Identifying Variables in English as Medium of Instruction: A Trajectory Equifinality Modeling Analysis of Two English Teachers in Japan

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The Southeast Asian Conference on Education 2020
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract
The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) has long tried to change the medium of instruction (MI) for secondary school English education. Released in March 2018, a new course of study states that junior high school English should be taught in English. This reinforces an earlier announcement for MI in senior high schools in 2008, so now English teachers in all Japanese public schools are under increasing pressure to speak English exclusively during class. This is referred to as the "All English" policy. However, these calls for an "All English" classroom have not necessarily been welcomed or accepted by instructors. Indeed, fewer than 20% of teachers use English more than 75% in class at both junior and senior high schools (MEXT, 2019). Senior high school teachers are undoubtedly able to conduct English-only lessons, so why do they refuse to use more English in class? In order to qualitatively clarify variables that govern teachers' decisions on the use of English, two female English teachers, each with approximately ten years of experience, were interviewed separately regarding their teaching career. The resulting data were analyzed using the Trajectory Equifinality Model (Valsiner & Sato, 2006). The results revealed that anticipated learning difficulties among students inhibited the teachers' use of English and that this was influenced by the fact that they had been assigned to schools with varied proficiency levels. It was also found that a coincidental encounter with a model teacher served as the Obligatory Passage Point along the way to their achieving the Equifinality Point of using English as a MI.

Keywords: English medium instruction (EMI), language teacher training, trajectory equifinality modeling (TEM)

Introduction

Japanese English education at primary and secondary schools has often been criticized for being ineffective. A survey conducted by CEFR-J Research Group reported in 2012 that 80% of Japanese students placed at a CEFR A level, 20% at B level, and that only very few achieved C level proficiency (Negishi, 2012). According to the annual survey by MEXT for 2018, 42% of junior high school students attained CEFR A1 level and above while 40% of senior high school students achieved CEFR A2 level and above, which seems to be close to Negishi's observation (MEXT, 2019). Relatedly, The Japan Times reported disappointing results from a 2019 survey by a Swiss international company called Education First, in which Japan is ranked the fifty-third among 100 countries researched and therefore regarded as a "low" proficiency country (The Japan Times, 11/9/2019).

With this quandary in mind, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) has tried to improve students' English proficiency by working on five policies proposed by the Expert Meeting Committee for English Education Reform in 2014. One of the proposed policies states that English teachers at the secondary level (i.e., junior high school for Grades 7-9 and senior high school for Grades 10-12) should improve their own English proficiency in order to better teach English in English (TEE) in class. The Course of Study released in 2008 exhorts senior high school English teachers to employ English-medium instruction (EMI) exclusively, though grammar instruction is allowed to be in Japanese.

Nevertheless, it is taking a long time for senior high school English teachers to accept EMI. The use of English in their classes is reported to be far from 100%, even in the December 2018 survey results (MEXT, 2019). It was found that only 20% or fewer teachers use English more that 75% of their instructional time and the figure is no better in junior high schools. Similar to the 2008 EMI directive at the senior high school level, the new Course of Study issued in March 2018 for junior high schools states that English classes should basically be taught in English, which may hopefully accelerate the use of English among teachers.

Still, considering the state of senior high school teachers' use of English during the ten years since the "All English" policy was promulgated, it appears that similar implementation at a junior high level will not be so easy. The MEXT response to this situation has been to extend support with a goal of improving teachers' English proficiency. The assumption is that teachers avoid using English in class due to their limited English language proficiency. However, in the annual report of 2018, 68.2% of senior high school English teachers nation-wide attained CEFR B2 level or above, which is a 2.8% increase from the previous year. In Okinawa, where I teach, the figure is 77.4%. This confirms my personal observation regarding the proficiency level of English-majoring students at my university, who receive a junior and/or senior high school teaching license at the time of graduation. They all receive EMI and practice teaching English in English as part of the teaching license curriculum. A majority of future teachers we train go overseas for six months to one year in order to improve their English skills and experience foreign culture, and this trend has existed for many years. Even when it was less common for college students to study abroad, I have observed during my 20 years of teaching that many of those who became local teachers were the ones who had opportunities to study in the U.S. In sum, based on

available statistics and my many years of training and observing student and in-service teachers, I do not think that English proficiency is a primary factor impeding the use of EMI in junior and senior high schools in Japan.

Yet if English proficiency is not an issue, why are English teachers with sufficient English proficiency to teach EMI seemingly resisting implementation of the "All English" policy? From the beginning of their teacher training, aspiring English teachers are frequently reminded about the importance for them to provide an enriched English environment for their students. Like many Japanese universities, our teaching methodology courses at the University of the Ryukyus train students to conduct "All English" classes. We also teach second language acquisition theories that include ample evidence that TEE promotes language acquisition. To be fair to in-service teachers, especially veterans, curricular support was weaker 10-15 years ago. In days gone by lecturers promoted EMI in teaching methodology classes, but theoretical background information and practical training were seemingly insufficient. Still, the pressure to teach English in English has been steadily mounting since the release of the Course of Study policy in 2008, but as yet it has achieved rather meager results. Why? The quest to answer this has led me to investigate by tracing two of my undergraduate teacher's license alumni's career trajectories with an aim to clarifying the factors that encourage or inhibit their use of English for instruction.

In order to conduct this investigation, I used a relatively new approach based on the Trajectory Equifinality Model (TEM). TEM originated in the field of social psychology and has not yet been applied in the field of language teacher education to the best of my knowledge. It has been described as "a new methodology for depicting a diversity of the course of human life" (Sato, Yasuda, Kido, Takada, & Valsiner, 2006, p.255), and has been applied in nursery studies to analyze the caretakers' transformation and child development via peer interaction, in career education studies to clarify the course of decision making, and studies for transformation of a special-education teacher through professional experience (Yasuda, Nameda, Fukuda, & Sato, 2015). TEM employs qualitative analysis to develop a systematic examination of participants' histories within a chronological framework that considers potential and actual circumstances of the participants, as well as how these came to be so.

The purpose of this study is thus to use TEM to identify the effective and ineffective events and experiences of two in-service Japanese teachers of English that influenced them to ultimately begin using EMI.

Research Questions

My research questions are as follows:

1. What are the reasons for using or not using English as a medium of instruction (EMI) in English classrooms in Japan?
2. If English teachers are to overcome the difficulty of introducing EMI in their classrooms, what experiences/events/trainings are likely to promote such behavior?

Method

Participants

Two English teachers from a public senior high school in Okinawa prefecture were interviewed for this study. Both were alumni of the university where I teach. Both teach mostly in English except during exam preparation classes and in-class grammar instruction. Both were teaching at one of the top public senior high schools in Okinawa at the time when the interviews for this study took place. Both are female and both received their teaching licenses by completing the University of the Ryukyus' teaching licensing curriculum as English majors, though I taught them at different times because they were of separate academic years.

Participant A graduated in 2007 and became tenured in 2010 after completing a M.A. in TESL in the U.S. Before earning a permanent position, she worked as a non-tenured teacher for two and half years. Participant B graduated in 2005 and passed the teaching exam in the same year. She was employed as a tenured teacher in 2006; however, the first year was more like a probation period as it was customary at that time to delay the tenure of newly-hired teachers for a year. Thus, Participant A and B had different routes to becoming teachers, although both happened to work in the same school at the time of this study.

Instruments and Procedure

I conducted a one-to-one, face-to-face interview with each of the participants. It was a semi-structured interview with open-ended questions regarding their current use of English in class and reasons behind that use, career and teaching history after graduation, what they remember about teacher training from their undergraduate days, and what in-service trainings influenced their current use of EMI. The interviews were approximately 60 and 90 minutes long respectively. With consent for the research agreed, the interviews were recorded and transcribed. The data were then analyzed using the Trajectory Equifinality Model (TEM).

Analysis

In TEM analysis, researchers map the interviewee's history in a chart. The TEM chart will include an arrow to indicate "irreversible time" and important events/experiences will be allocated there. It should be noted that TEM employs a notion called "bifurcation points" at every identified event. That is, any event could have resulted in alternative outcomes if the participant made an alternative decision. The final stage achieved by the interviewee is called "equifinality point" and if a different decision was made at any bifurcation point, the final stage could have not been achieved. This analysis then enables researchers to determine the most crucial event(s) as the "obligatory passage point." The TEM chart also incorporates external factors that enhanced or suppressed the possibility of achieving the equifinality point. (Sato, 2017; Sato, Yasuda, Kido, Takada, & Valsiner, 2006; Sato, Mori, & Valsiner, 2016; Yasuda, et al., 2015; Yasuda & Sato, 2012). TEM therefore enables for a systematic qualitative analysis of the academic and career trajectories of two teachers and how they came to adopt EMI.

Results

Figures 1 and 2 show the TEM charts for Participant A and B respectively. In both figures, the arrow from the left to the right at the bottom of figure indicates the flow of irreversible time. Real events are indicated in rectangles with solid lines while alternative (unhappened, theoretically possible) events are shown in rectangles with dotted lines. In these figures, a right-end rectangle at the top indicates the equifinality point where the participants realize EMI is necessary for their students and begin to teach English mostly in English. The rectangles in dotted lines at the right-end are theoretically possible outcomes if the participant had taken other routes. Accordingly, rectangles for more positive events are placed toward the top of the figure, while negative ones are toward the bottom.

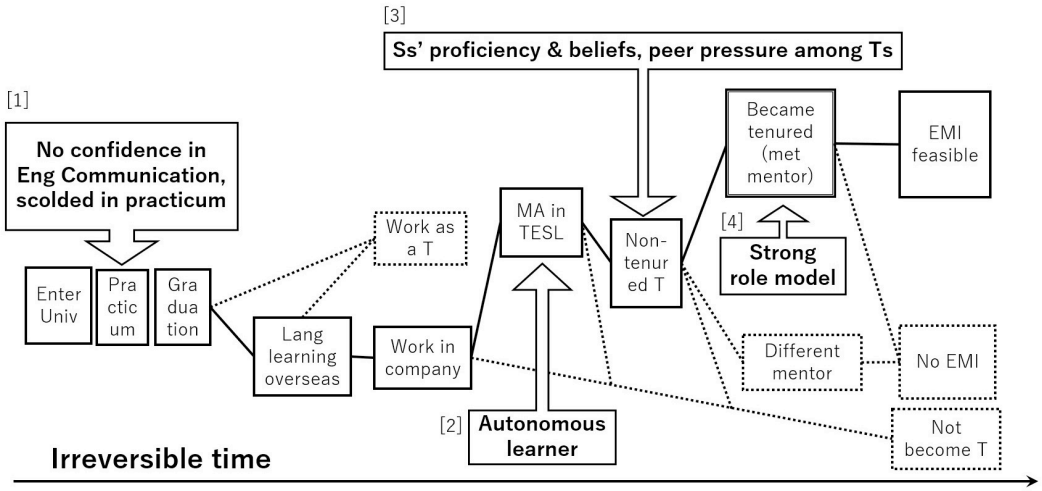

Figure 1: TEM chart for Participant A

By analyzing the interview results using TEM, clear paths of progression become obvious for each participant. Participant A met a mentor as she became tenured, which was her obligatory passage point. These experiences anticipate when she began using EMI as much as possible, her equifinality point (Figure 1). Similarly, the obligatory passage point for Participant B was when she met a mentor as a tenured teacher. After meeting a strong role model, she too began to employ EMI in her class as much as possible (Figure 2).

English teachers in Japan often experience difficulties when they try to teach English in English because they are not always convinced that TEE is beneficial for their students. Both interview results indicated that, depending on their estimation of the students' proficiency, these teachers sometimes held negative views about the feasibility of EMI. Especially in public senior high schools in Japan, the levels of students' English ability varies widely from one school to another, and many schools experience hardships trying to keep students motivated to study. In such schools, it is often believed that it would be impossible to teach English in English. Since senior high school teachers are generally relocated every five years, both participants claimed that they observed ups and downs in students' English levels as they were assigned to and moved from one school to the other. The events of school relocation were thus an influential environmental factor for the participating teachers.

Regardless of different school environments then, how did these interviewees manage to begin using more English in their classes? Both participants had experiences of almost giving up EMI when confronted with Japanese classroom reality. For example, Participant A felt that she could practice what she learned in the master's program in the U.S. when she first started teaching in a public school. However, the schools where she initially worked did not have very high academic levels. Although she was deeply impressed by the idea of "autonomous learners" as shown by [2] in Figure 1 and wanted to teach using such an approach, she was discouraged by the students' English proficiency and learner beliefs. Therefore, she could not effectively implement learner autonomy as part of her teaching ([3] in Figure 1). She also mentioned in the interview that it was additionally difficult to pursue her ideal teaching style while the other senior/peer teachers retained traditional teaching styles.

Yet when she passed the teaching exam and became tenured, she was assigned to a very experienced mentor teacher who became a strong role model. Participant A said that the mentor was "very proficient in both English and teaching skills" and she had also received her M.A. from an American University. She provided Participant A with numerous ideas about how to teach Japanese students in English. Significantly, Participant A who had almost given up the idea of teaching in English, discovered practical ideas to implement her ideals when she observed the mentor's classroom activities and when she received advice from the mentor. This motivated her to teach more in the manner she learned in her M.A. TESL program and led her to use as much English as possible in later years. This event can therefore be regarded as Participant A's obligatory passage point because without this experience, she would not have begun teaching English in English. A strong role model teacher ([4] in Figure 1) was the enabling factor that inspired her to become the teacher she is today—an effective TEE practitioner.

My TEM analysis of Participant B' interview revealed that her obligatory passage point was also when she obtained a tenured position and was supervised by a mentor. Her assigned mentor was an experienced male teacher, but rather unusual because he kept talking in English even when he was advising her. Participant B even wondered whether he was Japanese. The mentor persisted in speaking English all the time; he spoke English not only during class but also when he met students outside class such as in the hallway, and during homeroom meetings. He was perceived as a very determined English teacher and other teachers respected the way he behaved and taught. This does not necessarily mean other teachers tried to follow his style; however, he made a strong impact on Participant B and served as a role model teacher ([3] in Figure 2).

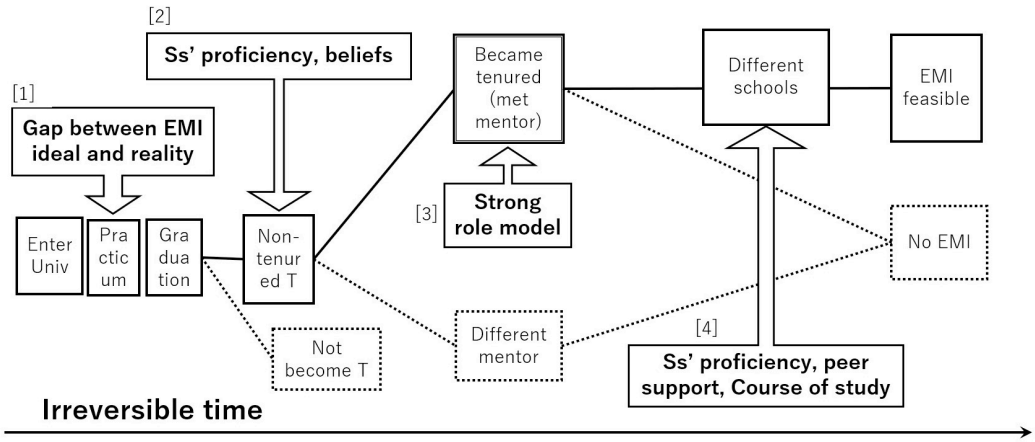

Figure 2: TEM chart for Participant B

Before that, Participant B actually found it difficult to teach English in English. She had learned that English should be taught in English in teaching methodology courses at university; however, experiences during her two-week practicum at the senior high school from which she had graduated made her despair of such an idea ([1] in Figure 2). Thereafter, she continued to be discouraged and could not use much English in her first year of teaching as a non-tenured teacher because her students did not accept the idea of using English for communication in class and rather preferred learning English for the university entrance exam ([2] in Figure 2). It was only when she met a role model teacher that she began to discover how she could teach using English. Because the impact of that mentor was so strong, she continued the same EMI teaching style, even after she was transferred to different schools. Toward the end of our interview, Participant B mentioned that introduction of the TEE policy in the Course of Study enhanced acceptance of English use in senior high school classrooms; therefore, it became easier to get support and understanding from students and colleagues ([4] in Figure 2). She could thus reach her current stage where she teaches English in English as much as possible.

Conclusions and Suggestions

With respect to my first research question, using TEM analysis I found that teachers who participated in this study hesitated to use more English in their classes because they felt that students were not ready to be immersed in EMI. It seems that when teachers encounter students with limited proficiency, they tend to feel reserved and refrain from using English. Fortunately, there is more support for teaching English in English now, as compared to the past. Students have begun to accept that EMI is good for them, and this makes it easier for teachers to use English in class. Regardless of the level of student, teachers need to find ways to make their English instruction understandable and enjoyable for their students. In such circumstances, mentor teachers can demonstrate practical solutions toward overcoming reservations about EMI.

Where the second question is concerned, my TEM analyses showed that meeting a strong role-model teacher was the obligatory passage point whereafter both teachers participating in this study adopted EMI. This implies that mentors are vital, and that

being instructed by the right ones—proficient, skilled teachers who are determined to conduct EMI classes—can be a formative experience that promotes more use of EMI. The mentor teachers referred to in this study actually demonstrated how teaching English in English could be done and how their students could enjoy themselves during that process, all the while improving their English.

Two items that require more research with respect to the first finding would be (1) the impact of teachers having to move schools every five years, and (2) the role that tenure might play in teachers' decision-making processes with regards to using EMI. Both of these considerations are areas for future research but, given available data, extend beyond the scope of the current investigation.

My only reservation about the second finding would be that, while newly employed teachers are assigned to a mentor for one-year on-the-job training, trainee teachers have no say in choosing that mentor. Mentors can thus serve as positive or negative role models according to a process that is more or less random. This process merits greater consideration. Mentors should be carefully selected based on demonstrated EMI teaching abilities that indicate they will serve as good role models. This is extremely important for beginning English teachers' career trajectories and for the success of EMI initiatives to date and hereafter.

Acknowledgements

This research was supported by Grants in Aid for Scientific Research from the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science under project No. 18K00744. Appreciation for editing and proofreading the manuscript goes to my colleague, Prof. George MacLean.

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Resources

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