

Achieving Student Self-Efficacy by Homeroom Teachers within Japanese Elementary EFL Classrooms : A Research Proposal

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小学校の担任による生徒の EFL 授業の自己効力感の構築：研究提案

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Homeroom teachers (HRTs) are a vital part of the classroom learning in elementary schools. The ability to comprehend whether an individual believes that he or she can achieve a goal, called self-efficacy, is at the center of the questions that make up this investigation. HRTs expertise in the ability to achieve student self-efficacy should not go unnoticed, despite the 2020 MEXT reform of the English as a foreign language (EFL). It is important to gain a full understanding of the impact that HRTs have on students as they learn English in their formative years, and what role they can play in the future of EFL education at the elementary school level. This research proposal hopes to identify the positive impact that HRTs contribute to the learning of EFL in the context of elementary schools.

Keywords : EFL, teacher development, self-efficacy, elementary school education

INTRODUCTION

In 2020, as a response to rapid globalization, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) implemented a reformed primary school English education. MEXT (2014) states that, “schools should verify and adopt an evaluation method, etc. which covers various aspects including students' motivation and attitude for active learning”, achieved by focusing on students' interests, motivation, and attitude towards communication equitably through an egalitarian approach. From the impetus of English language activities in elementary schools in the 1990s, the responsibility of conducting effective classroom lessons was placed on the HRTs

with a critical need to reach younger children. While many district are changing to subject-specialized teachers, the effectiveness of HRT-led classrooms, as it applies to MEXT's outline, is still not well understood.

Between August 2013 and July 2019, working as a native-language assistant language teacher (ALT) in elementary classrooms in rural city in Japan, I visited seven different schools and worked with a variety of HRTs and English-language teachers. While observing the classroom learning, I became aware of the lack of EFL pedagogy among HRTs for primary school students. Consequently, I became interested in the idea of the role of the HRT as an advocate to help students align one's learning towards their goals.

Motivation is at the focal point of this potential, making up an individual's self-efficacy. Understanding the ways motivation and self-efficacy are built within the classroom creates a dynamic which promotes the current and future success of learning EFL.

Through a proposed research project, I plan to explore how current teaching practices in EFL are implemented and how HRTs incorporate strategies that build, support, and sustain self-efficacy in students. The aim is to understand whether HRTs are conducting lessons with students' self-efficacy and potential motivation towards English language in mind. First, this document explores what research has taken place regarding motivation in the EFL context by competent HRTs in an environment which supports the implementation of English language learning. A brief understanding of the literature supports the direction of this research proposal and its suitability. Beyond that, the theoretical approach to be taken is discussed along with the methods of data collection and a description of the proposed research setting and study participants, including how the data will be analyzed. Finally, the document concludes with a brief section outlining the limitations and future direction of the study, followed by concluding remarks.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Motivation in EFL

Motivation is a commonly discussed topic of interest among researchers in the field of EFL. Zoltan Dörnyei, a prominent expert in the field of motivation in foreign language studies suggests, "self-regulatory strategies directly influence motivation, as they both concern the antecedents of increased learner achievement" (Dörnyei and Skehan, 2003, p.612). Researchers Madrid et al. (1993) concluded that, "attitudes and motivation are the most important determinant factors in the learning or acquisition of second languages" (p.19). To understand the main

sources of motivation in EFL, the researchers asked various cohorts to rank in order of influence six different factors and found that the youngest cohort rated "academic training of their EFL teacher" as very important. In a study titled "Research and Study on Learning Motivation", conducted by the National Institute of Educational Policy Research (as cited in MEXT, 2002), it was revealed that children tend to increase their motivation when they "better understood" classes, felt them "interesting", and "grew concerned about their future career".

Teacher Self-efficacy and Attitudes

The theoretical framework underlying teacher self-efficacy is Bandura's (1993) cognitive theory, which purports that individuals are viewed as agents of change who both influence and are influenced by the contexts in which they operate. Self-efficacy, he states, "is people's beliefs about their capabilities to exercise control over their own level of functioning and over events that affect their lives" (p.118). Research in teacher self-efficacy in Japan is abundant, noting several cases in which the theoretical framework of self-efficacy is applied. In a quantitative study exploring teacher motivation at the university level, Tsutsumi (2014) found that five factors, including stress, restricted autonomy, insufficient self-efficacy, lack of intellectual challenges and inadequate career structure appear to effect teacher motivation. By recognizing these factors, instructors can be made aware of their proclivities towards their own students' motivation, attitudes, and skill levels, suggesting an interrelationship present between teacher and student motivation (p.125).

Metacognitive Awareness

Werner and Kobayashi (2015) conducted a study which revealed that teachers in a Tokyo district elementary school were giving students an opportunity to "learn how to learn" (p.402) when it

came to studying EFL. “[Teachers] emphasized the fact that English is an academic subject, and while learning can be fun, it is also a serious part of the day” (p.404), which some students described as the reason for their added motivation towards EFL. Through a qualitative analysis based on the grounded theory approach, the researchers were able to collect data, “via observation notes and interview transcripts through the year [which] were categorized and coded according to an emergent framework” (p.404). Saito, Nagasawa and Ishikawa (2015) determined that students should be made aware of specific behavioural objectives, employing models such as the Common European Framework of Reference for Language (CEFR) to determine which skills have been individually achieved based on pre-prescribed objectives needs. Students who are invested in their individual development have greater self-efficacy and thus greater motivation in their effort to learn English.

Learning Environment and EFL Training

The learning environment considers the relationship teachers have with their students. Gorsuch (2002) says that certain characteristics brought upon by the HRT have an influence on Japanese learners including their learning environment, which could inhibit effective learning. One of the methods of assuring quality EFL programming, Hosoki (2010) suggests, is through the “upgrading of the teaching abilities of English language teachers” (p.211). Reducing anxiety in teaching a foreign language appears to be a significant outcome achieved through training, according to Machida (2016, p.44). However, teaching EFL pedagogy through professional development is determined by the local governments, which cannot be guaranteed on a periodic basis. Consequently, some local governments have begun placing licensed junior high school English teachers into elementary schools, many of whom are not training in primary school EFL. To date, there is still no regulatory standard on

training elementary school English pre-service or in-service teachers.

Limitations of Literature Review

Studies which specifically look at elementary English instruction in Japan that includes the perspectives of the HRTs and their propensity to promote self-efficacy are limiting. Although there are studies highlighting HRTs’ potential reluctance and anxiety towards EFL in the classroom, the studies themselves do not look beyond these interferences and overlook the realistic efforts taken on by HRTs. This is further characterized by the lack of understanding regarding what classroom strategies have been successful and which can be developed to increase students’ self-efficacy. A further area of research that has not yet been developed is the understanding of teacher self-efficacy as it applies to students’ own self-efficacy in the EFL elementary classroom. While teacher self-efficacy is well researched at the secondary and post-secondary school levels, it is not clear how teachers perceive themselves and their ability to conduct effective lessons at the elementary level.

METHODS

Theory Implementation and Methodology

To answer epistemologically the pillars of a constructivist/interpretive paradigm, the qualitative research method of grounded theory was selected as the methodology to be implemented. Vosloo (2014), suggests that the “primary analytical methods used in interpretative research are grounded theory and expansive analysis” (p.310). By analyzing and describing the meaning of the social world, grounded theory assists in studying the practices employed in EFL classrooms. “The intent of grounded theory”, as stated by Creswell (2012), “is to generate or discover a theory or abstract analytical schema of a phenomenon that relates to a particular situation grounded in

the experience and perceptions of the participants” (p.447). Grounded theory contains methodological description, then proposes and discusses the theory built during the research study, employing an inductive approach which moves the research process from specific to general. By determining the phenomenon at hand, interpretations can be made to better understand the practice of HRTs.

Data Collection and Procedures

Theoretical sampling in grounded theory, “means that the researcher chooses forms of data collection that will yield text and images useful in generating a theory” (Creswell, 2012, p.433). Semi-structured interviews are said to be the most appropriate, which are more flexible than structured interviews (Tilley, 2016, p.48), to “capture best the experiences of participants in their own words...consistent with the constructivist position” (Creswell, 2012, p.433). In-depth interviews will take place in the school building, employing a constant comparative analysis (Creswell, 2012, p.434). Prior to the interviews, participants will be informed about the content and basic questions that will be asked, priority given to developing opinions acquired during the interview. Given that the context is cross-cultural, special consideration will be made to understand whether, “the knowledge and skills to conduct...research in international and/or cross-cultural contexts [exists] before deciding to do so” (Tilley, 2016, p.53). Therefore, a translator will be available during the interview, fully capturing the participants’ intended meaning (Tilley, 2016, p.193). Interviews will be recorded using a digital audio recorder, making sure no disruptions are made during the interview. Finally, participants will be informed that follow-up interviews may be requested.

Observations of the classrooms will also be employed to gain insight into the methodologies used by each HRT. Following an observer-as-participant approach in which participants are known to the researcher,

observations will be conducted as a supplement to the interview process (Tilley, 2016, p.54). An interpretive approach will be used where, “knowledge takes the form of explanations of how others interpret and make sense of their day-to-day life and interactions” (Edwards & Holland, 2013, p.16), taking detailed notes during the observations. The interpretive understanding of the observed classroom environment will complement the interviews by clarifying the participants’ thoughts, feelings, actions, and attitudes towards the methodologies employed in their teaching.

Participant Recruitment

The sampling selection strategy to recruit participants will be conducted using purposive and snowball sampling methods. According to Tracy (2013), in purposeful sampling, researchers “purposefully choose data that fit the parameters of the project’s research questions, goals and purposes” (p.134). The main participants to be observed are in-service HRTs teaching EFL and have at least one year experience teaching EFL. Given that English language lessons are taught from the third to sixth grade, the scope of the participants should not be limited to one grade only. While the number of instructors fit to participate is high, snowball sampling may be employed to garner 10 participants total. Many instructors have responsibilities beyond the classroom and recruitment may prove difficult given the time constraints of their schedules. Therefore, “by identifying several participants who fit the study’s criteria and then ask[ing] these people to suggest a colleague, a friend, or a family member” (Tracy, 2013, p.136), a pool of potential participants may be gained.

With approval of the municipal board of education, an intent of research and request for participants will be sent to each local elementary school, giving each instructor equal opportunity to participate. Informed consent is to be acquired from everyone after being fully informed of the research process and data

collection (Tilley, 2016, p.82). It is important to note that participation is completely voluntary, which predicts a low harm risk level (p.82). Given that the proposed study is to take place in a non-English speaking environment, materials will be provided in both English and Japanese, to ensure clear information and to avoid any potential misunderstandings (p.82).

Data Analysis

Through an emerging design process, the collected data will be analyzed immediately after conducting observations or interviews to determine how to proceed with further data collection. Interviews will be conducted progressively and transcribed individually from the audio recordings. An interpretive approach will be used in reading each transcript before coding occurs. Open and axial coding, according to Creswell (2012, p.424), assist in the coding process of transcriptions in grounded theory design studies. Categories and subcategories will be built through the open coding process after which an emergent theory will be created. Axial coding then selects one category identified through the open coding process and, “positions it at the center of the process being explored, and then relates other categories to it” (p.426). Through these methods, causal conditions will be revealed, contributing towards theory building. Further data collection will occur through a process called, “zigzag”, gaining more insightful information from HRTs after which the researcher, “refines, develops, and clarifies the meanings of categories for the theory” (p.433) before going back to the field again. Data saturation is achieved when the researcher confirms that, “new data will not provide any new information or insights for the developing categories” (p.433) at which point observations and interviews will end. To achieve credibility through internal validity and increase the ability by which to interpret the findings from the data, field ethnographies using observations will satisfy methodological triangulation.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Proposed Study Limitations

As the research study developed, limitations in the vision of what was proposed to be achieved became clear. Initially, it was determined that participants be licensed elementary teachers who are currently employed by Fukui City, instructing students in EFL as HRTs. However, it should be noted that while HRTs are encouraged to teach their own classrooms during EFL instruction, some circumstances may keep them from entering the classroom on a regular basis. These teachers who fulfill the roles of the HRTs may have similar challenges regarding gaining self-efficacious students, but also may provide concrete examples of hurdles they envision the HRT may have to overcome given their unique positionality in the classroom.

Furthermore, to gain insight into the students’ self-efficacy, explicit inquiry should be made regarding the impact made on students through a native English speaker (the ALT) in the classroom. Given that the municipal board of education supports the use of ALTs as a resource in the classroom, legitimizing their presence as influencers to the HRT should be realized. Although the effectiveness of ALTs as resources in classrooms is well documented in Japanese elementary school classrooms, it became out of scope for this research proposal. By highlighting the advantages an ALT can provide the HRT or instructor as a resource in their effort to build self-efficacy, insights can be gained highlighting specific methodologies used in the classroom.

A third limitation of the proposed research study is the potential risk in inconsistent and inaccurate interpretations of transcripts made due to language barriers. Although it has been addressed that special procedures be taken when working across language differences, a researcher can experience severe drawbacks in potential relationships with participants and also in the data analysis phase of the study. In the

context of cultural sensitivity, the lack of language capability may deter some participants from speaking frankly. As a result, the breadth of the interpretation of the data gained may also be lacking, even after subsequent interviews are conducted.

Future Research

A lack of consistency among teachers in the classroom creates a challenging space in which to conduct a research study into the methodologies applied by HRTs. Thus, I advise a future study that would seek to understand the value of HRTs as the primary source of EFL for students compared to a visiting instructor, who while being less familiar, could benefit from their expertise in teaching the language. Which role would provide better chances of upholding self-efficacy in students would be a unique and enlightening study within this age group, given that English is not alone in terms of subjects taught by teachers other than the HRT (science, music and math), and it would certainly relieve some tension and anxiety one may have towards teaching an unfamiliar subject.

While grounded theory will provide a succinct source of potential in gaining insight into the experiences of HRTs, a valuable source of perspective is lost if native language teachers are not included in future projects. Clarity can be achieved regarding what methods benefit students in experiencing motivation towards EFL. Since there is no cultural or language barrier to cross, interviews may provide answers regarding what methods benefit students in experiencing motivation towards EFL. One study should seek to understand how the use of a native speaker contributes to the methodologies employed by the HRT in the successful implementation of EFL lessons, while another study should focus on the native speakers as the main participants, revealing their strategies in encouraging motivation among students. Furthermore, if the study were to employ an ethnographic portion in the research design, exposing the lived experience of participants, I

believe a more fruitful and authentic understanding of the classroom environment can be captured.

CONCLUSION

The formalization of teaching English language to young learners in elementary schools in Japan is an answer to the trend in the EFL world which seeks to promote English communication in a continually growing globalized world. Previously, Japan has lacked any definite stance on the methods by which to bring English to more young people, which has resulted in the need to define and understand how instructors are coping with this growing trend. Elementary school HRTs have been acquiring a set of skills, becoming familiar with EFL practices necessary to enhance students' experience with the English language during their developmental years. It is this skill set possessed by HRTs, as it applies directly to the learning experienced by students, that has influenced this research proposal. This study seeks to inform those committed to the improvement of EFL in elementary schools with a concerned effort to improve areas of practice towards self-efficacy.

With the results of this proposed study, I hope to be an informant within the EFL space in Japan, as it applies to the practical methods used in the HRT classroom. My concern for the betterment of individual learning carries with it a hope that students will move forward in their interactions with the English language confidently and passionately. This can only be achieved through one's potential gained through student self-efficacy as they learn how to learn. This unique proposal brings rich knowledge to a growing field of study, contributing to the development of EFL in Japan including pre-service and in-service training, curriculum development and reform, as well as theory. In consideration of the 2020 reforms, further research, as suggested, will provide new area of research to originate, as there are still improvements to be made for the future of EFL in Japan.

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