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THE SITUATION OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN THE FACULTY OF HUMAN SCIENCES IN A JAPANESE UNIVERSITY

Abstract:

This study investigates the situation of English language education in a Japanese university in Ishikawa, Japan, and is part of a larger research carried out over a number of years. The data gathered, reported, and analyzed in this paper includes a comparison of two academic years of data, showing results by/for different teachers' classes. The question of educational value for money, fair spread of teacher resources, and positive or negative discrimination is tackled. Findings show there tends to be both positive and negative discrimination within class levels, where students who initially score well on placement tests are assigned "better" teachers, while lower level students tend to be assigned lower performing teachers, resulting in a "low skill trap", despite all students paying the same fees.

Keywords:

equal educational opportunities, low skill trap, English language education

JEL Classification: Z00

1 Introduction

1–1 The need for English education for all

This paper seeks to highlight the situation of English education in a Japanese university through looking at data from the Faculty of Human Sciences, comprising the Department of Childcare Studies, and the Department of Sports Science. It is expected that this research could inform future educational decisions for not only the above, but also for universities in general. Students in the Department of Childcare Studies students “can earn teaching certificates for both Type 1 Elementary School Teacher and Type 1 Kindergarten Teacher” (Seiryō, 2017), which, as the above includes becoming an elementary school teacher, means that they will be expected to be able to follow and teach the prescribed course of education stipulated by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). This curriculum will include mandatory English classes from 2020 (Japan Times, 2017), meaning that the teachers will be expected to have the knowledge to teach or support it. According to MEXT’s “English Education Reform Plan corresponding to Globalization” (MEXT, 2014), work has begun from 2014 in order to provide “vigorous promotion from FY2014” to put in place the “Necessary Frameworks for New English Education”, including in elementary schools all over Japan. It should be noted that the above is a minimum standard, with local governments often having already stipulated such requirements well in advance of the date. For example, the city of Kanazawa, in Ishikawa (where the body of research in this paper originates) began English education in elementary schools much earlier, with it “being the first city to introduce the subject at all 58 of its public elementary schools in 1996” (ELTnews, 2004), beginning with at least one hour per week of English language education (Cabinet Public Relations Office, 2004).

From the above, it is clear that many of the students who graduate from the Department of Childhood Studies need a certain level of English language education and, for that reason among others, taking English classes is a required part of their university curriculum.

Regarding the Department of Sports Science, how necessary is it to include English language education in the curriculum. The department has stipulated that all their students, in the same way as the Department of Childhood Studies, also take English language classes as a mandatory requirement. As written on the department website, the department “aims to turn out high-level athletes, coaches, and public officials such as police officers, firefighters, and self-defense force personnel” (Seiryō, 2017). Looking at each of these, it can be proposed that high-level athletes will be exposed to English-language environments through sports literature or competing at home or abroad with English speakers and learning from them. They also come in contact with English

language speakers in the form of judges and umpires, with whom they have to communicate at times. As for coaches, they have to keep up with the latest trends in sports science, go to international seminars or training sessions to learn new techniques, and may even have English language speakers on their team of athletes. Therefore, for both athletes and coaches, “English can help your career in sports” (Kaplan, 2016).

Those studying sports science who want to become police officers, firefighters, and work in the self-defense forces, a knowledge of English is also very important. The number of visitors from abroad to Japan has increased significantly over the past five years in particular. Using conservative figures from Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO), figures which count the number of inbound tourists (and not the number of arrivals, as the same person may visit Japan multiples times in a year, such as for business), it was reported that 4,057,235 unique visitors arrived in Japan in 2011 (JNTO, 2017a), while the number was 21,049,676 in 2016 (JNTO, 2017b, showing a greater than five-fold increase. The results to date (published up to September 2017 by JNTO, 2017c) show a to-date year-on-year further increase of over 17.0%. While not all of these visitors are native speakers of English, English is a useful medium through which Japanese (such as police officers, etc.) can communicate with them (Kitao, 1996). In that light, it can be seen that making English language classes mandatory for sports science students at university was a wise decision.

The English classes in the departments included in the Faculty of Human Science are not divided according to career aspirations, rather the students are placed in line with their performance on an English ability placement examination given to them as they begin their first year in university. Thus, students who strongly require English in their future careers may be in any or all of the classes, regardless of level. Furthermore, in most cases, students pay an equal tuition fee, meaning students who are begin in the “top” English class pay the same fee as those in the “bottom” class. Due to this, it is reasonable for all students to expect a “good teacher”, meaning, in the case of English, someone who will help them to increase their level of English ability, irrespective of the class they are in.

Therefore, the starting point of this research is the notion that English language education is equally important, for all students in the faculty of human sciences.

1–2 Knowledge Compression and perceived drop in ROI

It has been shown that students who begin at a lower level find it easier to improve, in terms of an initially relatively steep learning curve (Lynch, 2015). In fact, student

inclusivity, learning curves, and diminishing returns all should be taken into account when considering English language education, if not all education when standardized testing is a part of it (ibid.). Basically, the above refers to including all students in education, by offering them the same resources set at their level. It asks us to keep in mind that compressing learning curves exist, so that a linear comparison of students at different levels is often not appropriate. Finally, it reminds us that a student may need to expend less effort increasing their score from, say, 30% to 40%, than they would in order to obtain a score of 95% from a starting point of 85% in standardized international testing, as the same input (effort) would produce diminishing returns (results) with consequential education results compression (ibid.).

Thus, we have to keep in mind that initially lower level students should outperform higher level students when comparing their improvement in terms of the percentage increase they show in standardized testing results over the term of their studies. This paper compares the results side-by-side, linearly, but the reader is invited to remember the above.

1–3 Assignment of Teachers to Classes

In the university English language teaching system, classes and levels are planned, and teachers are assigned to the classes by the professor in charge of English. Some teacher are full-time staff, while others work on a part-time basis. Then, there is an explanation/training day, when all the teachers go to the university, and some of the full-time staff explain the books, teaching system, etc., to the others.

A quirk in the system is that teaching is done in pairs, for example, in a four quarter (4Q) system, teacher 1 would pair with teacher 2. Teacher 1 might teach Q1 and Q3, concentrating on reading and writing, while teacher 2 would, in that case, teach Q2 and Q4, concentrating mainly on listening and speaking. There is (was) a variant of that system, in which one teacher would teach one (of two) scheduled classes per week, while the partner teacher would teach the other scheduled class. This paper looks at the performance of teachers, based on the students' results after one year (four quarters) of studying. In this situation, it is difficult to separate what is the result of one teacher's efforts from the other. This can be especially true when a poorly performing teacher is matched with a strongly performing one, and the students results are average. To go somewhere toward solving such an issue, this paper takes all the teacher-teacher pairings into the data set. If, for example, a "strong" teacher is paired with various teachers (as they are in the data), then, on average over all pairings, such a teacher's students will perform well (or, at least, not perform badly), while the opposite should be

true for a “weak” teacher. Data over a number of years should be considered for greater accuracy, and that is planned for a later paper.

2 Data Collection

2–1 Teacher Analysis (results of their students)

Results of not only the Faculty of Human Sciences, but of another faculty were gathered to increase the data set. The table below (Table 1) shows the data collected in the 2013 academic year. For some placement tests, the TOEIC Bridge was used (an “easier” examination with a maximum score of 160 points) and indicated in grey in the table while, for the others, the TOEIC was used (with a maximum of 990 points). It should be noted that each class had approximately the same number of students, and were taught for the same amount of time. All students were freshmen, n=610. The table also shows the class level to which students were assigned.

Teacher	Class Level Assigned (1=highest)	Human Sciences:1 Other Dept: 0	2013 Avg. (start, Apr. 2013)	2013 Avg. (finish, Feb. 2014)	% Change in Student Scores	Avg. % Change of All Classes	Teacher Performance Ranking
A	19	1	111	115	3%	3%	7
B	19	1	111	115	3%	3%	7
C	28	1	88	96	9%	9%	4
D	9	1	125	126	0%	0%	12
	11	0	125	125	0%		
E	9	1	125	126	0%	3%	9
	15	0	118	123	4%		
	25	0	102	104	2%		
	17	0	114	118	3%		
F	15	0	118	123	4%	2%	10
	13	0	121	117	-3%		
	23	0	106	111	4%		
	21	0	110	112	2%		
G	11	0	125	125	0%	1%	11
	13	0	121	117	-3%		

	25	0	102	104	2%		
	17	0	114	118	3%		
H	6	0	328	378	15%	16%	1
	29	0	85	100	17%		
I	7	0	320	330	3%	7%	5
	27	0	95	105	11%		
J	1	0	399	460	15%	13%	2
	3	0	387	430	11%		
K	1	0	399	460	15%	13%	2
	3	0	387	430	11%		
L	8	0	310	328	6%	4%	6
	23	0	106	111	4%		
	21	0	110	112	2%		
M	5	1	371	368	-1%	-1%	13

Table 1: Teacher Performance over One Year Reflected by Student Results in TOEIC (2013) (student n=610)

From Table 1, in 2013 Teachers J and K were initially assigned the highest level classes (based on students' performance on their placement tests), and Teacher H was assigned the lowest class. Interestingly, it could be seen that Teacher H, J, and K all had their students achieve a result of a more than 10% increase in their scores, and were ranked numbers 1, 2 and 2 (a tie), respectively. Teacher M showed the lowest increase (in fact, showed a decrease). What was done with this result and, logically, based on the equal needs of students, what should have been done with this result is discussed later.

One year later, the same testing and data collection was carried out. The data produced the following table (Table 2) (student n=540). From 2014, the TOEIC Bridge was no longer used, with all students being placed used the TOEIC. Due to changes in personnel, some teachers are not featured, while new teachers appear.

Teacher	Class Level Assigned (1=highest)	Human Sciences:1 Other dept: 0	2013 Avg. (start, Apr.)	2013 Avg. (finish, Feb.)	% Change in Student Scores	Avg. % Change of All Classes	Teacher Performance (over one year)
C	6	0	334	368	10%	10%	10
D	4	0	353	393	11%	15%	4
	13	0	256	303	18%		
E	14	0	256	309	21%	17%	3
	17	0	238	268	13%		
H	8	1	311	335	8%	8%	11
I	9	0	301	345	15%	13%	7
	3	0	378	423	12%		
J	1	0	412	493	20%	20%	1
K	1	0	412	493	20%	20%	1
L	7	0	316	336	6%	6%	12
M	16	1	247	251	2%	2%	14
N	10	0	287	293	2%	2%	13
O	20	1	233	264	13%	14%	5
	18	0	233	269	15%		
P	11	1	265	292	10%	13%	8
	12	0	261	302	16%		
Q	5	1	334	368	10%	13%	9
	19	0	233	270	16%		
R	15	0	252	287	14%	14%	6

Table 2: Teacher Performance over One Year Reflected by Student Results in TOEIC (2014) (student n=540)

From Table 2, in 2014 Teachers J and K were assigned the highest classes, with Teacher O assigned the lowest class. It could be seen that, after one year, Teachers J and K showed the highest percentage increase, while Teacher M showed the lowest increase.

3 Results

3—1 Teacher Assignment

It was seen that the “best” teachers were, in general, assigned the highest level class in the subsequent year. One teacher, Teacher H, was moved to a higher level class after good performance in the first year. Whether this was an unplanned coincidence or not is another issue. What it does show is that the lowest level students were not being assigned teachers that seemed as good as the ones who were assigned to the highest level students. In other words, taking the above as a general situation (which it is, as it includes all data from those years), the higher level students are benefiting from positive educational discrimination, while the lower level students suffer from negative educational discrimination, despite each student paying the same fees, and having the same goals (i.e., the goal to satisfy the graduation requirements of the university, and to be equipped to succeed in their post-university career). Further evidence for the above is the case of Teacher M, who was continually assigned to the lower classes, despite (due to?) showing low, or negative, performance.

3—2 Evidence of Positive and Negative Discrimination

It was seen that the “best” teachers were, in general, assigned the highest level class in the subsequent year. One teacher, Teacher H, was moved to a higher level class after good performance in the first year. Whether this is a coincidence or not is another issue. What it does show is that the lowest level students are not being assigned teachers that seem as good as the ones who are assigned to the highest level students. In other words, the higher level students are benefiting from positive educational discrimination, while the lower level students suffer from negative educational discrimination, despite each student paying the same fees, and having the same goals (i.e., the goal to satisfy the graduation requirements of the university, and to be equipped to succeed in their post-university career).

3—3 Little Evidence of Compression

It was expected that the lower-level students would show a greater increase (in percentage terms) than the higher level students as, for example, a 50 point increase from an initial lower score shows a larger percentage improvement than the same increase from a higher score. (e.g. increasing from 200 points to 250 points on the TOEIC is a 20% rise, while the same points increase, say from 500 points to 550 is only a 10% rise). On top of that,

educational compression says that even achieving that rise (in points) is more difficult for students who are starting from an already high level, than for those starting at a lower level (Lynch, 2015).

However, the data shows that the highest rise in scores was achieved by students in the upper-level classes (taught by Teachers J and K), which only some evidence of compression exists (e.g. Teacher H when in charge of the lower class in the 2013 academic year).

4 Conclusions

The evidence suggests that the highest performing teachers are continually assigned to the “best” students, while poor performers are assigned to lower classes. This is not fair to students who cannot enter the high ability classes. From the perspective of many students, and their families, the above situation is a type of negative educational discrimination, and measures should be taken to compensate for it.

Educational results compression (higher level students finding it increasingly difficult to improve, relative to their lower level peers) was not evident, with higher ability teachers possibly being the reason why top class students continue to improve their skills at a faster rate than the others.

5 Further Research

The data above is from two full years (2013 and 2104). A longer trend should be investigated, and this will be done in further research.

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