*Role of Study Abroad in the Path to Teaching English in English
Among Japanese Teachers*

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Abstract

Even with the newly issued and adopted Course of Study by the Japanese Ministry of Sports, Education, and Science, and Technology (MEXT), the use of English in junior high and high school English classrooms is far from 100 percent. The current project used individual interviews to investigate the professional development of English teachers at public schools in Okinawa, Japan, using the Trajectory Equifinality Approach (TEA, Valsiner & Sato, 2006). In this paper, the TEA charts of two junior high school teachers and six high school teachers are compared, with an emphasis on the effects of their study abroad experiences on attaining the Teaching English in English (TEE) stage (i.e., equifinality point). The findings revealed that the nature of their overseas experience caused the differences in the acquisition of practical means to pursue TEE. More specifically, majors other than TESL significantly improved the participating teachers' English command. They did not, however, necessarily provide practical ideas for conducting TEE, whereas studying TESL served as a psychological foundation for not abandoning TEE even when the students' proficiency levels were insufficient to understand the teachers' English use. TEE is thought to be important in developing students' classroom proficiency, and study abroad experience for teachers is often thought to be desirable. However, the impact of such experiences must be carefully examined during professional development.

Keywords: Teaching English in English, Trajectory Equifinality Approach, Study Abroad

Introduction

In Japan, English is one of the junior and senior high school subjects and it is taught as a foreign language. The relatively low proficiency achieved by the national school curriculum has been widely criticized as ineffective, and the Japanese National Curriculum Committee discussed the need for drastic reforms. The most recent change in the Course of Study (CS) can be seen as a reflection of this argument.

The language used as a medium of instruction has been the focus of the debate. In terms of second language acquisition, maximum use of the target language is most desired because it will provide ample opportunities for input, interaction, and output during class time. Therefore, the new CS incorporated the concept of English medium instruction (EMI), or teaching English in English (TEE). The Japanese Ministry of Education, Science, Technology, and Sports (MEXT) issues the CS, which is renewed every 10 years. The almost compulsory use of English in the English classroom was first stated in 2008 for senior high schools (HS; Grades 10–12), and now is reinforced for junior high schools (JHS; Grades 7–9) in the CS issued in March 2019. Although Japanese schools, like any other in the world, were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and taught with restrictions, the TEE policy went into effect in April 2020 for JHSs. The 2019 CS reform in school English education included lowering the starting age as a subject to 5th grade and maintaining the EMI at the SH level.

Before such changes, the MEXT encouraged Japanese English teachers to achieve a level of proficiency sufficient to conduct TEE. The expected level of proficiency is Eiken STEP Test Grade Pre-1 or TOEIC 730, which is equivalent to CEFR B2. The MEXT conducts an annual survey to confirm the achievement. According to this annual survey, as of December 2021, 74.9% of HS English teachers achieved CEFR B2 while 40.8% of JHSs English teachers did. In contrast, only 46.0% of HS teachers reported using English more than half of the time in class, while 73.4% of JHSs teachers reported using English more than 50% in class. Although the number of HS teachers teaching English majors rises to 81.6%, high proficiency in English does not lead to increased use of the target language in HS. JH teachers, regardless of the low number of B2 achievers, are attempting to use more English in their classrooms; however, those who spoke English more than 75% of the time in their instructions reportedly remained only 15.4%, falling far short of TEE's CS goal. The survey also revealed that teachers' English proficiency was positively related to students' English achievement and that increased use of English by teachers resulted in more English classroom activities, which boosted students' proficiency.

As has other teaching licensing curricula at Japanese universities, the University of the Ryukyus where the author has been engaged in pre-service teacher education has encouraged EMI in our methodology courses and during the teaching practicum. We've also seen a number of our graduates study abroad in their junior to senior years before becoming teachers with strong English communication skills. As a result, the annual survey results were astonishing and contradictory to our observations. What caused the disparity between their university experience and actual school teaching?

Toya (2020a, 2020b, 2021) conducted interviews with local JHS and HS English teachers who had received pre-service teacher training at the University of the Ryukyus to identify the variables influencing their use of English in class. In the semi-structured interviews, the participating teachers were prompted to tell their stories from their university days to the present. Their narratives were evaluated using the Trajectory Equifinality Modeling (TEM)

chart (Sato, 2017; Sato et al., 2006, 2016; Valsiner & Sato, 2006; Yasuda & Sato, 2012; Yasuda et al., 2012). Toya (2020a) discovered that the two interviewed HS teachers were empowered after meeting a mentor teacher who demonstrated a clear model of EMI even in a discouraging situation in Japan. Toya (2020b) compared the other three HS teachers and discovered that (1) their overseas experiences at different points in their trajectories had different effects on achieving the equifinality point (EQ) of EMI, and (2) events such as school transfers, the TEE policy in the CS renewal, and annual MEXT surveys were influential factors in the decision making of the amount of English used in class. In Toya (2021), the trajectories of one HS and two JH teachers revealed a common variable of the Okinawan environment that has historically been influenced by the U.S. It has also been argued that all participants could carry out TEE with zeal because they all had a clear vision of what they wanted to achieve by using more English in class, as well as means to make that vision a reality.

TEM charts analyses allow the researchers to determine the effectiveness of each event in the interviewees' stories. The TEM in the trajectory equifinality approach (TEA) maps out the path to the desired present status or equifinality points (EP) just like the top of the hill by drawing an arrow that indicates an irreversible time. There are numerous routes available if one wishes to climb the hill from the bottom. It can take a long or a short time, and the number of stops varies depending on the climbers. Such stops or events are known as bifurcation points, and they occur where an alternate route could have been taken. The event(s) critical to achieving the goal (EP) are referred to as obligatory passage point (OPP). An OPP is thought to be the most important point that determines the path to the EP. In the TEM chart, there also are upward and downward arrows that affect the path to EP positively or negatively. They are known as social guidance (SD) and social direction (SG) respectively.

Purpose of the study and research questions

The purpose of this paper is to present more focused analyses of the effects of extensive study abroad (SA) experience among Japanese English teachers who use TEA. This is part of a larger project that investigates TEE passages among Japanese English teachers at the elementary and secondary levels (see Toya, 2020c). The overarching question is: What are the reasons for using or not using English as a medium of instruction in Japanese English classrooms? and the specific question in this paper is: If English teachers have SA experience for more than a year, how does the experience lead to more use of English in their language classrooms? Based on the TEM analyses of English teachers in public schools who graduated from our university, we would like to clarify what conditions must be met for an overseas study to lead to TEE.

Methodology

Participants

The study included eight Okinawan English teachers (6 HS, 2 JHS; 4 males, and 4 females). They were part of a larger project that investigated in-service teachers' paths to TEE (see Toya , 2020c). The current participants obtained an English teaching license for JH and/or SH from the University of the Ryukyus, where the author teaches for the license. They have been teaching English in local public schools and all spent more than a year studying abroad in the U.S. Table 1 summarizes the details.

Table 1: Participant Details

Participant	A	B*	C*	D*	E	F	G	H
Enrollment	1998 (junior)	2002	1998	1998	2001	2001	2003	2003
Gender	Female	Female	Female	Female	Male	Male	Male	Male
Years of Teaching	15 years	10 years	15 years	15 years	10 years	10 years	9 years	9 years
School	High S.	High S.	High S.	High S.	High S.	High S.	Junior H.	Junior H.
S.A. length	2 years	2 years	1 year	1 year	1 year	1 year	1 year	1 year
S.A. timing	Graduation →company →non-tenured	Graduation →company	4th year after teaching practicum	4th year after teaching practicum	3rd year before teaching practicum	3rd year before teaching practicum	Graduation →M.A. 2nd year	Graduation →M.A. 2nd year
S.A. program	M.A. in TESOL, assessment (U.S.A.)	M.A. in TESOL (U.S.A.)	Univ. Exchange (U.S.A.)	Univ. Exchange (U.S.A.)	Univ. program, private (U.S.A.)	Univ. program, private (U.S.A.)	Non-degree SLA (U.S.A.)	Non-degree linguistics (U.S.A.)

Notes: Participant B was the same teacher as Participant A in Toya (2020a). Participant B was Participant A, and Participant C was Participant B in Toya (2020b).

Data collection and analyses

The teachers were interviewed individually with prepared questions. The interviews were conducted one-on-one, face-to-face with the researcher, and lasted between 50 to 90 minutes. Before the interview, each participant was informed about the study and signed the consent form. The discussions were recorded and transcribed, and their TEM charts were mapped. The OPP was calculated for each individual chart. The overlap between the main SA experience and OPPs will be regarded as the significance of such experience in achieving EMI. The following section summarizes the interview results as each participant's stories with some TEM charts.

Results

Participant A's story

Participant A attended a university outside of Okinawa before transferring to our university to obtain an English teaching license. With little work experience, she accepted a one-year non-tenured teaching position. She passed the teaching exam while also receiving a two-year scholarship to study in the U.S. She studied TESOL with an emphasis on assessment. She earned an M.A. and hoped to pursue a Ph.D., but she had to return to Okinawa and work as a teacher. She had high hopes for TEE, but her first school as a tenured student was academically demanding. It made her consider giving up her teaching career, but she persevered thanks to numerous peer supports. She eventually adjusted herself and began to

enjoy students. Since then, she has preferred to be transferred to difficult schools. She recalls how important it was for her to use English in class. Her M.A. experience, as well as the CS-based seminars and surveys, sparked the idea. Nonetheless, her first tenured school had such an impact that her M.A. knowledge and skills went unused and never seemed to be fully recovered. Figure 1 depicts her TEM chart. As shown here, the gray-highlighted OPP occurred after the yellow-highlighted SA experience. They do not overlap, and the OPP only resulted in very limited use of English in EFP class.

Notes: univ = university, ESL = English as a second language, mo = month, HS = high school, T = teaching / teacher, yr = year, yrs = years, US = United States, EMI = English as medium of instruction, MA = Master of Arts, w = week(s), CS = course of study

Figure 1: TEM chart for Participant A.

Participant B's story

Participant B lost confidence in TEE during the teaching practicum during her fourth year in our teaching licensing curriculum. Her mentor scolded her harshly and felt inept as a result of this experience. Therefore, after graduation, she enrolled in a short-term language learning program outside of Japan to improve her English. At the time, she was about to give up teaching and work in a company, but she decided to study TESOL in an M.A. program in the US. As her school focused more on sociolinguistics, she learned about and was fascinated by the concept of autonomous learners. She was resolute to become a teacher when she returned to Okinawa with a Master's degree. She began teaching as a non-tenured instructor, hoping to implement the theories and practices she learned in the US. However, the schools she was assigned to at the time were all academically demanding, which discouraged her greatly. During her first year of tenured teaching, her mentor became a living example of EMI implementation in Japanese high school settings (see also Toya, 2020a).

Participant C's story

Before enrolling in university, Participant C spent one year in Massachusetts as an HS student. During her university years, she also spent a year in Hawaii on our exchange program as a junior. She studied second language studies as a major. She was obsessed with perfecting her pronunciation, and she remembered absorbing more during her first SA experience than during her studies in Hawaii. Our teaching licensing curriculum during her tenure required students to write lesson plans in English and strongly promoted EMI. Thus, she spent a significant amount of time preparing visual materials for TEE during her teaching practicum. However, she stopped using much English in class when she was hired as a

tenured teacher due to the limited time for preparation. Because she has a more structure-oriented learning style, she prefers grammar instruction using Japanese (i.e., L1) to EMI. The OPP was chosen as her third school during her tenure, and the teacher's teamwork was supportive of EMI. The students were also capable of accepting EMI. Around the same time, she participated in several in-service training programs, including a 6-month TESL program in Australia and a three-day British Council workshop, which increased her motivation to use English in class. Then the final push of the active learning seminar took place in her 4th school, which is considered the second OPP. Like other interviewees. The CS and MEXT survey worked as social guidance. (For her TEM chart, please refer to Participant A in Toya, 2020b).

Participant D's story

Participants C and D enrolled in university the same year and completed the teaching licensing curriculum concurrently. Participant D received the same instructions in the university's teaching licensing curriculum as Participant C. As instructed by the methodology course instructions, she tried to speak as much English as she could during her teaching practicum. However, she was too nervous to carry out EMI successfully. Like Participant C, Participant D studied abroad for a year as part of an exchange program after the practicum. She realized while studying in the U.S. that Japanese people were too modest and self-conscious to speak up and persist in their intentions during conversations with native English speakers. This experience made her realize the importance of being more assertive and confident when speaking in English, which served as the foundation for EMI later on. This is considered the first OPP and overlaps with a SA experience.

 Nonetheless, she struggled for years to implement TEE because her EMI strategies lacked concrete examples. Because her first three schools, as well as the school where she worked as a non-tenured teacher, were academically difficult, she mostly inserted Japanese translations after her English utterances to ensure that her students understood. Coincidentally, Participant C happened to be her colleague at her 4th school as a tenure. As a result of her former university friend and students' high proficiency, she became more active. The British Council Workshop, which Participant C also attended, provided Participant D with practical ideas for English-only classrooms, prompting her to pursue TEE. However, her private situations such as maternity and family responsibilities made it difficult to thrive more, and her TEE was less in the 5th school. (For her TEM chart, please refer to Participant B in Toya, 2020b).

Participant E's story

Before entering the university, Participant E participated in a one-month exchange program in the US twice: once in Oregon in his 9th grade and again in Massachusetts in the 11th grade. He enrolled in and completed teaching licensing courses in the hopes of becoming an English teacher. He studied in the U.S. during his junior year and completed his HS teaching practicum after returning from SA. The experience enabled him to use a lot of English during his practicum. He had high hopes of continuing EMI as an HS teacher after graduation, but he was discouraged by students' low proficiency and motivation and stopped using English while working as a non-tenured employee. As a tenured teacher at a more proficient high school, he regained motivation to experiment more with the use of English in class. Still, it wasn't until the 3rd tenured school that he felt at ease and confident about EMI. He gained ICT skills and knowledge in the 2nd year and developed the idea for EMI implementation. Specifically, he was chosen as an off-the-job trainee for school ICT use for 6 months, and he

was able to establish effective use of the iPad to minimize the use of Japanese in his teaching. This event should have been the OPP in his trajectory; thus, his SA experience did not serve as an OPP.

Participant F's story

Participant F was a university coursemate of Participant E. He spent ten months in a university ESL program in California before extending his stay for another two months to learn TESOL. In his JH teaching practicum following his SA experience, he attempted to provide English activities using the target grammar, though he did not intend to teach exclusively in English. Because the schools where he worked after graduation did not encourage TEE, he mostly taught in a traditional manner using the grammar-translation method and/or mimicking what other teachers did. After passing the teaching exam, he was on the waiting list and worked as a non-tenured teacher for 2 years. He taught English in English using the communicative approach in his first year as a tenured professor, as part of his in-service training project. He discovered that his students enjoyed his class and were willing to use English extensively. This means he has reached the OPP, which is the point at which EMI is possible.

However, he withdrew himself from using much English in class or taking a communicative approach after his project was completed. He preferred not to draw attention to himself and was aware that the school system should function as a unit. Based on his learning experience in Japanese classrooms up to HS, he felt that much of what he learned in TESOL in the US did not apply to the situations in Japan. His action research focused on 10th graders, and he did not believe he should apply the same strategy to 11th and 12th graders. With the students who were aiming to pass the university entrance examination, he could not see how EMI could benefit and motivate his students. Therefore, his SA experience served as a resource to try TEE at one time but had no long-lasting-term positive impact.

Participant G's story

An interview with Participant G revealed that he was heavily influenced by the university's teaching methodology course, in which the instructor advised using as much as possible English in class. As a result, he conducted almost all of his teaching practicum in English. He pursued TEE because, around the same time, he failed the interview for the SA university exchange program, which motivated him to prove himself by using English as much as possible. He then enrolled in our university's M.A. program in English Education and was chosen to study in Hawaii as an exchange student for a year, majoring in second language studies. This suggests that his SA experience was a dream come true, but, again, it was not the OPP for achieving TEE.
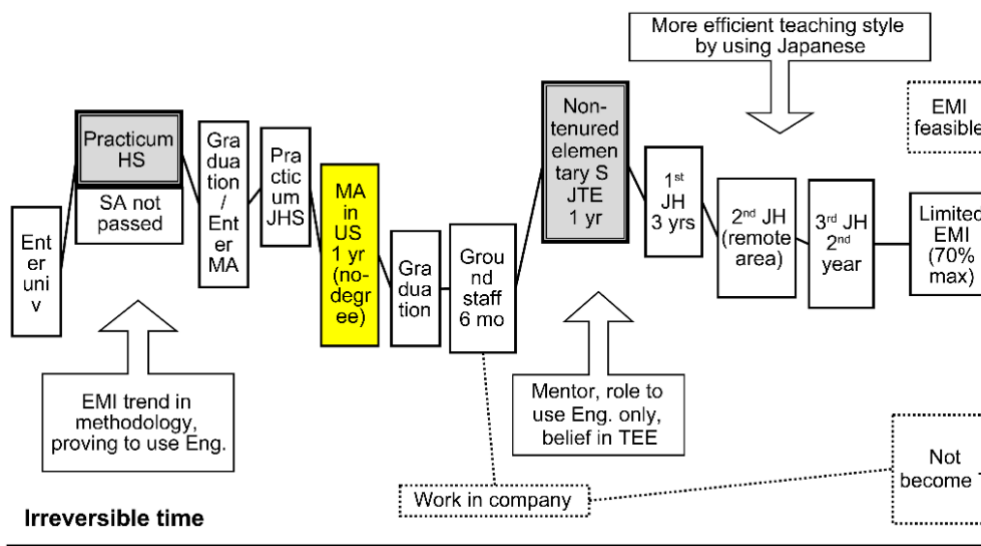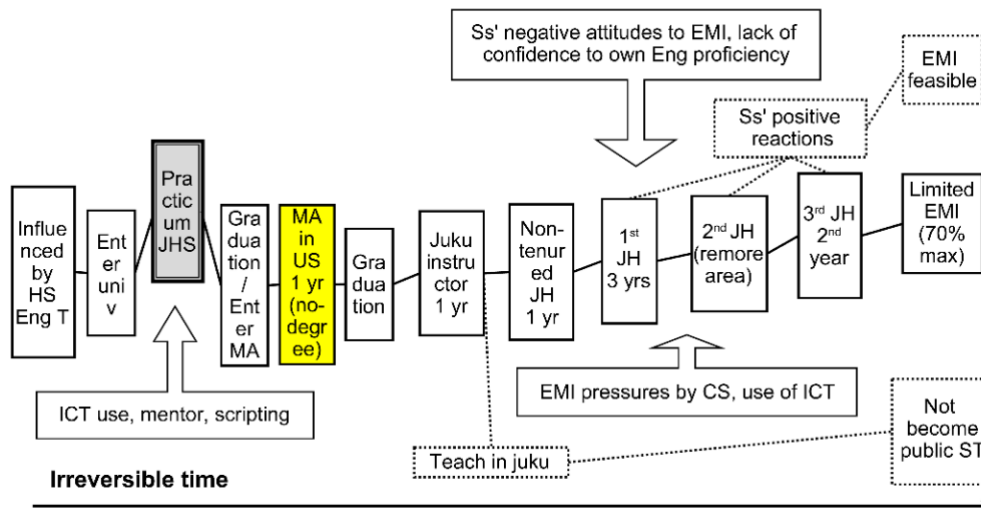
Figure 2: TEM chart for Participant G.

The analyses revealed two OPPs in his TEM (see Figure 2). The first was his teaching practicum in the undergraduate program, where he was convinced of the effectiveness of EMI and implemented it despite some students' negative comments. The second was during his year as a Japanese English Teacher (JTE) at an elementary school. His role as JTE was to collaborate with the Japanese classroom teacher and teach exclusively in English. At first, he struggled a lot but the school had a very skilled teacher who demonstrated how to teach children effectively without using Japanese. He learned a lot from his mentor and then became a tenured JH teacher by passing the teaching exam.

Participant H's story

Participant H became interested in becoming a teacher in his JH days. He met a good English teacher in HS, which prompted him to apply to our program. While taking the teaching methodology course alongside Participant G, he was convinced that TEE was necessary for Japanese classrooms. He used as much English as possible during his teaching practicum at a local JHS, by writing out what he would say as an English teacher, memorizing the script, and acting it out. This practicum served as the OPP that had the greatest impact on him, ultimately leading to EMI. His practicum mentor was able to teach almost entirely in English using original PowerPoint slides. Participant H was taken aback by his mentor's teaching because PowerPoints were still new in JHS classrooms. The impact was so strong that, when he became a tenured teacher, he purchased all of the necessary devices to mimic his mentor's teaching style with ICT. Since then, he has continued to use PowerPoint slides that he created based on the coursebook contents. As a result, we decided to end his teaching practicum as the OPP (see Figure 3).

Under pressure from the CS, which stated that English lessons should be taught primarily in English, he recognized that TEE was the right direction to take; however, he sounded less enthusiastic about actual implementation. He admitted that, despite using ICT, he never felt his English was fluent enough to conduct EMI smoothly, even after his one-year SA in Michigan. He also struggled to keep up when low-proficiency students in class became disoriented because he spoke so much English and ended up using more Japanese. It was

surprising that Participant H was still not unsure about TEE. It should also be noted that he majored in linguistics rather than TESOL, during his SA experience, which may have had a less positive impact on TEE.

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Figure 3: TEM chart for Participant H.

Discussion and conclusion

Given the stories of the 8 participants, it was discovered that the SA experience generally does not serve as OPPs except for Participant D. It should be mentioned that their SA experience all happened before the actual teaching. Six went to the U.S. when they were in the university, 4 undergraduates and two during their Japanese M.A. programs, all deciding to SA to become teachers. It was also obvious that the other two, i.e., Participants A and B, also studied abroad for a Master's degree with the assumption that the experience and expertise would improve their English and teaching skills immediately after they began their teaching careers.

Although the SA experience surely impacted them positively on their use of English in class; however, further push for visualization of TEE possibility or feasibility was required for the actual EMI implementation. For example, Participant B's OPP was when she found a mentor to serve as a TEE role model. TEE role model teachers were also assigned to participants F and G. Participant B gained practical TEE tools during the in-service workshops and she supported Participant D's direction toward implementation as a peer. Participants E and G could conduct TEE because they discovered an effective use of ICT.

TEE is deemed essential in developing students' proficiency in class and language teachers' SA experience is commonly thought to be desirable. However, the current analyses using TEM mapping indicated that the effect of such experience requires careful examination in the course of professional development. Due to our analyses, pre-service teachers' SA experience may have more chance of resulting in TEE if (1) the study discipline focuses on ESL/TESOL with theories and practical skill training, (2) the experience creates strong beliefs about the positive long-term vision for their student's future, and (3) develops the communicative competence to build confidence in the target language.

For (1), Participant B gained knowledge about autonomy in second language acquisition (SLA), which later became fueled when she met a TEE mentor. However, Participant A's overseas study focused on assessment and she could not recover the concept of EMI in the end. Participant H's TEE resources did not emerge in his SA experience and his major during SA was linguistics. (2) is supplemented by cases of Participants A and F. Even with the positive experience during the SA, they decided not to pursue EMI at the time of the interviews. If they could overlap their students' needs with their positive experience as language learners, they would not have discontinued TEE. The author has seen our pre-service teachers become very fluent and capable of functioning in English; however, there was one participant, Participant H, who struggled when attempting to conduct TEE. When the similar trajectories of Participants H and G were compared, it appeared that Participant G was more competent in English communication even before the SA, and thus seemed more confident using more English in class. The two also differ because, unlike Participant G, Participant H majored in linguistics, which most likely did not provide TEE training during the SA.

The difficulty arises when the teachers are confronted with students' proficiency, motivation, and a short-term goal of passing an entrance examination, as well as peer pressure to continue using the same methodology in the same school. The effects of pre-service SA experience on TEE are found to be rather limited; however, with the appropriate nature of such SA and the events that occur after they become teachers, their chances of reaching TEE could potentially increase.

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