

# **EXPLORING JAPANESE UNIVERSITY ENGLISH TEACHERS' BELIEFS ABOUT THEIR STUDENTS: QUESTIONNAIRE DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

The purposes of this paper are (1) to illustrate the importance of investigating teachers' beliefs about their students and (2) to discuss the validity of questionnaire items used in a survey to explore Japanese university English teachers' beliefs about their students. First, I will briefly review previous research to demonstrate the importance of investigating teachers' beliefs while acknowledging the complex features of what the concept of "beliefs" actually means. Beliefs that teachers hold about teaching and learning, and about their students, are among many factors that can influence their decision-making processes. This means that teachers' beliefs can make a difference in what they do in and about their classes. To address the second goal, I will discuss the background of a questionnaire survey that has been conducted among Japanese university English as a foreign language teachers. The questionnaire items were developed based on the findings from a previously conducted pilot questionnaire study in which 17 such teachers participated. The current questionnaire survey aims to explore not only teachers' beliefs about their students but also their idiosyncratic teaching backgrounds and teaching situations. I will conclude with a discussion of effective methods of analyzing the data collected from the questionnaire survey.

## **1 importance of investigating teachers' beliefs**

Investigating teachers' beliefs is important and yet so complicated that there have not been clear and comprehensive research results on this matter. Many researchers have agreed that teachers' beliefs influence their choices in their teaching practices (Borg, 2006; Burns, 1996; Eisenhart, Shrum, Harding, & Cuthbert, 1988; Fang, 1996; Woods & Cakir, 2011), but the nature of the relationships between teachers' beliefs and their teaching practices is not clear-cut (Burns, 1996; Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012; Eisenhart, Shrum, Harding, & Cuthbert, 1988; Mak, 2011; Sakui & Gaies, 2006).

A number of studies have indicated that various factors in individual teachers' teaching contexts prevent them from applying their beliefs in their teaching practice. For example, Graden (1996) reported six cases where teachers compromised their beliefs about reading

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instruction (e.g. that frequent opportunities have to be provided for reading practice) because of such factors as poor performance by students and lack of time. Burns (1996) analyzed a case of one teacher's interaction with her students in which the teacher's observed behaviors were not necessarily true to her beliefs or thinking; that is, she was not always implementing the theories that she believed in in the real classroom situation. Burns (1996) thus emphasized the importance of reflecting on one's own actual teaching in order to improve one's teaching techniques and approaches. Kameda (2005) discussed the cases of three teachers who responded on a questionnaire that they were able to implement what they wanted to implement in class and were satisfied with their own teaching; fewer than 10% of the questionnaire respondents (n = 201) had given positive responses like these, placing the three among the minority. Many teachers in her study were not satisfied with their teaching because "[they] were not successful in implementing their teaching beliefs in class" (Kameda, 2005, p. 14) and their frustration seemed to be connected with their students' low motivation for learning English. Thus, teachers' actual behaviors are influenced by their beliefs, but the degree to which this is so and the way beliefs are reflected in behavior vary depending on the situation.

The issue of defining "beliefs" also adds to the complexity of belief studies. Horwitz (1988), which is the most frequently referenced belief study, explained that her inventory (the Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory: BALLI) was developed to assess "student opinions" (p. 284). Borg (2006) summarized how concepts in teacher cognition research were defined in previous studies: In explaining the concept of beliefs, terms such as "personal knowledge," "preconceptions," or "attitudes and values" were used (p. 36). Similarly, Dörnyei and Taguchi (2010) stated in their explanation about "attitudinal questions" on questionnaire surveys that "[attitudes, opinions, beliefs, interests, and values] are not always distinguished or defined very clearly in the literature" (p. 5).

There have been variations in the definition of "beliefs" in the past, but in a general sense, the term refers to the attitudes and values that one holds about something, often inseparable from one's knowledge. In fact, this feature of "beliefs" is one of the factors that make it difficult to define the concept of beliefs. Woods (1996) claimed that beliefs, assumptions, and knowledge are not separate entities but represents a single continuum. He used the term BAK (for "beliefs, assumptions, and knowledge") to emphasize that the three terms refer to "points on a spectrum of meaning" (p. 195) and claimed that each of them works as an important element in teachers' decision-making around their classroom practices.

Thus, teachers' beliefs influence their decision-making about class activities as do their assumptions and knowledge. At the same time, various additional factors influence teachers' decision-making, such as their interpretation of institutional guidelines, availability of teaching and learning materials, class size, learners' proficiency and motivation levels, and teachers' expectations from and about students, colleagues, and other related people. What individual teachers do makes a difference to their students' learning achievements in the classroom and therefore eventually also to the outcomes in terms of curriculum goals (Figure 1). Teachers' beliefs are among such an influential

factor and therefore, better understanding of beliefs should be beneficial to the field of education.

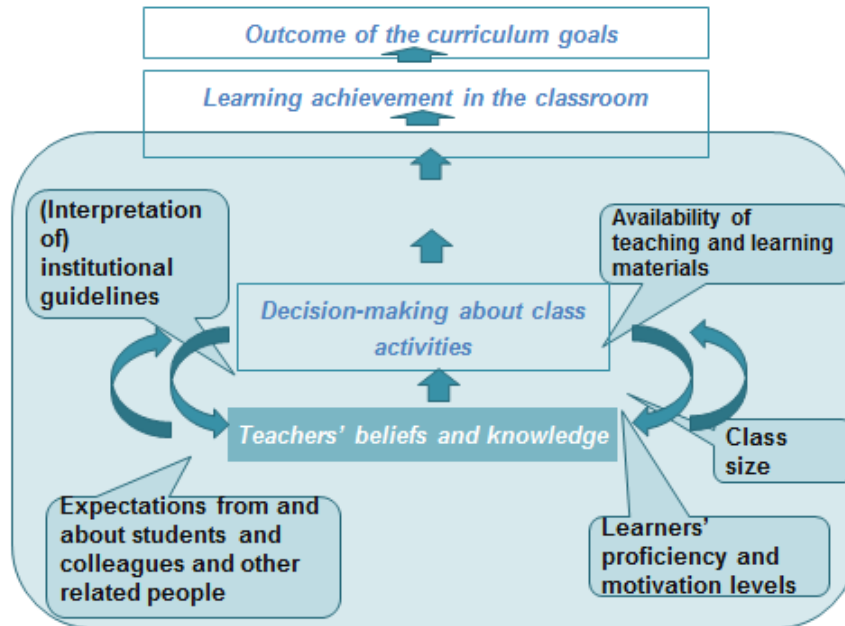


Fig. 1. Teachers' beliefs and other factors influencing learning outcomes

## 2 Research purposes and design

A three-year research project was started in the 2013 academic year to investigate beliefs—views and thoughts; perceptions, opinions, and assumptions— held by teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) at Japanese universities. This research project focuses on comparing the beliefs of native English-speaking EFL teachers (ETs) and those of native Japanese-speaking EFL teachers (JTs) about their students, with the following three main research purposes:

1. to help deepen understanding among teachers involved with university-level English learning programs of their own beliefs and those of their colleagues,
2. to provide data to help us better understand Japanese learners of English, and
3. to add more resources that we can use to improve English learning programs.

In most universities in Japan, both ETs and JTs work collaboratively in the same English-learning program, and cooperation between ETs and JTs is often crucial for effective teaching and the achievement of curriculum goals. However, ETs and JTs have different cultural backgrounds, and such differences may have helped to create different perceptions and views among them even within the same teaching contexts.

Pajares (1992) pointed out that “beliefs are created through a process of enculturation and social construction (p. 316)”. That is, while beliefs are constructed based on personal and individual experiences, such experiences are often influenced by social and cultural factors in the communities that the individual belongs to. In other words, the individual’s belief construction is definitely influenced by the culture to which the individual belongs.

A criticism can be made of the present approach is that it groups ETs from different countries (namely, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, the United States, and others) together and treats them as if they come from one culture; however, the comparison of beliefs between ETs (regardless of country) and JTs should lead to insightful findings that we can utilize to improve English-learning programs at Japanese universities.

It is often the case that ETs and JTs have different roles expected in the same English-learning programs. ETs are often requested to teach oral communication skills while JTs may be focusing on reading and grammar instructions, teaching for qualifications such as TOEIC. If ETs are expected to play similar roles among themselves, they may have similar beliefs about their students, regardless of where they come from. The comparison between ETs and JTs is expected to provide meaningful findings to promote smooth cooperation between ETs and JTs working in English-learning programs at Japanese universities. Besides simply comparing the two groups, individual differences such as the teachers' expertise, teaching backgrounds (years of teaching, students' majors, etc.), and so on should also ultimately be taken into account in the process of analyzing research data, because factors that have caused any differences may be explained by factors other than the teachers' status as native speakers of English or Japanese.

The three-year plan for the research project can be summarized as follows:

- a) Academic Year 2013: literature review, development of pilot questionnaire items, pilot study data collection and analysis;
- b) Academic Year 2014: larger-scale questionnaire survey data collection and analysis; and
- c) Academic Year 2015: interviews, review of the whole research project.

In the 2013 academic year, a pilot version of the questionnaire survey was conducted (Shimo, 2014). The questionnaire items were then revised for a larger-scale questionnaire survey, and conducted (henceforth, the "2013 pilot study") between May and August 2014 (the "2014 survey" hereafter). In the 2015 academic year, follow-up interviews with some of the respondents to the 2014 survey are to be conducted.

In the following sections, I will briefly report on the 2013 pilot study (Shimo, 2014), explain the 2014 survey question items, and discuss the analysis of the 2014 survey data. Questionnaire surveys are useful to collect perceptions about certain issues and problems from a given population. The present respondents' perceptions, collected through questionnaire surveys, should reflect their beliefs, as "beliefs strongly influence perception," though they can also be "an unreliable guide to the nature of reality" (Pajares, 1992, p. 326). Pajares (1992) also claimed that "beliefs must be inferred" (p. 326). Using the questionnaire surveys, I was able to collect information on the respondents' perceptions about their students, but it will still be a difficult task to understand how the teachers' beliefs are reflected in their responses; nevertheless, I expect that comparison between the groups of teachers to help reveal various beliefs that underlie the responses on the survey.

### **3 Questionnaire development**

#### ***3.1 The 2013 pilot study***

The 2013 pilot surveys was designed to explore the following questions regarding teachers' beliefs about their students: a) what kinds of abilities teachers believe their students have, b) what kinds of abilities teachers believe their students want to improve; c) what kinds of activities teachers believe their students want to engage in, d) what views teachers believe their students have about learning a language, and e) how teachers believe their students are actually learning English.

The survey was prepared online; a request for participation was emailed to 29 EFL teachers working for the same university English language learning program. Out of the 29 teachers, 17 participated in the 2013 pilot study. Shimo (2014) reported how the questionnaire items in the pilot survey were developed and presented the findings from that survey. Thus, only a brief summary of the pilot survey's development and findings will be given in this paper.

The pilot questionnaire was prepared in English and in Japanese. Question items were designed based on items in Horwitz (1987, 1988) and Sakui and Gaies (1999). These studies were designed to explore learners' beliefs about language learning; therefore, some of the questions were irrelevant to the current research project, which aims to explore teachers' beliefs about their students. Those questions were excluded from the pilot questionnaire survey. Also, some questions were revised and some new ones were added to meet the objective of the 2013 pilot survey. The questions on earlier drafts of the survey were checked by two experts in the field of Language Education and Applied Linguistics, and the question items were finalized by the author based on the two experts' advice.

The survey was divided in two parts so that the respondents would not be overwhelmed by the length of the questionnaire. The first part had a total of 10 questions: 6 demographic questions about the respondent's teaching backgrounds, 3 questions about a typical class, and 1 open-response question about the students (that is, impressions about their personalities and attitudes). The second part had a total of 45 questions, 40 of which were answered on a four-point Likert-scale questions (the response options were provided as "I disagree," "I somewhat disagree," "I somewhat agree," and "I agree," and they were calculated later as "1", "2", "3", and "4" respectively); these related to the teachers' impressions of their students' abilities and attitudes and did not require much time to respond to. The rest were multiple-choice (MC) and open-response questions: students' reasons for learning English, skills that students should be improving most in the teacher's opinions, specific learning activities that students should be doing, and reactions or comments to the survey itself.

The respondents in the pilot survey were instructed to consider a particular class for first- or second- year non-English majors that they were then teaching or had taught in the

previous two years. The first question on the survey asked whether the respondent was teaching or had taught such a class in the past two years. If that was the case, the respondent was asked to participate in the whole survey. This instruction was given in order to reduce the number of possible variables in the respondents' teaching contexts and to help the respondents answer the questions without having too many conflicting ideas arising from various situations that they would have encountered in their various classes. This concern had been pointed out by the two experts, who looked through the earlier drafts of the survey.

The findings from the pilot survey were as follows:

1. The tendency was stronger among ETs than among JTs to believe that students do not ... feel that there is a good reason to learn English.
2. The tendency was stronger among [ETs]<sup>2</sup> to believe that students feel embarrassed to speak in English in class.
3. ETs were much more generous in their judgment of their students' pronunciation and grammar knowledge.
4. Most JTs agreed that students prefer a class format in which they have frequent chances to initiate activities, while most of the ETs disagreed.
5. Most ETs agreed that students prefer a class format in which the teacher mostly explains the material, while JTs disagreed (Shimo, p. 39-40).

These findings provided a basis for questionnaire development for the 2014 survey; namely, question items that explored issues related to these findings were kept for the 2014 survey. I will discuss the questionnaire development for the 2014 survey in the next section.

### ***3.2 Questionnaire for the 2014 survey***

In developing the questionnaire for the 2014 survey, the following issues were kept in mind: (a) the five points to be explored, to which questions had been targeted (as stated in 3.1), (b) possible similarities and differences between ETs and JTs indicated by the 2013 pilot study findings, (c) the length of the questionnaire (time efficiency), and (d) the accuracy of the English and Japanese versions.

Similarly to the 2013 pilot study, on the 2014 survey, the respondents were asked to base their responses on their general impressions about students in one typical class that they were teaching. In order to limit the teaching context variables, the respondents were instructed to choose a first- or second-year class. In the pilot study, the respondents had been able to choose a class that they had taught within the previous two years, but this was changed in order to maximize the reliability of the teachers' reported perceptions of their students (that is, more recent memories were considered more reliable). Also, in the pilot study, the respondents were instructed to choose a class for non-English-majors, but

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<sup>2</sup> The original paper (Shimo, 2014) stated that "the tendency was stronger among JTs to believe that students feel embarrassed to speak in English in class." However, this was a typographical error: "JTs" should be replaced with "ETs," as shown by the following discussion part in that paper.

in the 2014 survey, this was not the case. This was done in order to make the questionnaire directions simpler, since complicated instructions have a higher risk of confusing respondents and ending up receiving not as much cooperation. In the 2014 survey, the instruction to respondents to base their responses on their general impressions of the students in one particular current class was given more clearly and repeatedly.

With regard to questionnaire length, Dörnyei and Taguchi (2010) have suggested that a paper questionnaire should not exceed four pages unless the case is exceptional (cf. “Fatigue Effect,” p. 9). The questionnaire had four pages; most of the questions were MC questions, so that the respondents could choose their responses without taking too much time, allowing a greater number of respondents to participate. Some of the Likert-scale questions used in the pilot study were also eliminated to avoid redundancy. Most of the items retained related to points (a) and (b) above, including all the questions about students’ skills and their preferred teaching styles.

On the other hand, question items regarding students’ level of learner autonomy were combined into one question asking about the respondents’ impressions of their students’ personalities and attitudes toward learning. Among these were questions “Students do in-class activities diligently,” “Students take their home assignments seriously,” “Students are interested in improving their own English learning methods,” and “Students plan their English learning.” These items were integrated into one MC question that asked the respondents to choose up to five descriptive items from a list of provided choice created based on an open-ended question in the 2013 pilot study that had asked the respondents about their impressions of their students. For example, “cheerful,” “lethargic,” “make a plan for their own learning,” “interested in how to improve their English” were on the list.

The English translation of the 2013 pilot survey had proved to have some issues [for detailed discussion, see Shimo (2014)]. For the 2014 survey, therefore, both the English and Japanese questionnaires were checked by professional translators, as well as three experienced English teachers who had been teaching at Japanese universities for over a decade. Some question items were revised in response to their feedback (Table 1).

**Table 1. Changes in question items from the 2013 pilot to the 2014 survey**

2013 Pilot	2014 Survey
Q6. <sup>1</sup> Students find a reason in learning English.	Q8. The students find it meaningful to learn English.
Q21. Students like the class format in which they can initiate activities	Q12. The students <sup>2</sup> like a class format in which they have frequent opportunities to initiate activities.
Q22. Students like the class format in which the teacher gives explanations	Q13. The students like a class format in which the teacher mostly explains the material.

(Notes: 1. Question numbers are given as in the original survey; 2. “The students” refers to the students in the class chosen as a basis for survey answers by the respondent.)

The final version of the 2014 questionnaire was also divided into two sections so that the respondents would not be overwhelmed by the length of it, and the number of questions

was reduced from a total of 55 in the pilot to a total of 48 in the 2014 survey. The number of questions in the first section was actually more in the 2014 survey (13, as compared to 10 in the pilot) because additional questions were created to ask about the respondents' teaching contexts. Individual teachers' idiosyncratic teaching contexts were considered potentially important variables in this belief exploration. Questions about a typical class were asked by simple questions like "Which skills or abilities are mainly targeted in the class?" and "Is the class a required or elective course?" These were MC questions with a choice of "other" and a place to specify. One MC question regarding the respondents' impressions of their students' personalities and attitudes was also included in the first section. The number of questions in the second section was reduced from 45 in the pilot to 35 questions in the 2014 survey. Among the retained questions were 28 Likert-scale questions regarding the respondents' students' English language abilities and learning preferences. The response options were the same as the ones in the pilot survey (i.e., "I disagree," "I somewhat disagree," "I somewhat agree," and "I agree."). In addition, one MC question asked about the students' reasons for learning English, one about the skills that the students should particularly be focusing on improving, one about teachers' roles as ETs and JTs, and one about the respondent's position in their university English language learning program. In addition, three open-response questions asked respondents for reasons for their responses, and so on.

The survey was prepared in both online and paper versions in order to maximize the potential number of participants. Requests for participation in the survey were sent as emails, list-serve messages, and posts on social network service sites. Paper-version questionnaire forms were also delivered to over 1000 university English teachers by post or by being placed in their physical mail boxes.

#### **4 Methods of analyzing the questionnaire data**

The 2014 survey questions covered the following aspects of teachers' beliefs about their students: (a) students' personalities and their attitudes towards learning English, (b) students' listening, speaking, reading, writing, pronunciation, and grammar ability in English, (c) students' preferences regarding the use of English with their teacher and with their classmates, and (d) students' preferences regarding teaching and learning styles and methods. A few questions also asked about the teachers' views on why their students were learning English and on how they should learn English or another foreign language (e.g., learning methods and strategies, skills that students should particularly try to improve, learning activities that students should particularly utilize). By comparing the responses of ETs and those of JTs in each of these categories, I would next like to investigate the differences and similarities between the perceptions of teachers in the two groups. Any differences might reflect different tendencies in their beliefs about their students.

In addition, it will be interesting to explore any correlations between teachers' perceptions within groups but across categories. For example, there may be a correlation between teachers' judgments about their students' skills and their opinions about their students' personalities or attitudes towards learning (e.g. teachers who have negative



impressions of their students' attitudes may also tend to judge their students' abilities more severely).

Some of the differences and similarities found in the teachers' beliefs might be explained by their idiosyncratic teaching contexts rather than by their status as native speakers of English or Japanese. Individual teachers' teaching backgrounds and teaching situations will therefore also have to be taken into account in the data analysis.

## **5 Future plans**

A total of 294 teachers participated in the 2014 survey. Preliminary analysis of the data indicated a few differences between ETs and JTs' perceptions of their students. For example, ETs were more generous in their judgments of their students' four skills. For JTs, the ratio of the teachers who (somewhat) agreed that students prefer a student-centered class format was larger compared to that of ETs. I plan to discuss these findings in a follow-up paper, and to formulate interview questions based on the findings. Through the interviews, I would like to further explore the backgrounds to the survey responses and the factors affecting them in order to better understand the beliefs underlying teachers' reported perceptions of their students.

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