

Title of Project:

Teaching English for the first time:
Anxiety among Japanese elementary school teachers

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Summary:

After long discussions and the pressure from “Japanese industry and government officials” (Butler & Iino, 2005), the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) officially launched English language education in elementary schools in 2009. All 5th-year and 6th-year students are required to study English for 45 minutes every week. Homeroom teachers are responsible for teaching the subject to students. However, a sizable majority of teachers have neither experienced teaching English, nor taken any pre-service training for English. Additionally, teachers are often required to team-teach with a native English-speaking assistant teacher (AET) who could not speak Japanese. It is plausible that Japanese teachers are anxious about teaching English. This study investigated Japanese teachers’ English anxiety and its sources. Teachers’ anxiety coping strategies were also examined. English anxiety includes (a) anxiety about a teacher’s own English proficiency and (b) anxiety about teaching English. There were 133 Japanese elementary school teachers from two school districts participating in the present study, as well one native English-speaking assistant teacher, and three in-service teacher trainers. Among 133 teachers, 63 teachers in one school district started English language education in 2004 on a trial basis, and 70 teachers in the other school district began English in April, 2009. The Teacher Foreign Language Anxiety Scale (Horwitz, 2008), the Situational Teaching Anxiety Scale, follow-up interviews, and a survey were used in this study. The Teacher Foreign Language Anxiety Scale (TFLAS) is composed of 18 five-point Likert scale questions to measure a teacher’s anxiety level toward his/her own foreign language proficiency. The Situational Teaching Anxiety Scale (STAS) has also 5-point Likert scale questions and focus more on teachers’ anxiety in an English teaching situation. The follow-up interview sessions were conducted to nine Japanese teachers and one AET individually. The interviews were used to understand their feeling toward teaching English. The survey examined to understand what teachers learned in the in-service training courses.

Data showed that 77.4% of teachers were anxious about their own English proficiency, and 90.2% of them were anxious about teaching English. The sources of anxiety included lack of confidence in English communication and lack of experience

and training for teaching English. Most elementary school teachers reported themselves as being at a beginner level of English proficiency. Elementary school teachers had not taken any specific training for improving their English proficiency and did not need to use the language in their daily work. One teacher said that “I am not confident about my English pronunciation.” Even younger teachers expressed her anxiety, “I studied English for 10 years—from junior high school to college. But I couldn’t say even a single English word in front of our native AET.” Teachers were more anxious about teaching English. Many of them had a negative response to the new subject. To be required to teach English created a huge burden on elementary school teachers. For example, they needed to prepare for unfamiliar materials, to manage classes, and to communicate with native AETs. The common words which teachers used to describe their feelings about teaching English were “burden,” “overloaded,” “hard,” and “tough.” One of the teachers answered, “English is just burdensome for us. We don’t have much time to prepare for English lessons. Besides, we haven’t taught English, which imposes a big burden on us.” A considerable number of teachers felt anxiety about their own English proficiency and about teaching English.

One of the major findings of this study is that teachers experienced two phases of anxiety: first-phase anxiety and second-phase anxiety. The first-phase anxiety stemmed from their unfamiliarity with English language education. Although Japanese teachers tackled the difficulty of English language education on a weekly basis, most teachers had a negative impression about teaching English. In addition, they were worried about their English proficiency because they were not confident about speaking English like native speakers. Therefore, Japanese teachers were nervous and uncertain about teaching English at the beginning of their English teaching. This provoked the first-phase anxiety among teachers. However, Japanese homeroom teachers realized that they did not need to speak English like native English speakers to teach students once English language education started. Even in a team teaching situation with a native AET, Japanese teachers did not speak English for instruction because native AETs led the students and spoke to them in English. At this stage, their first-phase anxiety seemed to decrease because they came to understand that teaching English had nothing to do with their negative English learning experience. However, as Japanese teachers worked with native AETs who had no or limited Japanese proficiency, they gradually found that they needed to speak English for the management of English lessons. Second-phase anxiety appeared at this stage. The second-phase anxiety was generated by teacher’s struggles against English communication with AETs. Homeroom teachers had to communicate with native English counterparts for meetings and for quick changes in plans during lessons. Talking about details of each lesson and fixing plans during ongoing situations in English could be much more difficult than teaching English to students. Japanese teachers might not expect that complicated English communication skills would be required of them before English teaching was instituted. There seems to be a huge gap between job expectation and reality. Japanese teachers had to use English—not for teaching students but for discussing teaching plans and instructing native AETs. Unfortunately, most elementary school teachers did not have sufficient command of English to complete this. A young female teacher illustrated their struggles. She said, “I have many things to ask our native AET to do in class, but I cannot convey my thoughts to her in English.” The two kinds of anxiety appeared to operate continually.

In addition to the two kinds of anxiety, Japanese way of thinking about self-defensiveness also prevented teachers from improving their English proficiency through using English in class. In Japanese culture, Japanese teachers have been thought as authority figures of school subjects. However, they hesitated to speak English in front of students because they were afraid of losing face. One male teacher confessed, "I will be embarrassed if I make a mistake in speaking English. Students may think of me as stupid. With that pressure, it is not easy to speak English." In Japan in particular, teachers have long concealed weaknesses, such as anxiety, to maintain their self-respect. However, a new wave of English language education seems to be breaking down the wall of their defensiveness and giving them opportunities to express their anxiety.

Working with less-qualified native English speakers was another source of anxiety among Japanese elementary school teachers. In fact, teachers reported some AETs' misbehavior, such as tardiness, absence without permission, and stealing teaching materials from a school. Because of the tight budget and the recession, each city board of education tended to sign a contract with private English conversation companies or individuals with the cheapest annual bid. Due to growing demands for native English speakers at Japanese elementary schools, fewer high-quality native AETs appeared to be sent to elementary schools as English teachers.

No universal anxiety-coping-strategies were found among Japanese elementary school teachers. However, some teachers created their own ways to deal with anxiety. For English proficiency anxiety, attending in-service training courses seemed to be effective. Teachers learnt useful expressions for English communication in the training, and those kinds of knowledge helped them decrease their anxiety level. For teaching English anxiety, teachers integrated their strength into their English lessons. One teacher used English songs for making lessons more fun, and another teacher created activities which their students were interested in because she knew her students very well. However, it seemed to be impossible for all teachers to create their own coping strategies because they were very busy. Thus, each city board of education should take the lead in helping teachers develop teaching strategies.

The study also has two things as educational implications. First, it is important for less-experienced teachers to understand the two phases of anxiety. Currently, only 5th- and 6th-grader teachers are teaching English, and teachers from 1st- to 4th-grade have not experienced English lessons yet. However, every elementary school teacher is required to teach upper grade students sometime in their future teaching career. Therefore, understanding how to cope with anxiety is very helpful for them. Second, support by city board of education is a key to decrease teachers' anxiety. Of course, teachers are in charge of English lessons, but each city board of education can do lots of things and help teachers diminish their English anxiety.

Although my research focused on teacher anxiety, it can be included in a topic about non-native English speaking teachers. Even in Japan, most English teachers are Non-native speakers. They tend to be worried about their lower English proficiency in pronunciation, reading, and listening (Tang, 1997), which prevented them from actively teaching English. The results and findings of my research can release them from the pressure and help them have confidence when teaching English. I would like to continue my research about non-native English speaking teachers in EFL environments.

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