Shared Identities: Our Interweaving Threads

Elementary school students' beliefs about their EFL classes

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This study addresses the growing need for EFL research at the elementary school level. In 2002, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) created the Period of Integrated Study at the elementary school level under which schools offered foreign language activities with the expected outcome of positive motivation and attitudes of students (MEXT, 1998). As Japan prepares to implement compulsory English language activities at public elementary schools in 2011 (MEXT, 2008), an understanding of elementary school students' beliefs is necessary as a reflection of current policy as well as to better inform future educational decisions. The results of this investigation of 1,208 Japanese public elementary school students from the same school district ranging from grades 3 through 6 showed 3rd-grade students liked English while each subsequent upper grade liked English to a significantly lesser degree. Secondly, all grades generally found little use for English as a means of communication. Lastly, however, results showed that all grades strongly identified with the importance of English and their English classes.

本研究では、小学校レベルでのEFL研究の必要性について取り上げる。２００２年より、文部科学省は小学校で「総合的な学習の時間」を導入し、外国語及び外国の文化に慣れ親しむという位置づけで「外国語活動」を取り入れた（文部科学省、１９９８）。２０１１年から小学校英語必修化に向け（文部科学省、２００８）、小学生の信条を理解することは現在の言語教育政策の内省及び今後の教育的判断を行う上で必須である。日本の公立学校の同じ学区に通う小学生１，２０８名（３年生-６年生）を対象に調査を実施したところ、３年次は英語に対するおもしろさが動機づけの理由となっていたのに対し、学年が上がるにつれ有意差が見られなかった。第二に、全ての学年においてコミュニケーション手段としての英語使用に関しては中立だった。しかし、最後に、すべての学年において英語クラスの重要性が強い動機づけの要因となっていることが判明した。

Elementary EFL policy and motivation

As part of reform measures which took effect in 2002, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) created the Period for Integrated Study under which the following three areas of study were introduced at the elementary school level: international

understanding, information technology, and environment, welfare and health (MEXT, 1998).

Under international understanding, foreign language lessons were offered as a way to introduce students to culture and foreign language communication. Each school was allowed to decide precisely how many hours to offer, what the content of the lessons would contain, and how the language classes were to be conducted (MEXT, 2003). The expected outcome was the motivation and attitudes of students:

> It is important that experiential learning activities that are suitable for elementary school students are carried out, and that the *motivation and attitude* [emphasis added] for children to communicate positively is fostered by providing children with exposure to foreign language conversation in an enjoyable manner, and by familiarizing them with foreign cultures and ways of living. (MEXT, 2003, Section 5, ¶ 2)

From 2011, 5th and 6th-grade elementary school students will receive 35 hours of compulsory English classes per year. English will be designated as an activity rather than a subject, and thus, unlike compulsory subjects, it will not be evaluated or need to meet any formal standards; these compulsory hours only need to aspire to promote foreign language communication, cultural understanding and a deeper connection to the Japanese culture all while fostering students' positive attitude (MEXT, 2008). Thus, positive student motivation and attitudes have been the predominant benchmarks for Japanese elementary school EFL classes since their formal inception in 2002.

EFL motivation research at Japanese elementary schools

A review of SLA research in Japan conducted by Cornwell, Maeda, and Churchill (2007), which focused on studies published between 2000 and 2006, found only two articles that contained research conducted at the elementary school level. Aline and Hosoda (2006) focused on team-teaching between Japanese homeroom teachers and assistant language teachers, and Carreira (2006) focused on the motivation of 3rd and 6th-grade elementary school students.

The questionnaire used in Carreira (2006) investigated to what degree the students were motivated to learn English. She followed the socio-educational theory proposed by Gardner (1985) which is based upon measuring integrative and instrumental motivation. Integrative motivation is having a positive attitude toward the people and the culture of the language and the desire to integrate into the group. Instrumental motivation involves what the language will bring to the learner, e.g., higher pay or the ability to pass an examination. Of the two, integrative motivation is often said to be more valuable to language learning success. However, the socio-educational theory has been questioned by researchers of motivation with regard to the difference between ESL and ELF settings. Dornyei found the desire to "integrate" to the foreign language community was "partly instrumental and only partly integrative in (foreign language learning) contexts" (1990, p. 69). Moreover, "there is no constant definition of integrative motivation across studies" (Crookes & Schmidt, 1991, p. 475). It has also been said that the socio-educational model does not account for individual differences, course-specific motivational factors, and teacher

influence. (see Dornyei, 1994; Williams & Burden, 1997), and its relationship to the Japanese context (see Norris-Holt, 2001; Nakata, 2006).

Any EFL motivation study that asks elementary school students to answer why they study English assumes that the students have chosen to study English and are aware of the reasons and outcomes of foreign language study, such as the integrative and instrumental orientations explained above. Thus, I believe the questionnaire used by Carreira (2006) was inappropriate for 9 and 12-year-olds. Though students are often accommodating and answer survey items as directed, if the research instrument does not match the participants then the research instrument cannot be said to be valid. Thus, the ensuing results become questionable.

Secondly, Carreira indicated her study intended to investigate the motivational factors of elementary school students' EFL study and "their developmental trends" (2006, p. 141), and she later stated her results supported "developmental declines in both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation" between grade levels (2006, p. 151). Carreira acquired data from her participants only once. Such a cross-sectional research design cannot be interpreted as signifying any sort of trend, and it cannot be the basis for any generalizations. Thus, it is misleading to suggest that Japanese children's intrinsic or extrinsic motivation decreases with age over time when the only true finding is that one group of students' motivation is less than another group's.

A student belief approach

Rather than attempt to classify elementary school students motivational orientations, e.g. using the socio-educational approach of integrative or instrumental orientations, I believe elementary school students' beliefs about their foreign language classes are more important, especially at this juncture in Japan's foreign language education. Research with Hungarian EFL elementary school students showed that they did not have integrative or instrumental orientations, but rather positive intrinsic motivation and achievement if they found the classroom activities "worth the trouble", i.e., valuable (Nikolov, 1999, p. 53). In order to investigate students' beliefs, I based my study on the task-value approach to motivation in education defined by Eccles and Wigfield (1995).

The task-value approach focuses on four components: attainment value, intrinsic value, utility value and cost (Eccles, 1987). Attainment value is defined as the importance to do well (Eccles & Wigfield, 1995). However, because current ELF policy in the Japanese elementary school context does not refer to language attainment, i.e., achievement, or evaluate student progress, attainment value cannot be directly associated with Japanese EFL classes. Yet I do believe it is valid to ask students if they believe it is important to have English language classes. Therefore, I have included importance in this study as a topic of study as opposed to achieving an ability in English.

Eccles and Wigfield (1995, p. 216) defined intrinsic value as "the inherent enjoyment or pleasure one gets from engaging in an activity". This component of the task-value approach is valid to the current study, and thus, was included.

Utility value is associated with students' obtaining long-term and short-term goals (Eccles & Wigfield, 1995). This value is not included within the current Japanese elementary EFL policy. However, the use of English is expected to occur and to be fostered through English language communication activities (MEXT, 2008). Therefore, use as associated with participant desire to use English was included in this study.

Eccles and Wigfield defined cost as prohibitive anxiety and the "anticipated cost of failure" (1995, p. 216). The school administrator in charge of this study believed it was unnecessary to investigate anxiety because she felt anxiety was not valid in the elementary school context, and so an investigation of student anxiety was not included.

Eccles and Wigfield (1995) empirically showed that upper elementary school students are able to differentiate among the four values described above. Wigfield (1994) found that early elementary school students viewed importance and use as a single factor, but were able to differentiate between it and interest. Furthermore, both of these studies also showed that from the first grade, students showed a distinct understanding between ability-related beliefs and task-value judgments (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000).

Based upon the above findings, I believed 3rd to 6th-grade students would be able to differentiate my chosen areas of inquiry. Thus, the research questions addressed in this study were:

1. To what degree do Japanese elementary school students like English?

2. To what degree do Japanese elementary school students value the use of English?

3. To what degree do Japanese elementary school students think English is important?

4. Is there a difference among grade levels in response to research questions 1, 2, and 3?

Method

Participants

All participants were Japanese students from 11 public elementary schools in the same school district in Tokyo. The 1,208 students ranged from the third to the sixth grade (ages of 9 to 12) and received English language lessons as part of their regular class schedule. Lessons were conducted jointly by a homeroom teacher and a native English speaking assistant language teacher. As per an agreement of anonymity made with the school district, a description of the English language program cannot be provided. Table 1 shows the participant information by grade and by gender.

Table 1. Participant data by grade and gender

	Boys	**Girls**	**Total**
Grade 3	168	154	322
Grade 4	124	153	277
Grade 5	137	124	261
Grade 6	181	167	348
Total	610	598	1,208

Instrument

The questionnaire contained 17 questions, and participants responded to a four-point Likert-type scale. Participants were asked to respond to what degree each statement represented them from *matches me, kind of matches me, does not really match me,* and *does not match me at all*. Five of the 17 items were related to activity types, and these five items also had a fifth option outside of the four-point Likert-type scale which was *haven't done it, so I don't know*. Students were directed to choose this fifth statement only if they did not participate in an activity or could not recall doing so in order to avoid missing data or data that may have misrepresented some participants.

Two Japanese teachers, both with experience in academic research as well as with young Japanese learners, did independent translations of the English version of the survey. A third Japanese teacher then reviewed and combined both translations to ensure each item would be readable and understandable for Japanese children ages 9 to 12. The school district administrator in charge of this study also added items 12 to 17 which specifically targeted class content. The administrator also formatted the final Japanese version of the survey (see Appendix for English and Japanese versions).

Procedures

Written instructions in Japanese were provided to homeroom teachers asking them to administer the questionnaire to their students. The instructions explained the importance of the project and the need for consistency in how the questionnaire was to be administered. A clear step-by-step procedure

was included. Permission to conduct this research with the participation of public elementary school children was granted by the school district administrator.

Results

This study investigated students' personal views of their EFL class activities and of English in general.

Table 2 shows the mean (*M*) and standard deviation (*SD*) for each item by grade and for all participants (*matches me*=1; *does not match me at all*=4). Some items, most notably Item 10 *I am confident in using English*, are not normally distributed, or in other words, skewed; that is, a majority of the students all responded in similar fashion either positively, or in this case, negatively. Such extremes, although not a surprise when they occur on Likert-type questions regarding motivation, can prohibit the use of statistical analyses; however, for factor analysis and analysis of variance (ANOVA) (the analyses carried out in this study) normality is "not always required for analysis" and "in a large sample, a variable with statistically significant skewness often does not deviate enough from normality to make a substantive difference in analysis" (Tabachinick & Fidell, 2001, p. 74).

Factor analysis identifies the relationships among observed questionnaire items and reduces them into definable groups (or factors). This process of empirical reduction first confirms if the constructs under investigation, i.e., intrinsic motivation, use and importance, exists among the questionnaire items, and second, allows for subsequent statistical analyses and discussion to be based upon

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for questionnaire items by grade

Item	3rd grade (n=322)		4th grade (n=277)		5th grade (n=261)		6th grade (n=348)		All (n=1208)	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
1	1.70	0.85	1.89	0.90	1.98	0.94	2.00	0.90	1.89	0.90
2	1.69	0.88	1.86	0.91	1.93	0.95	2.19	0.91	1.92	0.93
3	1.33	0.66	1.40	0.74	1.49	0.77	1.38	0.69	1.39	0.71
4	1.97	0.94	2.15	0.98	2.28	0.95	2.42	0.96	2.21	0.97
5	2.27	1.06	2.57	1.09	2.52	1.01	2.83	0.98	2.56	1.05
6	2.03	1.06	2.13	1.07	2.15	1.03	2.22	0.94	2.14	1.03
7	2.09	1.16	2.47	1.29	2.41	1.13	2.46	1.18	2.35	1.20
8	1.95	1.04	2.17	1.08	2.08	1.00	2.11	0.99	2.08	1.03
9	1.55	0.82	1.69	0.93	1.72	0.97	1.66	0.91	1.65	0.91
10	2.35	1.02	2.73	1.01	2.79	0.89	2.94	0.93	2.70	0.99
11	1.38	0.67	1.38	0.70	1.41	0.68	1.35	0.64	1.38	0.67
12	1.70	0.95	2.04	1.01	2.24	0.99	2.36	1.04	2.08	1.03
13	1.33	0.69	1.55	0.88	1.61	0.86	1.98	0.94	1.63	0.88
14	1.96	0.95	2.08	1.01	2.18	0.97	2.37	0.94	2.15	0.98
15	1.89	0.91	2.16	1.06	2.15	0.95	2.32	0.98	2.13	0.99
16	2.26	1.06	2.44	1.09	2.26	1.03	2.58	0.99	2.40	1.05
17	1.89	1.02	2.05	1.10	2.36	1.06	2.21	1.06	2.12	1.07

Note: M = mean. SD = Standard Deviation. matches me = 1, kind of matches me = 2, does not really match me = 3, does not match me at all = 4

such unobservable constructs. For a quick illustration of the dilemma posed by this set of questionnaire items, questionnaire Item 5, for example, states *I like to talk to foreigners*. Is this statement related to intrinsic motivation, use or importance? Did the participants view it in the same way? Among the other items, is it clearly related to a subset of them or not? Factor analysis answers such questions for each observed item and shows its relationship to other items. However, prior to running a factor analysis, items must be correlated, especially in the case of large sample sizes; item correlations for this questionnaire were checked and found to be strong (Tabachinick & Fidell, 2001).

The questionnaire items fell into three different groups (or factors) as expected, yet in order to accept the three factors their eigenvalues were checked to see if they met the traditional 1.0 cut-off point. Factors 1, 2, and 3 met the cut-off point with the respective eigenvalues of 7.929, 1.215, and 1.049. A scree investigation confirmed that three factors were best due to the flattening out of the curve after the third factor.

To clarify the interpretation of the factor analysis, a statistical rotation was done. Oblique rotation assumes that factors are related as opposed to not being related at all (Tabachinick & Fidell, 2001) and because I believed intrinsic motivation, use and importance were related, an oblique rotation was conducted. After rotation, each factor produced an acceptable to high internal consistency Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient of α=.89, α=.86, and α=.77, respectively; that is, the items on each factor were measuring the same thing making each factor reliable.

The results of the factor analysis of the questionnaire are in Table 3 and are sorted by factor; the numbers to the left of each item refer to the original position of each item on the questionnaire. Items were grouped under the following factors:

- Items 1, 2, 4, 12, 13, 14, and 15 are clearly related to liking English, the English class and various English activities. Thus, Factor 1 was labeled as Intrinsic Motivation.

- Items 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, and 16 are related to using English as a tool of communication, i.e., talking; thus, Factor 2 was labeled as Use.

- Items 3, 9, and 11 reflect the importance of English and the desire to have the ability to use English later in life. Therefore, Factor 3 was labeled as Importance.

The highest factor loading for item 17 (*I like writing English letters*) was on Factor 2 at -.367 after rotation, a much lower and thus weaker result as compared to the other items. Such a result made the item difficult to interpret and was probably due to the vagueness of the statement. Therefore, the item was dropped from analysis. Table 3 shows the results based upon the remaining 16 items, which were nearly identical to the original 17-item solution.

Factors scores for Intrinsic Motivation, Use, and Importance were then calculated by combining all item scores of each respective factor. The results shown in Table 4 were used to answer Research Questions 1, 2, and 3.

Research Question 1 asked: To what degree do students like English? The 3rd-grade students indicated they liked English and their English classes, but each subsequent higher grade had a less positive mean score than the grade before.

Research Question 2 asked: To what degree do students value the use of English? Students from each grade showed a mostly neutral response to this variable with only the 3rd-grade students showing a slightly positive response.

Research Question 3 asked: To what degree do students think English is important? Students from all four grades clearly regarded English as very important.

Table 3. Factor analysis of the survey items

#	Item	Factor 1 Intrinsic Motivation (α=.89)	Factor 2 Use (α=.86)	Factor 3 Importance (α=.77)
1	I like English.	0.572	-0.249	0.148
2	I like our English class.	0.799	-0.017	0.051
4	I want to use more English at school	0.451	-0.271	0.201
12	I like English songs.	0.681	-0.104	-0.018
13	I like games that use English.	0.820	0.209	0.089
14	I like speaking in English.	0.535	-0.380	0.088
15	I like listening to (in) English.	0.589	-0.256	0.099
5	I like to talk to foreigners.	0.149	-0.762	-0.071
6	If a foreigner talked to me on the street, I would talk to him.	-0.117	-0.730	0.180
7	I have used English outside of school.	-0.113	-0.745	0.098
8	I want to use English outside of school.	0.076	-0.459	0.401
10	I am confident in using English.	0.274	-0.658	-0.106
16	I like talking with foreigners in English.	0.282	-0.632	0.022
3	I want to speak English perfectly.	0.144	0.038	0.778
9	Someday, I want to use English in my life everyday.	-0.063	-0.170	0.770
11	I think English is important.	0.075	0.093	0.816

Table 4. Means and standard deviations for each factor by grade

Factor	3rd grade		4th grade		5th grade		6th grade	
	M	**SD**	**M**	**SD**	**M**	**SD**	**M**	**SD**
Intrinsic Motivation	1.75	0.91	1.96	0.99	2.05	0.97	2.24	0.97
Use	2.16	1.07	2.42	1.13	2.37	1.04	2.53	1.05
Importance	1.42	0.73	1.49	0.81	1.54	0.82	1.46	0.77

Research Question 4 asked: Is there a difference among grade levels in response to research questions 1, 2, or 3? In order to find whether significant differences existed or not, multiple one-way ANOVA tests were run. ANOVA tests compare the mean values of variables in order to identify empirically significant differences between groups. However, multiple tests (in this case three for Intrinsic Motivation, Use and Importance) using the same group of participants increases the possibility of finding a significant difference between groups by mere chance alone, which is called a Type I error. In order to avoid such an error, a Bonferroni adjustment was made and the traditional p value of .05 was set to .017 (.05 divided by 3, the total number of multiple tests) (Tabachinick & Fidell, 2001).

Table 5 shows the results the ANOVA by factor. A significant difference was found among grade levels for Intrinsic Motivation, $F (3, 1204) = 26.102, p < .001$, and Use, $F (3, 1204) = 12.212, p < .001$. However, the effect size was very small for each factor, $\eta^2 = .059$ and $\eta^2 = .027$, respectively, which means that grade level accounted for only 5.9% and 2.7% of the difference in the factors of Intrinsic Motivation and Use. The ANOVA indicated no statistically significant difference among grade levels

for Importance, $F (3, 1204) = 1.772, p = .151$. Though a significant difference was found to exist for Intrinsic Motivation and Use, further analyses were necessary to identify where among the grades this significance occurred.

Therefore, post hoc analyses using the Scheffé post hoc criterion for significance were conducted for Intrinsic Motivation and Use. Results showed there was a significant difference among all grades for Intrinsic Motivation, and post hoc analysis for significance among grade levels for Use showed significant differences between 3rd and 4th-grade students and between 3rd and 6th-grade students.

Discussion

This study offers three key points. First, though it was found that 3rd-grade students had higher intrinsic motivation than 6th-grade students, the effect size of this study (see Table 5) was very small, which suggests that the difference between grade levels alone is not responsible for much of this significant finding. In future studies, it would be useful to look at alternative variables such as comparisons between genders, schools or comparisons between classes within schools.

Table 5. One-way analyses of variance for effects of grades by factor

	SS	MS	F (3, 1204)	Sig.	η2
Intrinsic Motivation					
Between Groups	40.836	13.612	26.102*	.000	.059
Within Groups	627.868	.521			
Use					
Between Groups	23.433	7.811	12.212*	.000	.027
Within Groups	770.083	.640			
Importance					
Between Groups	2.156	.719	1.772	.151	
Within Groups	488.232	.406			

*$p < .017$ (.05/3)

Second, students of this study were neutral to the use of English. Since 2002, MEXT policy has promoted English language activities at the elementary school level as opportunities to use English for communicative means, and in 2002, elementary schools were incorporated into the Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme to promote cultural exchange and English language education opportunities for Japanese students (Council of Local Authorities for International Relations, 2006). In addition, most EFL programs also focus on English language use by hiring assistant language teachers and encouraging communicative lessons. Through both policy and program, Japanese governmental agencies have supported opportunities for English language use at the elementary school level. Yet the students of this study did not especially like using

English, did not especially want to use English, and were not especially confident in using English. More than any other outcome of this study, this result should give educators pause. If elementary school students do not find use of the English language valuable, perhaps the current approaches to Japanese public elementary school EFL classes need to be re-addressed. At the very least, a review of the ELF program of this study regarding student language use should be conducted.

Lastly, however, there is great hope. Students of each grade level in this study said English is very important and that they want to use English in their future. Moreover, there was no significant difference among grades concerning importance, so the importance placed on future use of English by the students is irrespective of age, intrinsic motivation or current beliefs about the use of English. This may indicate that the content and/or the delivery of the lessons are the problem. It may also indicate that the students' needs have not been addressed at the curriculum design level.

Conclusion

In this study, I have addressed motivation from the viewpoint of students' beliefs about their EFL classes. From this perspective, I showed that the 3rd-grade participants of this study had greater intrinsic motivation than the upper grades; the majority of students did not view the use of English in a positive or negative way, but were only neutral concerning the use of English; and students, regardless of grade level, believed the English language was very important to them. As a check of EFL policy with regard to motivation and the

desire to use English, these students' EFL program is not yet achieving these aims. However, given how strongly these students believe English is important to them, one can hope that future English language opportunities that they will like and find useful will come their way.

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Acknowledgements

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Appendix 1

Elementary school student beliefs survey (English version)

For statements #1 to #11, fill in the circle for the response that best matches you.

		matches me	kind of matches me	doesn't really match me	doesn't match me
1)	I like English.	○	○	○	○
2)	I like our English class.	○	○	○	○
3)	I want to speak English perfectly.	○	○	○	○
4)	I want to use more English at school.	○	○	○	○
5)	I like to talk to foreigners.	○	○	○	○
6)	If a foreigner talked to me on the street, I would talk to him.	○	○	○	○
7)	I have used English outside of school.	○	○	○	○
8)	I want to use English outside of school.	○	○	○	○
9)	Someday, I want to use English in my life everyday.	○	○	○	○
10)	I am confident in using English.	○	○	○	○
11)	I think English is important.	○	○	○	○

Statements #12 to #17 are in regard to your English class. Fill in the circle for the response that best matches you.

	In English class,…	matches me	kind of matches me	doesn't really match me	doesn't match me	haven't done it, so I don't know
12)	I like English songs.	○	○	○	○	○
13)	I like games that use English.	○	○	○	○	○
14)	I like speaking in English.	○	○	○	○	○
15)	I like listening to (in) English.	○	○	○	○	○
16)	I like talking with foreigners in English.	○	○	○	○	○
17)	I like writing English letters.	○	○	○	○	○

Elementary school student beliefs survey (Japanese version)

◆次の1から11の質問に対して、あてはまるものに○をつけてください。

		あてはまる	どちらかというとあてはまる	あまりあてはまらない	あてはまらない
1	英語が好き。	○	○	○	○
2	英語の授業が好き。	○	○	○	○
3	英語をもっと上手に使えるようになりたい。	○	○	○	○
4	学校でもっと英語を使いたい。	○	○	○	○
5	外国人に話しかけるのが好き。	○	○	○	○
6	まちで外国人に話しかけられたら、話し返すと思う。	○	○	○	○
7	学校以外の場所で英語を使うことがある。	○	○	○	○
8	学校以外の場所で英語を使いたい。	○	○	○	○
9	将来、英語をできるだけ使いたいと思う。	○	○	○	○
10	英語を使うことに自信がある。	○	○	○	○
11	英語は大切だと思う。	○	○	○	○

◆英語の授業について、あてはまるものに○をつけてください。

	英語の授業の中で	あてはまる	どちらかというとあてはまる	あまりあてはまらない	あてはまらない	やったことがないからわからない
12	英語の歌が好き。	○	○	○	○	○
13	英語を使ってゲームをすることが好き。	○	○	○	○	○
14	英語を話すことが好き。	○	○	○	○	○
15	英語を聞くことが好き。	○	○	○	○	○
16	外国人と英語で交流することが好き。	○	○	○	○	○
17	英語で文字を書くことが好き。	○	○	○	○	○