



Exploring Teacher Communication: A Case Study of HRT and Senka

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This qualitative case study investigates the communication patterns of Homeroom Teachers (HRTs) and Specialist English Teachers (*senka*) in their respective English classrooms, focusing on alignment with the communication-based goals of Japan's Course of Study (CoS), a document outlining subject goals and content for all schools nationally. English language teaching in Japanese elementary schools has undergone four main stages of development, with the current stage shifting from primarily HRT-led lessons to progressively more *senka*-led classes, increasing the diversity of training needs among teachers. Building on prior research into self-reported anxieties and strengths of HRTs and *senka*, this study analyzes classroom transcripts, interviews, and survey data to explore communication patterns in HRT- and *senka*-led classrooms. Analysis confirmed a tendency with *senka* to use more instructional English rather than communication-focused interactions and a tendency for HRTs to be more authentically communicative with students in general, but to switch back to Japanese rapidly during interactions.

本研究は、学級担任および専科教員の英語授業におけるコミュニケーションパターンを調査し、日本の現行学習指導要領におけるコミュニケーション重視の目標との整合性に焦点を合わせている。日本の小学校英語教育は4つのステージを経ており、現在は学級担任主導の授業から専科教員による授業への移行が進み、教師間の研修ニーズが多様化している。本研究は、学級担任および専科教員の自己申告による不安と強みに関する先行研究を基に、授業記録、インタビュー、調査データを用いて、それぞれの教室におけるコミュニケーションパターンを詳細に分析する。データ分析の結果、専科教員は指導的英語を多用する一方で、コミュニケーション重視のやり取りは少なく、学級担任は自然な形で児童と対話しているが、すぐに日本語に切り替える傾向があることが確認された。

The implementation of English language teaching into elementary schools in Japan has followed four main stages (Matsukawa & Oshiro, 2008), and these changes have been accompanied by changes in the teaching formats and primary instructors over time. During stage 1 (1992-2001), research schools were chosen to explore English teaching at the elementary school level, with at least one school located in each prefecture in Japan. During this stage, in many of the schools, English was primarily taught by homeroom teachers (HRTs) with the help of assistant language teachers (ALTs) and often with some guidance from a teacher with formal qualifications to teach English (JTEs).

During stage 2 (2002-2010), English Activities (*eigo katsudo*) were introduced under the umbrella subject known as the Period for Integrated Study (*sougoutekina gakushu no jikan*), as part of international understanding education (*kokusai rikai kyouiku*). During this stage, the teaching of English Activities spread to over 90% of schools in Japan, though there was significant disparity in the regularity of classes and content taught across the nation. At this time, the majority of classes were seen to be taught primarily by outside teachers or ALTs, though the HRTs were usually present (Fennelly & Luxton, 2011).

These issues were dealt with in stage 3 (2011-2019) when once-a-week classes following the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) guidelines and unified content were introduced with the new Course of Study (CoS) at that time stating that HRTs or teachers formally in charge of Foreign Language Activities (FLA, *gaikokugo katsudo*) should be responsible for preparing classes. Over 90% of classes

could be seen to be taught primarily by HRTs during the majority of this period. In stage 4 (from 2020) weekly FLA classes were introduced into third and fourth grades while English as a Subject (*gaikokugo-ka*) was introduced in twice weekly classes in the fifth and sixth grades, aiming for growth in students' English abilities and a more seamless transition between elementary and junior high school.

Moving toward the implementation of stage 4, a change in teaching responsibilities could be seen through the annual government surveys (MEXT, 2023), with the number of HRTs in charge of teaching English reducing every year. The use of *senka* (specialist English teachers or SETs) has continued to increase with support for government plans to reduce the work burden on HRTs. These surveys also show a concurrent increase in exchange classes. Discussions with teachers such as Y. Tabuchi (personal communication, April 20th, 2022) suggest that HRTs who feel more confident or willing to teach English are exchanging classes with fellow HRTs willing to cover other subjects.

Diversity in teaching formats has led to diversity in language abilities and training needs of the teachers leading English classes. This is an area that has yet to be addressed by many teacher training and teacher preparation courses and is one that the authors hope to address through this research.

Current Course of Study

The most recent course of study for Foreign Language Education at elementary school states as a goal that teachers are to “develop pupils’ competencies that form the base of communication” as outlined “through language activities of listening, reading, speaking and writing in a foreign language while activating the *Approaches* in communication in foreign languages” (MEXT, 2022, p.1).

According the *Kenshu* Guidebook (MEXT, 2017) language activities are defined as ‘activities through which pupils exchange their own ideas and feelings’ while the *Approaches* mentioned above are described in the CoS as ‘discipline-based epistemological approaches emphasizing the contextualizing of language’ (MEXT, 2022, p. 1). It is possible then to derive that in the classroom, teachers should involve students in activities that require authentic communication of their own ideas or feelings in context. It is this form of communication that we refer to as communicative language or authentic communication in this paper.

The CoS emphasizes that teachers play a crucial role in fostering students’ fundamental ability to communicate their thoughts and feelings. This involves guiding

students to listen and speak about simple, familiar topics in alignment with the purpose, scene, and context of the interaction—ultimately encouraging authentic communication between teachers and students. In the objectives for English specifically, it can be seen that teachers are meant to:

- Enable students to give instruction, make requests and respond using basic expressions.
- Enable students to exchange their own thoughts and feelings regarding simple and familiar topics in everyday life by using simple words and phrases and basic expressions.
- Enable students to communicate through asking and answering questions about themselves, the person they are communicating with and their surroundings by using simple words and phrases and basic expressions on the spot. (MEXT, 2022, p.2)

The focus in the English specific objectives asks for genuine, meaningful, authentic communication in the classroom. These objectives align with well-established understandings in linguistics and second language teaching as to how languages are learned. Richards (2006, p.13) summarizes the guiding principles of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) as:

- Make real communication the focus of language learning.
- Provide opportunities for learners to experiment and try out what they know.
- Be tolerant of learners’ errors as they indicate that the learner is building up his or her communicative competence.
- Provide opportunities for learners to develop both accuracy and fluency.
- Link the different skills such as speaking, reading, and listening together, since they usually occur so in the real world.
- Let students induce or discover grammar rules.

In communicative language teaching, the role of the teacher shifts from being one primarily focused on mechanical drills, error correction, and modeling of correct language to that of a communication facilitator and support resource for students.

Foundational Research

The authors have defined instructional language as language used to give directions, language for classroom management, or language used as modeling input for learners. Rather than attempting to carve a clear division between instructional and

communicative language, the authors acknowledge that teacher talk can exist along a spectrum. It is possible for language in the classroom to at times be both instructional and communicative in nature.

Data from previously conducted foundational studies for this research (Fennelly et al., 2023a, 2023b), teacher surveys, teacher interviews and classroom observation led the authors to believe that elementary school HRTs and *senka* were likely to have different strengths and weaknesses related to the teaching of English. Early research suggested that in respect to language use, *senka* would likely tend toward more instructional, practice-type language use despite having superior language skills, while HRTs may have a better understanding of how to encourage rapport building and communication in general in the classroom but would be likely to tend to switch to Japanese in authentic communication situations. The authors decided to take a closer look at the classroom discourse in recorded lesson observations to see if these beliefs were true on closer inspection and, if so, to consider research informed strategies for helping teachers to support each other in using more authentic communication in English in the classroom, in line with the current CoS.

Methods

Japan's 2020 reforms to the CoS introduced communication-centered goals for English education, requiring teachers to model authentic language use. However, achieving these goals poses significant challenges, as teachers vary in their language proficiency and communication practices in the classroom as described above. Previous studies (Fennelly et al., 2023a, 2023b) identified issues among HRTs and *senka*, including anxiety about language proficiency, limited understanding of the CoS, and concerns about the burdens associated with English instruction. These findings provided the foundation for the current study, which examines teacher talk as a critical aspect of classroom communication.

This study investigated the communication patterns of HRTs and *senka* in their respective English classrooms, focusing on how these patterns align with the communication-based goals of Japan's CoS. Building on previous research that has identified a broader range of issues in teacher training and classroom practice, this research used qualitative methods to analyze classroom video, transcripts of teacher talk, interviews, and survey data. The focus was to test beliefs formed by the researchers based on previous data and to investigate whether a previously suggested peer-learning model could address some of the key challenges to implementing communicative English lessons more effectively in elementary schools.

Study Design

A qualitative case study approach was adopted to explore teacher communication patterns, focusing on how these practices align with the CoS goals. Qualitative research allows for an inductive understanding of complex social phenomena (Creswell, 2012), making it particularly suitable for examining the nuanced dynamics of teacher-student interactions. Building on an earlier investigation into general teacher issues (Fennelly et al., 2023a, 2023b), this study utilized an explanatory sequential design. This design included surveys to extract broad themes, followed by participant interviews, recorded classroom observations, and transcription analysis to gain deeper insights. The current study narrowed its focus to teacher talk specifically, leveraging the classroom observation transcripts for detailed analysis.

Participants and Sampling

Purposeful sampling was employed to select one HRT and one *senka*. These participants represented contrasting teaching roles in elementary schools:

- HRTs, typically generalists, who are responsible for fostering classroom community and managing diverse subjects, including English taught as a foreign language
- Senka*, specialists in English as a foreign language instruction, who often teach across multiple schools

The sample aligns with research indicating that in recent years HRTs have comprised 55% of English teachers in rural prefectures, while *senka* have accounted for 41.3% (MEXT, 2021). By focusing on one representative of each group, the study achieved a detailed exploration of communication patterns, albeit limiting the generalizability of the authors' study. Informed consent was acquired from both participants after permission to implement the study was granted by the first author's university institutional review board.

The HRT had 13 years of overall teaching experience, including five years of teaching English. She completed a university course on English education for elementary school teachers and has regularly participated in professional development workshops, including those focused on integrated instruction and assessment. The *senka* had 10 years of English teaching experience with three years at junior high school and seven years at elementary school. She completed a teacher training program in an English specialization course at her university and had participated in several elementary school English lesson-based courses during that time.

While the limited sample size of one HRT and one *senka* constrains the generalizability of our findings, this design choice was intentional and aligned with the study's qualitative case study framework. The goal was not to make broad claims about all teachers in Japan, but rather to gain a contextualized understanding of two contrasting teacher roles. As Merriam (2009) notes, a case study is particularly useful for exploring complex, practice-based issues in depth. Furthermore, the present study builds on prior large-scale survey and interview data (Fennelly et.al., 2023a, 2023b), which established broader patterns in HRT and *senka* perceptions. This study thus serves as a qualitative complement, offering nuanced insight into the how and why behind those patterns, which can inform future research.

Data Collection and Procedures

Data sources included (a) classroom transcripts from six video-recorded lessons per teacher, transcribed to capture verbatim verbal interactions, and (b) semi-structured interviews in Japanese exploring teachers' perceptions of their communication practices, challenges, and anxieties, as well as items adapted from the aforementioned study to provide additional context on training needs. Ethics approval was obtained from the university's ethics board, local boards of education, and from the participating schools. All data collection adhered to Creswell's (2012) guidelines for ethical qualitative research.

Data Analysis and Interpretations

The analysis followed Creswell's (2012) six-step framework:

1. Data Preparation: Transcripts were compiled, ensuring all instances of teacher talk were included.
2. Initial Exploration: Transcripts were reviewed to identify recurring themes, such as instructional versus communicative language.
3. Coding: A thematic coding system was developed, drawing on insights from (Fennelly et al., 2023a, 2023b). Codes included categories such as instructional language, authentic communication, and language switching. Inter-rater reliability was implemented during coding to ensure objectivity.
4. Exemplar Extraction: Representative excerpts were selected to illustrate each theme.
5. Interpretation: Findings were contextualized within the CoS framework and previous literature on teacher communication (Walsh, 2011).

6. Validation (to be conducted): Follow-up member checks with participants will be conducted to ensure the reliability of findings. This step is considered to be the triangulation technique employed by the authors across data sources to enhance the validity of interpretations.

Table 1

Creswell's Six-Step Framework

Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4	Step 5	Step 6
Data Preparation	Initial Exploration	Coding	Exemplar Extraction	Interpretation	Validation

As such, the study's multi-layered approach aimed to enhance the credibility of its findings. The use of inter-rater reliability during coding and planned member checks further enhances objectivity.

Results and Discussion

The following section discusses our results and how patterns were observed in relation to the objectives of the CoS, principles of communicative language teaching, and previous literature.

Instructional vs. Communicative Language

Our results start with the Exemplar Extraction step which consisted of transcript analysis revealing distinct patterns in teacher communication.

- a. *Senka*: Predominantly used English, but this was primarily instructional, focusing on commands and vocabulary explanations.
Please open your textbook to page 70.
Write today's goal: *hantaigo wo manabou* [Let's learn antonyms].
Note: These interactions provided structured input but lacked opportunities for authentic communication.
- b. HRTs: Demonstrated higher engagement through personal questions and conversational exchanges. For example:
HRT: *Mikka...* [the third...]? *Anata no...* [your...]?
Student: *Tanjyoubi* [birthday]

HRT: Your birthday. Happy birthday.

HRT: *kinou oshietekuretayannna* [You told me (about it) yesterday, right)?

HRT: *Sou, tanjyoubi presento hoshii* [Ok then, you want a present / presents?]

Student: *Hoshii* [I want (a present / presents)]

Note: These interactions frequently reverted to Japanese, limiting students' English exposure.

Insights from Previous Research

Findings were further contextualized using data from the authors' previous studies which examined a broader sample of HRTs and *senka*. These previous studies employed a primarily quantitative method, and the surveys were distributed to all public elementary schools in the prefecture. The participants in the current case study were the same individuals and the earlier data provided relevant background regarding common teacher anxieties and training needs, enabling a richer interpretation of the present findings (Fennelly et.al., 2023a, 2023b), such as the following:

1. Language Proficiency: 65.6% of HRTs reported anxiety about their English skills, compared to 26% of *senka*.
2. Teaching Skills: HRTs (67.2%) expressed greater concern than *senka* (22.2%) about their ability to conduct effective English lessons.
3. Burden of English Instruction: HRTs found teaching English more burdensome, correlating with their lower confidence in language proficiency and language teaching proficiency.

Teacher Anxieties and Their Classroom Manifestations

The authors investigated how these anxieties aligned with the observed communication patterns, where HRTs relied on Japanese due to language insecurity, and *senka* focused on language form rather than communication. The authors also found connections to the findings in this study with previous research (e.g., Walsh, 2011; Yorozuya, 2019), which emphasized the importance of balancing instructional and communicative language. While *senka* practices align with form-focused approaches seen in other contexts such as junior high schools, the HRTs' communicative focus, albeit limited in English, highlights the potential for integrating these strengths through collaboration and peer support.

Strengths and Challenges of HRTs and *Senka*

As described in the analysis and interpretations above, the data for the *senka* participant in this case study showed a consistent pattern of much greater instructional language use across all six lesson observation transcripts. As outlined above, the authors acknowledge that teacher talk can exist along a spectrum. It is possible for language in the classroom to at times be both instructional and communicative in nature. However, even taking this spectrum into consideration, the *senka* transcripts showed a marked difference in the kind of language used in the classroom with a strong tendency toward instructional language and far less meaningful communication and rapport building exchanges with students in comparison to the HRT lesson transcripts. There was frequent use of pattern modeling and vocabulary usage checks in exchanges with students. Follow up to student responses from the HRT were largely limited to evaluative phrases like "ok", "very good", "good job", or focused on vocabulary use correction, echoing older pre-communicative language teaching methodologies. *Senka* responding to the survey sent to 185 schools in the authors' previous study (Fennelly et.al., 2023a, 2023b) reported anxieties regarding student understanding (51.9%). Some of this anxiety could be interpreted as stemming from the large number of classes taught by the *senka* in comparison to the HRT. While the HRT is responsible for their own classroom of students alone, as specialists, *senka* meet with students from many different classrooms, sometimes traveling to multiple schools, creating a situation where it is more challenging to get to know the children and to form a rapport through familiarity. Effective communication facilitation and rapport building through genuine engagement with a student's ideas, rather than their form, do not depend on familiarity. They are skills that can be taught through teacher training.

Conversely, the transcript data showed the HRT participant in this case study to have notable proficiency in creating rapport and facilitating meaningful, authentic communication with students. Across the six lesson observation transcripts, the HRT interacted in a way that let students know they were genuinely being listened to and that the content of their communication mattered. The HRT showed interest and understanding by eliciting more information and by using repetition of the students' words, among other strategies. For instance, in the exchange below, the HRT used repetition of *your birthday* and elicitation using *Anata no...?* (*yours*) to encourage the student's response and build on it, demonstrating attentiveness and interactive listening.

HRTs as generalists responsible for fostering classroom community and managing diverse subjects perhaps have had opportunities to develop an expertise in this area that *senka* could learn from in in-house peer training.

As described above in the paper however, where the HRT struggled was in using English consistently in communication. The authors were a little surprised that the HRT participating in the case study used more English than expected based on the survey and interview data collected previously, but what often happened was that while more authentically communicative, the HRT would quickly switch back to using Japanese during interactions with students. In the survey data from the authors' previous study (Fennelly et.al., 2023a, 2023b), language skills (English skills) were a significant source of anxiety for HRTs (65.6%), far more so than for the *senka* (26%). While it is true that the HRT did not have English skills matching those of the *senka* as a non-specialist, it was interesting to see in the transcript data that the Japanese used by the HRT when switching back tended to be fairly simple, something the HRT may have just as easily have been able to say in English in many cases, or could learn to say with minimal training to build a toolbox of useful phrases. In the example described earlier in the paper, the HRT says first:

mikka... [the third...]? *anata no...* [your...]?
 Student: *tanjyoubi* [birthday]
 HRT: Your birthday. Happy birthday.

It is probable that the HRT knows how to say the phrases used here in Japanese in English. The teacher may be struggling with how to use strategies common to ESL teaching, for example holding up three fingers and pointing to the student while speaking to convey the intended message. The HRT goes on to say in the same exchange:

HRT: *kinou oshietekuretayannna* [You told me (about it) yesterday, right]?
 HRT: *sou, tanjyoubi presento hoshii* [Ok then, you want a present / presents]?
 Student: *hoshii* [I want (a present / presents)]

While the HRT may not yet have full mastery in English of the phrases used here, they are not particularly difficult. With training, possibly peer training with a *senka*, the HRT could begin to work on adding phrases in English like these that aid authentic communication to their repertoire, little by little over time. Here too, it would be possible for the HRT to work on strategies like using items in the classroom environment as communication facilitation aids, such as using the calendar on the blackboard to help students understand the meaning of yesterday.

Toward Peer Learning and In-House Training

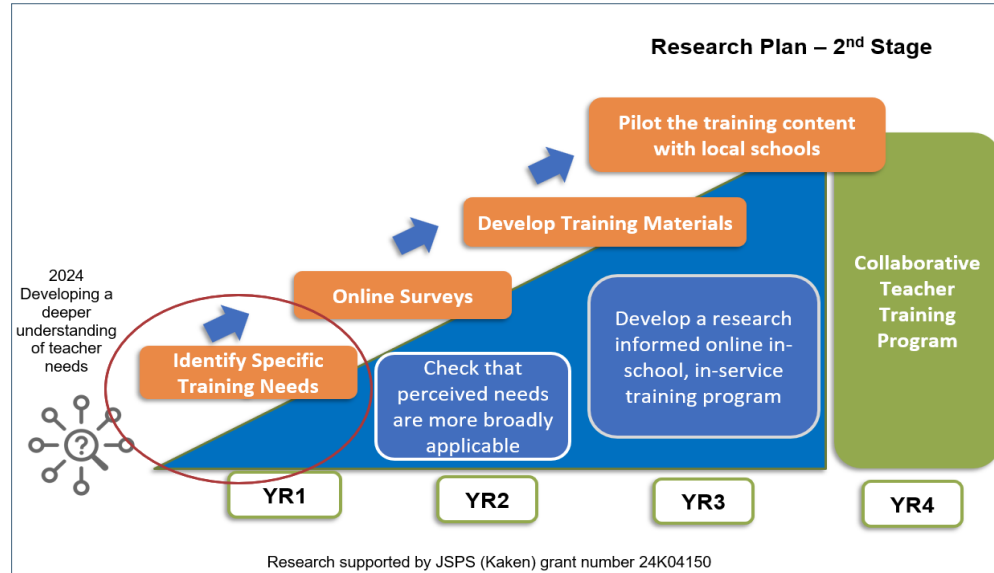
In Fennelly and colleagues (2023b), teachers participating in the survey and interviews expressed a desire for more in-house training and positive feelings toward discussions with colleagues about teaching in the local context. At the same time, teachers expressed concerns about facilitating in-house training themselves without support citing both lack of planning time and anxieties about lack of expertise. As can be seen in both this current study and the previous one, the needs of HRT and *senka* can differ significantly but may at the same time be complementary—one able to potentially support the needs of the other.

Looking to the Future

The authors hoped through this study to extract implications for teacher training in English education in elementary school by building on the authors' earlier study's recommendations that training should address (a) Language Proficiency, for example, workshops for HRTs to build confidence in using simple English phrases and (b) Communicative Practices, such as peer-learning sessions where HRT and *senka* exchange strategies for creating more communicative English classrooms aligned with the CoS goals, thereby addressing teacher-reported anxieties (Fennelly et.al., 2023a, 2023b).

The authors believe that peer-learning models offer a promising solution for aligning teacher practices with the current CoS communication-centered objectives. HRT and *senka* could help teachers to learn from each other, support each other's weaknesses and help bridge gaps in communication patterns in the classroom. HRTs, with confidence and skills at interacting with students, could help coach *senka* teachers with student interaction. *Senka* teachers in turn could use their higher language skills to coach HRTs on how to interact more meaningfully in simple English. This training in turn could help teachers to design and conduct more communication centered lessons and ultimately achieve MEXT aims of having students learn by experiencing authentic communication in context.

Figure 1
Future Research Outline



Based on the authors' research to date (Figure 1), the plan going forward is to confirm findings through further online surveys, observing and discussing in-service teacher training both at home and abroad and through developing in-service training materials to be accessed online to support and foster collaborative teacher training for both HRTs and *senka*. Finally, future research should aim to replicate this study in other prefectures and school settings, with a larger and more diverse sample of teachers, to explore the broader applicability and impact of collaborative training models across Japan.

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