

Perspectives

***JALT Journal* Turns 30: A Retrospective Look at the First Three Decades**

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With the *JALT Journal* having entered its fourth decade, this retrospective of the first 30 volumes surveys some aspects of papers published in the journal, including characteristics regarding research methodology, research focus, and pedagogical level, as well as several other factors. Results of the review of 297 articles revealed that the publication has mirrored other journals in applied linguistics by adopting an empirical focus with quantitative methods being used in most of the published studies. The primary research focus was language teaching pedagogy; however, other areas receiving attention in the first three decades were pragmatics, motivation, and test reliability, with these three appearing prominently in the latter half of the 30 volumes.

JALTジャーナルが第二世代に入ったことにあたり、第一号から30号まで回顧し、掲載論文の幾つかの特徴を検証する。その特徴は研究方法論、研究の焦点、そのほかの諸点における教育学のレベルに関するものである。297編の論文を調べた結果、本ジャーナルは応用言語学の分野で、これは最近の傾向である定性的研究ではなく、定量的研究アプローチを使った研究が大部分であり、それらが実証的側面重視の立場を取ることであり、他の研究誌と重なっていることが明らかになった。当然想定されることであったが、JALTジャーナルの第一の研究主眼は語学教育学ではあるものの、第一世代の諸論文は語用論、動機論、試験の信頼性にも関心を注ぎ、この三つのテーマは第二世代の諸論文においても目だた取り上げられている。本再検討はまたJALTジャーナルのユニークな特徴を構成する要素に深く関係するいくつかの側面にも光を当てている。

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As in any field, language teaching has witnessed change and growth over the past generation with new approaches, frameworks, methodologies, theories, and trends. The shift in approach from the audio-lingual teaching method to more communicative-oriented teaching is just one of many examples of change within the language teaching field. Naturally, teachers and researchers have followed these shifts, although, as one would expect, the situation in Japan has developed its own individual characteristics.

The publication of the 30th volume of the *JALT Journal* in 2008, marking the end of the journal's third decade, appears to be an appropriate occasion to look back at the nature of the journal's first generation of research publications in order both to describe its distinctiveness and to suggest where the patterns that have emerged may be leading.

Other similar published studies have acted as a guide to the type of description and trend spotting that we attempt in this paper. With regard to reviews of research methodology, Lazaraton (2000) surveyed four prominent applied linguistics journals over a 7-year period in the 1990s, examining 332 published articles. Her findings revealed there was considerable focus on quantitative research with 88% of the studies following this methodology while only 10% were qualitative. However, Gao, Li, and Lu (2001), in a comparison of Chinese and Western language learning journals, noted that in the four Western journals they surveyed from 1985 to 1997, the number of studies using quantitative research methods went from over four times that of qualitative approaches at the outset to roughly equal numbers by 1997. More recently, Ellis (2006) noted the increasing number of qualitative articles being published in the journal he edits, *Language Teaching Research*. In his own small-scale survey of 25 empirical articles in the journal under his watch, he found that only 24% of the studies were quantitative while 76% were "interpretive," although some of the latter included descriptive statistics. A similar shift is noted by Magnan (2005) who, as editor of *The Modern Language Journal*, surveyed research articles in the same journal. Magnan revealed that from 1996 to 2005, research articles comprised 82% of the published papers, while 18% were essays. Among the research articles, 74% were quantitative and 20% were qualitative with the remainder a combination of the two. A decade earlier, quantitative studies accounted for 93% of papers. Most recently, Benson, Chik, Gao, Huang, & Wang (2009), in a survey of 2202 research articles in 10 leading international teaching and learning journals from 1997 to 2006 found that 22% could be classified as using qualitative research. Benson, et al. do comment that this percent-

age should not be compared to Lazaraton (2000) or Gao et al. (2001) above because both of these considered only empirical articles at the outset, while Benson et al. included all types of articles, both empirical and nonempirical. While qualitative research appears to be finding wider acceptance in international journals within the field, it is worth noting a recent review by Richards (2009) which “revealed no evidence of a continuing expansion of [qualitative research] papers published in leading journals in our field, but the new millennium has seen consolidation to a point where its position seems secure” (p. 167), a perspective echoed by Dörnyei’s (2007) claim that “applied linguistics has been offering an increasingly level playing field for both QUAN and QUAL approaches” (p. 36).

Research methodology, however is just one of many facets that define the nature of articles in a journal. Other variables include the origin and nationality of authors. Magnan (2005), for example, in the same study mentioned above, noted an increase in the percentage of non-U.S.A.-based authors with a concurrent increase in articles authored by researchers from other parts of the world, reflecting an increasing number of submissions from countries other than the United States.

Other categories that appear worthy of consideration when surveying a journal’s collection of articles include:

- the level at which the research is focused (e.g., primary, secondary, tertiary)
- the topic under study (e.g., pragmatics, motivation)

Thus, the primary purpose of the present study is to survey each of the main articles in *JALT Journal*’s first 30 volumes in order to classify and summarize its nature while identifying patterns and trends which may shed light on where language teaching research in Japan is headed.

Method

The first 30 volumes of *JALT Journal* were examined focusing on four main areas:

- author’s nationality (Japanese or non-Japanese)
- research methodology (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods plus instruments and statistical tests)
- level (elementary, secondary, tertiary, or other)
- primary topic focus

Only the 297 full-length articles were assessed in the survey, including papers in the *Research Forum* and *Perspectives* sections. Other sections,

such as *Book Reviews* and *Point-to-Point* articles, were not included. While determining how to classify each article with regard to the above rubrics may appear straightforward, various nuances appeared in the course of the evaluation. Accordingly, we first independently scored two randomly selected volumes of *JALT Journal* under the categories listed above and then compared our classifications for consistency. After some negotiation, a taxonomy was established and a systematic scheme of data entry was decided.

The following conditions were set:

- Author nationality was determined by assessing first and family names. In a few cases where ambiguity arose, e.g., a non-Japanese first name but a Japanese family name, the author was deemed Japanese. In the case of multiple authors where there were both Japanese and non-Japanese names, the paper was classified under both nationalities.¹
- The methodology used in a paper was determined to be quantitative if numerical results played a role in the findings.
- The methodology used in a paper was determined to be qualitative if recognizable approaches, such as interviews, discourse or conversational analysis, observations, and documentary or transcript analysis, were employed.
- If elements of the above two methods were used, the methodological approach utilized by the author(s) was defined as a mixed methods approach.
- In order to give each paper equal weight only one central topic focus of each paper was determined, even though some papers could be viewed as having two central points. For example, in one paper (in Volume 15.2) concerning the evaluation of written errors by Japanese teachers of English and assistant (native English speaking) language teachers, the author's concern was with both the errors and native/nonnative teachers assessment differences. We determined the latter of these to be the main focus. In these few cases, the title usually helped in making the decision.
- Papers were categorized according to their particular teaching context—was the focus of the paper on issues related to primary, secondary, or tertiary education, or had the author(s) adopted a general stance?

Results and Discussion

In this section, we discuss prominent patterns and trends emerging from the database of 297 *JALT Journal* articles published between 1978 and 2008. Although many of the patterns and trends arose out of numerical counts within the categories we chose to explore, we will also bring to light qualitative information that has characterized research papers in *JALT Journal's* first 30 years. While a 30-year period can be divided into several possible periods (e.g., 5- or 10-year periods), most of the analysis below focuses on *JALT Journal's* first and second halves (i.e., Volumes 1-15 and Volumes 16-30). We chose this time span because it appears to best illustrate some of the major trends we explore. However, finer gradations could result in a better understanding of the trends, and in some places we mention this. The tables and figures also illustrate these finer trends in time.

Nationality

Figure 1 shows a marked increase in the number of papers from Japanese authors. Some of this increase may be due to the existence of American graduate schools in Japan conferring degrees in TESOL, as well as the increase in the number of graduate distance education programs offered by universities in the United Kingdom and Australia. The recent move in Japanese universities requiring teaching staff to apply for grants and publish research in refereed journals may be another factor.

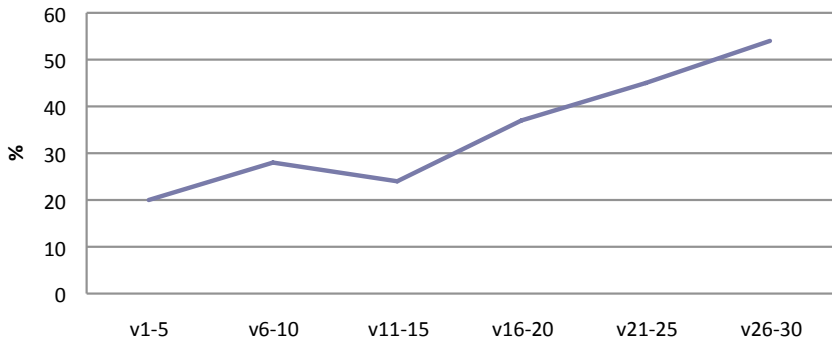


Figure 1. Japanese Authors by Percentage

Empirical Versus Nonempirical

As applied linguistics has become established as a field of scientific study, the expectations for producing findings from empirical studies has grown. Figure 2 graphically reflects this move towards a greater emphasis on experimental, or at least data-producing, studies. Underscoring this trend, Lazaraton (2005) notes that in the 1970s and 1980s, research in applied linguistics underwent a significant move towards quantitative studies. Gao, et al. (2001) noted a similar trend in their study.

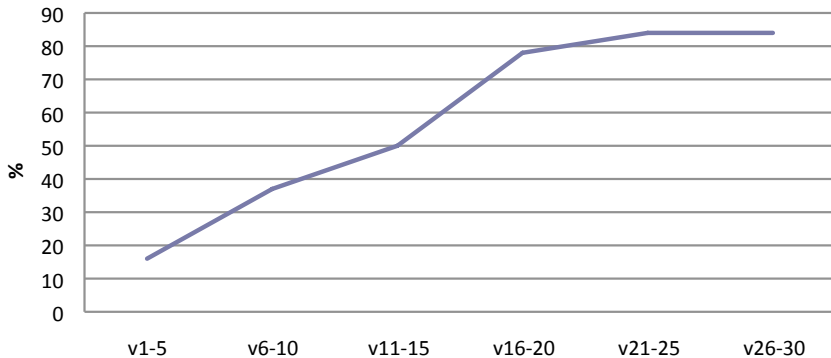


Figure 2. Percentage of Empirical Studies in Volumes 1-30

Concurrently, nonempirical articles, which can include theory-building studies, classroom techniques, critiques, and reviews, among other types of papers, have witnessed a notable decline. In the first 15 years of *JALT Journal*, nonempirical articles ($n = 72$) accounted for 63% of papers while in the past 15 years, they have accounted for only 23% ($n = 43$). In the past 8 years that figure has dropped even further to 19% ($n = 16$). Half of these appeared in the *Perspectives* section, which seems to serve as a venue for nonempirical papers.

Of particular interest among nonempirical studies is the large number of *teaching technique* pieces which appeared in the early volumes. These *how to* pieces, which included step-by-step instructions for classroom pedagogy, virtually disappeared in *JALT Journal*'s second 15 years with none appearing in the past 7 years. This move away from practical pieces towards empirical studies may reflect a natural maturation of the journal towards theory and research. There may also have been recognition amongst the journal's contributing demographic that applied or pragmatic pieces were more suitable