

Shogakko university English course: Needs analysis from the perspective of pre-service teachers

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Beginning in 2011, all fifth- and sixth-grade students in Japanese elementary schools must complete 35 hours of compulsory English. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology has stipulated that homeroom teachers, rather than language teaching specialists, will carry out instruction in elementary schools. Many current and pre-service teachers are unprepared for this role. Significant research with in-service teachers has been carried out, by both the government and independent researchers. However, pre-service teachers have not been included in data collection until now. Two groups of pre-service teachers ($n = 14$, $n = 19$) were surveyed regarding their perceptions of and confidence in English teaching in elementary school. Results suggest that educational background, particularly in English, may play an important role in what pre-service teachers perceive as relevant to preparing for their future career.

2011年度より公立小学校の高学年において『外国語活動』が必修化される。指導者に関して9割以上が担任教師であるといった文科省の調査結果からも、小学校英語教育では「指導者養成の必要性」や「現職教員への研修の充実」が課題として挙げられてきた。このような背景から、これまで「現職教員」や民間の「児童英語指導者」を対象とした指導者養成に関する意識調査の研究が行われてきたが、小学校教員養成課程に在籍する大学生を対象とした研究は十分に行われてきたとは言いがたい。必修化が決定した今、卒業と同時に、新規採用教員として小学校英語教育に携わっていく大学生に対する教員養成も急務の課題であるといえよう。本研究では、小学校教員養成課程に在籍する大学生 ($n=19$) と中学・高校英語教員免許取得志望者を含む英語を専攻している大学生 ($n=14$) を対象とした「小学校英語活動」に関する意識調査を実施した。ここで明らかになった大学生の認識の違いは、かれらの専門や学習環境などとの関連性がみられた。これら分析結果を基に、今後大学における小学校英語教育を視野に入れた教員養成のあり方について検討していく。

IN APRIL 2011, with the addition of a language learning component to elementary school, all levels of Japanese education will have compulsory language learning curricula. The addition of language curricula to elementary school teaching, however, has created a number of issues that current as well as new teachers will have to resolve. Up to the present, Japanese teachers of English (JTE) and native speaking Assistant Language Teachers (ALT) have primarily been employed to carry out language instruction at junior high school and high school in Japan. However, in the elementary school context, homeroom teachers (HRT) are to be the primary instructors of English. In addition to the necessity for current and future HRTs to acquire sufficient English skills, language-teaching skills must also be acquired. Both present and pre-service teacher education will need to integrate these components into current curricula.



Before integration can effectively occur, needs analyses which take pre-service teachers' current educational backgrounds as well as the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) guidelines into consideration should be undertaken.

Background

In 1998, MEXT added a new comprehensive teaching component to the national elementary school curriculum: International understanding (*Kokusai Rikai*). Schools were instructed that within this new component, it was permissible to teach foreign languages (MEXT, 1998). In 2002, MEXT informed all elementary schools that they could begin teaching a foreign language within the comprehensive teaching component added to the national curriculum in 1998. By 2002, more than 50% of Japanese elementary schools reported teaching some English (MEXT, 2003).

In 2006, the Central Education Council (*Chuokyoikushingikai*) (MEXT, 2006) specified that, unlike in high school and junior high school contexts, HRTs should be responsible for English language instruction. However, neither exactly how teachers were to accomplish this new type of instruction nor the potential supporting role of JTEs and ALTs was addressed.

In 2008, MEXT (2008) published survey results suggesting that: 1) more than 97% of elementary schools were teaching English within the foreign language component; 2) more than 90% of the English instruction in elementary school classrooms was being carried out by Japanese national HRTs. Also in 2008, MEXT published its 10-year Curriculum Guidelines for Elementary School Teaching. The guidelines stated that foreign language was a compulsory course: Fifth- and sixth-grade students were expected to study language for one class per week—around 35 hours per year. At the same time, MEXT instructed HRTs and/or JTEs to take charge of constructing

weekly teaching plans.

Research regarding the effect of English instruction curricula in elementary school contexts has been ongoing for nearly a decade. From 2005 to 2008, both public and private English instructors were included in research regarding preparation needs and general teacher perceptions (Hojō & Matsuzaki, 2008; Kanazawa & Ito, 2008; Kobayashi & Miyamoto, 2008).

The results from government surveys suggest that elementary school teachers are concerned about their readiness for language instruction (MEXT, 2005). This concern is easily understood, as many of these teachers have had little or no preparation for this kind of instruction during their university education. Looking ahead to the next generation of teachers, it is important that universities provide adequate opportunities for learning about teaching language to young learners. This paper focuses on the perceptions of pre-service teachers and their concerns regarding readiness for the new elementary school teaching climate.

Aims

Although teachers currently working within Japanese elementary schools have been questioned regarding what they feel is relevant for teaching and learning English at elementary school, similar feedback from pre-service teachers has not been obtained. This paper aims to examine quantitative and qualitative feedback from education students and students interested in education at two universities in Japan.

Methods

Sample

The participants for this needs analysis were students currently enrolled in elementary school English teaching courses at one of two universities (A: $n = 19$; B: $n = 14$) in Kyushu, Japan. Students



enrolled at University A, were third-year students working towards a teaching certificate in elementary school teaching. Students enrolled at University B were third-year students with a wide range of English related interests. Many of the University B students were currently taking courses towards the completion of a teaching license for junior high school or high school. In addition, some of the University B students suggested that they were either currently pursuing or planning to pursue an elementary school license via correspondence.

Instrument

In April 2010, pre-service teachers from two universities (A and B) were asked to voluntarily complete a short survey of their perceptions and expectations with regard to teaching English in Japanese elementary schools. Students from University A majored in education and students from University B majored primarily in international studies. The surveys were distributed and completed during the first class of their elementary school English teaching course. In both of these cases, this was a new course that began that year; courses were optional and aimed at third/fourth-year students. The survey employed was designed as a preliminary needs analysis for courses preparing pre-service elementary school teachers for a new foreign language curriculum. On average, students completed the survey in less than 15 minutes.

Part one of the survey began with six open questions, each with the same stem: With regard to teaching English at elementary schools please write about 1) Your areas of low confidence, 2) Necessary experience, 3) Necessary English skills, 4) Necessary knowledge, 5) Necessary teaching skills, 6) Differences between HRTs' and JTEs' roles. Following these open questions, part two of the survey asked students to rank 12 components related to teaching and teacher development with regard to their relevancy for teaching English at elementary

school: Communication skills, teaching experience, class management, general English knowledge, listening skill, speaking skill, pronunciation, reading skill, writing skill, grammar, going abroad, and other. Part three of the survey asked students to complete a Likert scale of one to five, referring to how often they employed the four skills of English (speaking, listening, reading and writing). Part four of the survey asked students to rank the same 12 components listed in part two based on their lack of confidence in their current abilities. Students were instructed to rank only those skills in which they felt under-confident.

Results and discussion

This section will proceed by presenting the students' ranking of teachers' needs (part two of the survey), as contained in Table 1 below. Explanations and comparisons of the two groups' perceptions will be supported by students' answers to the open-ended questions from part one of the survey. Students' open-ended answers were originally in Japanese, but have been translated into English here.

Table 1. Pre-service teachers' ranking of elementary school teachers' "needs" to be successful teaching English within the new curriculum

Teacher component	Ranking	
	University A	University B
Communication skill	1	1
Teaching experience	5	2
Class management	4	2
Knowledge	7	3
Listening skill	3	3
Speaking skill	2	4



Teacher component	Ranking	
	University A	University B
Pronunciation	3	5
Reading skill	6	6
Writing skill	7	7
Grammar	8	7
Going abroad	9	8
Others (e.g., interesting)		9

Note: Where the teacher components tied in ranking, they were attributed the same rank.

As Table 1 shows, students from both institutions (A and B) perceived communication skills to be the most important component for elementary school teachers to be successful English instructors. This reflects the fact that the students are clearly aware of the fact that MEXT has stipulated communication to be the primary objective of the elementary school foreign language curriculum:

[The overall objective of foreign language activities is] to form the foundation of pupils' communication abilities through foreign languages while developing the understanding of languages and cultures through various experiences, fostering a positive attitude toward communication, and familiarizing pupils with the sounds and basic expressions of foreign languages. (MEXT, 2010, p. 1)

In addition, Student A-1 noted the necessity of basic communication skills for being able to "say what you think and understand what others have to say."

Reading and writing skills, grammar and experience abroad were all ranked the least important by both Students A and B. These results also clearly reflect the general MEXT guide-

lines, which exclusively isolate "oral" communication as the language learning goal of instruction. Reflecting the relative unimportance of grammar, writing and reading, Student A-4 remarked that "we will not be teaching very difficult English to our students, so there is no need to be competent with complex grammar or advanced skills." Student A-5 similarly remarked that "there is no need to teach the details of grammar or general English skills. Instead, we should be teaching the expressions, like self-introduction, necessary for easy communication." Finally, Student A-6 remarked that "rather than English skills in general, we should be focusing on speaking skills specifically."

It is understandable that students would perceive reading, writing and grammar skills as less important in light of MEXT's guidelines; however, as the guidelines clearly state the overarching goals to be "developing the understanding of languages and cultures through various experiences" (MEXT, 2010, p. 1), it is surprising that students vest so little importance in experience abroad. In an environment within which HRTs are expected to be the primary instructor, it is difficult to imagine them as effectively aiding students in developing such an understanding without some first-hand experience of their own. Where the student comments supported their low ranking of grammar, writing and reading, some of their comments reflected a different perspective with regard to the importance of experience abroad for elementary school teachers. Student A-8 remarked that "experience going abroad and speaking to foreigners is important I think." Student A-13 also placed significant importance on such experience stating, "it is necessary for teachers to go abroad and learn proper pronunciation and English use, as well as speak directly to foreigners in their own country."

The difference in the two student groups surveyed is clear in what they ranked as the next most important component for elementary school teachers. Following communication skills, University A students felt that speaking, pronunciation and lis-



tening skills were the most relevant. This is in direct accordance with the teaching guidelines, which state that one of the aims of foreign language curricula is “To become familiar with the sounds and rhythms of the foreign language...” (MEXT, 2010, p. 1). University A’s students, in preparing explicitly to become elementary school teachers, are familiar with these aims and as such perceive speaking, listening and pronunciation skills to be very important. Student A-2’s lack of confidence with regard to pronunciation was highlighted in the comment that “I have little confidence in my pronunciation/accents; within elementary school, English pronunciation is particularly important.” Student A-4 stated that “for the children, rather than thinking about the structure of language, they will copy us, so pronunciation is particularly important.”

The difference in the two groups is again highlighted by University B students’ perceptions of teaching experience, classroom management and general English knowledge as the next most important components, following communication skills, while University A students felt these were only of middling importance. University B students’ perspective is a departure from MEXT’s objectives, and reflects the students’ university English learning experience. As students from institution B were generally majoring in an area related to English, they had regularly studied listening, speaking and pronunciation. Their casual experiences with these components likely led them to see the possession of these skills as assumed for new teachers. In addition, they reflected on their own reasons for studying English and pursuing it as a field of study at university, and surmised that teaching quality itself was of significant importance. As student B-2 stated, “It is important for the children to have fun, and we must ensure that when they proceed to junior high school and high school English, they have not developed an ‘allergy’ to English.” From this student’s perspective, the quality of the teaching plays a greater role in ensuring that students enjoy English and that teachers “foster a positive attitude toward com-

munication” (MEXT, 2010). Student B-1 had a different reason for feeling these components were relevant, stating that “most elementary school teachers have not studied about English, so it is particularly important that they are confident in their teaching skills.” This student suggests that teaching skills may make up for some lack in English knowledge.

Part four of the survey asked students to again rank the same 12 teacher development components, based on their areas of under-confidence (Table 2).

Table 2. Pre-service teachers’ ranking and number of times they marked areas of under-confidence

Teacher components	University A		University B	
	Ranking	Marked	Ranking	Marked
Pronunciation	1	18 (95%)	3	7 (50%)
Communication skill	1	13 (68%)	1	8 (57%)
Speaking skill	2	17 (90%)	1	10 (71%)
Class management	2	19 (100%)	1	8 (57%)
Listening skill	3	14 (74%)	4	9 (64%)
Teaching experience	3	18 (95%)	3	9 (64%)
Knowledge	4	19 (100%)	2	6 (43%)
Grammar	5	14 (74%)	5	10 (71%)
Reading skill	5	13 (68%)	2	9 (64%)
Writing skill	6	14 (74%)	2	7 (50%)
Experience abroad	7	16 (84%)	1	7 (50%)

Note: Rankings are from least confident (1 being the least). Components in which students felt they were sufficiently confident were not ranked. “Marking” refers to how many times the component was chosen as an area of under-confidence. The percentages are the portion of the entire group which selected that component as an area of under-confidence.



The overlap across the two student groups with regards to confidence is relatively clear. Communication skills, which are the primary skill students perceived as being necessary for English teachers, is an area both groups of students seemed to lack confidence in. One might presume that the overlap in speaking skills stems from a similar source of concern. Student A-17's comment reflects this lack of confidence: "If a teacher has never communicated using English, then teaching children will be difficult, I think." Class management skills is an unusual source of under-confidence, which might be explained by the fact that students may be daunted by facing up to forty children in a future English teaching context. Student A-2's comment brings this concern to the forefront: "When I actually become an elementary school teacher, I am not sure what to be careful about and how to handle students in the classroom." The primary difference in the two student groups' responses was that group A seemed to have generally checked off all of the areas available on the survey as a source of under-confidence. Group B was more selective and in many cases only checked half of the components as sources of confidence concern. Group B's apparent relative English confidence—*noted earlier*—is likely due to their greater prior experience learning English during university.

Conclusions and suggestions

Both university groups felt that communication skills were the most important for teachers within the new language curriculum. Conversely they felt that experience abroad and grammar skills were not particularly important.

Student group A felt speaking, pronunciation and listening to be especially important. These are all oral communication related English skills which are directly tied into the component seen as the most important: communication. These students, as education majors, have not had sufficient opportunity to use and learn English. They therefore see English skill itself, particu-

larly oral English as this is what MEXT has focused upon, as a major barrier to becoming a good teacher.

Student group B stated that following communication skills, teaching experience, classroom management and general English knowledge were the most important components. These students have had a reasonable amount of experience with English and therefore have moved beyond English as the primary requirement for new teachers. These students saw experience as being what they needed in order to function effectively as a teacher in this new environment.

These results suggest that the amount and type of prior university English learning opportunities students have had strongly affects expectations and perceptions of teaching in the future. University students of all types of backgrounds aim to become elementary school teachers. Some students return to university after graduation to complete courses for elementary school licenses. For university educators preparing these students, it seems important to take these backgrounds into consideration and ensure that students understand the range of skills necessary to effectively teach English to elementary school students. It is important to encourage students to reflect on what they see as vital for their prospective career. University educators' role should include providing students with some balance to ensure that their areas of under-confidence are not negatively affecting their understanding of the demands of becoming an elementary school teacher. The sample examined here is small, which means that the results should be treated with caution. However, they appear to suggest that student group A's relative lack of English experience may be focusing their concerns on English itself rather than on the practice of teaching it. These students are nearing the end of their university experience and have already participated in internships at various elementary schools. As a result, one would expect them to value the essential teaching experience and skills necessary to join their chosen profession.



This short paper can only contribute a few small suggestions as well as highlight concerns, which may appear self-evident.

1) If university students are to be effectively prepared to teach English as a compulsory subject, then they need to have adequate English skills to begin with. This means expanding both the quantity of teaching-learning hours as well as the range of courses to include topics such as pronunciation/phonics into current university curricula. 2) University educators need to be aware of and account for the range of backgrounds which students preparing to become elementary school teachers may have. 3) Finally, the guidelines (MEXT, 2008a, 2010) which MEXT has produced in support of its new elementary school curriculum seem to be somewhat lacking in focus. Students are often unsure about exactly what they will be teaching and how they might be most effective. One student (A-5) reflecting this concern stated explicitly that “within English activities (*Eigo Katsudo*) I really don’t know what I should be doing, I am concerned.” With stronger words, Student A-6 questioned, “Is it enough to just have fun classes, and teach nothing?”

Future directions

It seems relevant to briefly outline a few areas that are in need of further research, especially as the April 2011 due date for the beginning of these curricula draws closer. Future research should follow students from pre-service into their new positions and examine the challenges they face in the first few years of their teaching. Also, in order to effectively expand the types of English courses available for pre-service teachers, curricular development research will be necessary. Currently, there is a range of education universities, each with its own strengths in this field, but little inter-university research has been embarked upon. If strong pre-service English curricula are to be created, each of these institutions must be drawn into a Japan-wide effort for the benefit of students and teachers everywhere.

MEXT has stated clearly that “communication abilities” is the goal of the upcoming elementary school curricula; however, MEXT has failed to clearly describe what they mean by communication abilities. Students participating in this study had a range of conceptions of communication. It seems likely that if MEXT fails to clarify the goal of the imminent curricula, then misunderstandings on the part of teachers and students alike may interfere with future learning outcomes.

Bio data

Kaori Nakao has a Masters in Education from Seinan Gakuin University. Her primary research has been Shogakko English teaching. She is also interested in learner motivation and English learning within Japanese university environments. Her recent focus has been on pre-service elementary school teacher education.

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