing sound lesson plans, curricula, and educational governance in the classroom and beyond. Teachers can find the courage to centralize learners' voices when sharing the joy of communication, listening actively, and fostering *intent participation* (Rogoff, et al., 2003). In reciprocity and when expected to, learners can proactively engage in their own education.

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## Appendix

### *Questionnaire prompt*

Dear Students: I will be talking to JHS and HS English teachers soon and I would like to tell them what students thought of their English classes in JHS and HS. Please tell me WHAT YOU LIKED and DID NOT LIKE and WHAT HELPED YOU and DID NOT HELP YOU LEARNING ENGLISH. And WHAT SUGGESTIONS YOU HAVE FOR THE TEACHERS—how would you like them to change. Please separate your comments for JHS teachers and HS teachers. Try to write in English mostly but Japanese is OK when you do not know the English. Your ideas and opinions are the most important. Your name will be kept private and all comments given anonymously. Thank you.