

Observed Classroom Management Variables Influencing Pupils' Task Engagement in Elementary English Activities

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Abstract

With the introduction of foreign language activities (FLA) in 2011, many elementary teachers have expressed concern with their ability to engage students in classes. This study aimed to document concrete methods which current teachers use to improve students' observable levels of motivation and engagement in foreign language classes. Using a mixed methods approach to document noticeable qualitative differences along with independent quantitative ratings, this study looked at 23 different 5th and 6th grade classes using the new curriculum. An exploratory factorial-design ANOVA found significant differences between individual classes, as well as classes grouped according to the level of involvement of Japanese homeroom teachers (HRTs), native English speaking teachers (NESTs), and the effective monitoring of classroom seating procedures. Preliminary conclusions indicate that greater involvement by HRT, more interactive relationships with assistant language teachers (ALTs), and clear procedures to monitor student behavior have a strong role in promoting students' behavioral engagement.

1. Background

1.1 Foreign language activities in Japanese elementary schools

In the spring of 2011, The Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Technology (MEXT) implemented the new course of study guidelines to include foreign language in all elementary schools in Japan (MEXT, 2008). With the new curriculum for FLA, Japanese HRTs have been worried about how to properly teach and engage students in English classes (Fennelly & Luxton, 2011).

In support of elementary teachers, numerous resources looking at methods for engaging students in learning tasks have been published (e.g. Naoyama, 2011; etc.). These books have emphasized ideas for promoting communication not only in English during class time, and some have even included video examples. While these videos offer

examples for teachers to follow on how they might present or demonstrate a lesson, these classes are often artificial and do not demonstrate unseen influences or everyday practice. In order to document how students learn in real foreign language classes, an examination of student behavior in relation to the underlying classroom variables is necessary.

1.2 Engagement and classroom management

Classroom motivation, evidenced by student engagement (Skinner, Kindermann, & Furrer, 2009), has been identified as a key issue in promoting student learning (Nuthall, 2002). Much of the literature has conceptualized engagement as connected to students' cognition, emotions, and behavior (Skinner et al., 2009), a division which roughly corresponds to the MEXT (2008) guidelines for teaching to improve interest (関心), motivation (意欲), and attitudes (態度). While all engagement constructs may be considered somewhat elusive, emotional and cognitive engagement pose special measurement issues. However, behavioral engagement, specifically the collective behavioral engagement of all the students in a class, has at the same time been clearly measured using observational data (Jang, Reeve, & Deci, 2010).

According to Good and Brophy (2008), students' behavioral engagement can be directed through the use of positive classroom management, such as concrete rules, procedures, and routines. These may include classroom space organization and use, behavioral monitoring, and interaction with students to provide feedback. Management procedures elicit positive engagement through the creation of a meaningful learning environment (Brophy, 1998), an essential feature improving student motivation (Nakata, 2009).

1.3 Factors influencing engagement in foreign language classes

Looking specifically at factors which may influence student engagement in elementary schools, several of the above mentioned ideas have been studied indirectly. One common topic of discussion in Japanese schools is the employment of NESTs, sometime called ALTs. These teachers are employed with the expectation that they can act as a role model for the use of language (Mahoney, 2004) and help to motivate students by providing real opportunities for communication in the foreign language (MEXT, 2008).

Related to this is the role played by HRTs in foreign language classes lead by NESTs. Aline and Hosoda (2006) looked at and found 4 different patterns of HRT behavior during NEST led foreign language activities: bystander, translator, co-learner, and co-teacher. These roles range from the teacher as a largely passive onlooker (bystander) to active classroom leader (co-teacher), with each role in between representing a step towards greater interaction with students and investment from the teacher. The prevalence of the first two roles, the bystander and translator roles, may be

explained by teachers' attitudes towards teaching English as a foreign language (Butler, 2004; 2007), which may in turn have an effect on student motivation and engagement.

According to Butler's (2004) study of elementary school teachers from various East Asian countries, Japanese HRTs rated their English skills the lowest of any of the groups. Further studies into HRTs' attitudes towards English indicated that many believe that NESTs were the ideal teachers of English, related to a combination of factors including English ability and a fear of somehow losing Japanese identity (Butler, 2007). This may explain teachers' strong emphasis on the employment of ALTs, allowing teachers to both save face and ostensibly follow the course of study guidelines (MEXT, 2008). However, students also respond to teachers as role models, and the way that teachers demonstrate desired behaviors in class may help to explain students' behavioral engagement (Bandura, 1997; Good & Brophy, 2008). The reality of teachers' feelings towards English should be balanced against the idea that elementary students may recognize their teacher's level of engagement and interest in the class and use this as a base reference for their own expected level of engagement.

While the above represents a loose collection of potential factors influencing student's behavioral engagement, there are quite likely numerous other factors which influence pupils' behavior in elementary foreign language classrooms. In order to document potential exogenous influences, this study aims to use classroom observation in order to record concrete organizational and procedural factors which show measurable effects on students' behaviors.

2. Aims

In order to document concrete differences in management practices by current elementary teachers, this study seeks to answer the following research question:

What measurable effects do observed classroom management procedures and practices have on elementary students' in-class foreign language learning behavioral engagement?

3. Methods

3.1 Subjects

This study looked at 23 classes at 6 different schools in a suburban city in western Japan. Classes at the 5th and 6th grade levels were investigated with the permission of the city board of education, each school principal, and the individual HRT, Japanese teachers of English (JTEs), and ALTs employed at each school. In order to protect individual minor students' right to privacy, I used only collective class data rather than gathering individual survey data from students. Twenty-one out of the 23 classes were observed twice: once with ALTs present and once without. All classes were observed

during the months of October and November of 2011. As the time frame for each class was relatively similar, each class was also covering the same basic unit goals.

3.2 Instruments

This study used simultaneous mixed methods design known as concurrent triangulation (Cresswell, 2009) to both quantitatively rate and qualitatively describe classroom activities and events in order to document students' collective behavioral engagement (Skinner et al., 2009) in elementary classes. This exploratory method involves gathering quantitative data, in this case an external rating of students' collective behavioral engagement, and qualitative data, in this case the observed classroom variables, simultaneously and independently before finally bringing the two together.

Classes were rated on a 6-point Likert-type scale designed to document on-task versus off-task behaviors by a research assistant. Justifications were based on an overall composite of the observed engagement rubric used by Jang, Reeve, and Deci (2010). Theoretically, classes with high engagement would have students who were all listening, paying attention to the teacher and the task, and actively participating in the classroom communication activities. In extremely low engagement classes, the majority of students do not listen to teachers and spend more time performing off-task actions such as talking, fidgeting, or distracting their neighbors.

In order to compare overall observed behavioral engagement under different conditions, a factorial ANOVA design was used to look at differences in effects the classroom environment teachers' created by each teacher. For this research, independent variables were selected based on a combination of previous empirical research and my own observations of the classroom setting to investigate student behavior. Due to the exploratory nature of this research, independent variables were chosen after watching classes and discussions with JTEs, HRTs, and ALTs.

These classes were rated by an independent research assistant using a double-blind format; I was not informed of the ratings, and my assistant did not know about my hypotheses generated from observation and discussions with teachers. Independent variables were chosen separately from the ratings in order to prevent unconscious or conscious bias according to the research goals. The final decision was confirmed by the teachers observed as factors important to promoting positive on-task behavior. Analyses were completed in Stata version 12.1 (StataCorp, 2011).

4. Results

4.1 Qualitative classroom observations and the creation of grouping codes

Based on observations, one issue I noticed was the role of the HRT. These teachers played a highly varied role in the classroom, with some teachers never present and others actively involved. This dynamic was also observed by Aline and Hosoda

(2006). Referring back to their research, I coded each class according to the role and involvement of the HRT. Each was classified based on his or her involvement as *bystander/not present* in the classroom, *translator*, *co-learner*, and *co-teacher*. These categories were then used as independent variables in the factorial ANOVA to test for differences between different levels of involvement.

Similarly, during information sessions and organizational meetings with teachers, JTEs and HRTs stated that students' reactions when ALTs were present was significantly different. Teachers would often claim that students were more interested and motivated by ALTs. Further, ALTs were thought of as highly desirable because their presence creates a need for students to use their English in order to communicate with the native speaking teacher. Teachers based this on the idea that ALTs do not speak Japanese and students will want to speak and pay attention to them more based on novelty. Other work has also documented teachers' opinions of the influence of ALTs (Mahoney, 2004; Butler, 2007). In response to these teacher opinions, I chose to measure differences in students' behavioral engagement according to the role of the ALT in class. ALT involvement was coded as either *not present*, *co-teaching*, and *primary activity leader*.

One subject that came out of discussions with teachers after classes was the idea that a specialized classroom for teaching English would help students to develop a greater interest and engagement in English. Teachers with access to specialized classrooms noted that these classrooms were helpful in organizing their materials and creating spaces for tasks. Indeed, from observations these classes were brightly colored and offered students many opportunities to look at a variety of international themes and pictorial representations of English. In many cases, students were interested in the English paraphernalia, often noticing, reading, and pointing them out to classmates during unrelated activities. As a result, I looked at the differences in students' behavioral engagement between schools with and without dedicated English classrooms in order to test the validity of these attributions, coding for *use of specialized classrooms* versus *use of main classroom*.

In the process of viewing classes, I noticed that off-task behaviors seemed to increase in specialized rooms, in spite of what many teachers had reported. In talking to teachers and doing further observation, I noticed that these behaviors increased in classes where students did not have specific assigned seats in the specialized classroom, and were even more present when students sat on the floor. This led to speculation that while the classroom may have an impact, the stronger impact on students may be the degree of continuity between students regular classes and teachers' monitoring of the classroom, as also indicated by Good and Brophy (2008). I coded seating arrangements according to 5 types of observed seating procedures: *sitting on floor in no specified arrangement*, *sitting on floor with arrangements not monitored*, *sitting on floor with arrangements monitored*, *sitting in chairs in regular classroom arrangement*, and *sitting in chairs in specialized arrangement*.

Finally, many teachers expressed the idea that different school years show different patterns of engagement. Specialist teachers who taught multiple classes claimed that each school year and class had its own characteristics that help to define the way they interact with the teachers and the material. Many of the JTEs involved in the study felt that different groups of 5th and 6th grade students showed stronger and weaker patterns of engagement. In order to capture this variance, each student group was given a unique code according to the school, year, and class.

4.2 Quantitative differences in behavioral engagement

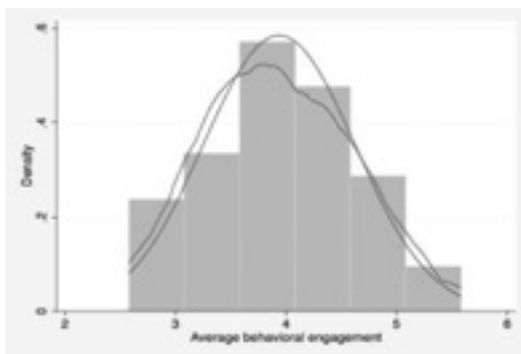


Figure 1. Histogram of behavioral engagement with normal-density and kernel-density overlays

Before conducting quantitative tests, a review of the normality of the dependent variables is necessary. The skewness-kurtosis test for normality revealed acceptable normality, adjusted $\chi^2(2)=0.67$, $p=0.72$. Further visual inspection revealed a fairly clear normal distribution (see figure 1), indicating that the intended parametric ANOVA tests were appropriate and no data transformation would be necessary to get reliable scores.

A factorial ANOVA was then run on the data, considering students' on-task behavioral engagement as the dependent variable, with factorial independent variables run using individual classes; specialized classroom settings; ALT role; HRT role; seating arrangement; the interactions between the ALT role and seating; the HRT role and seating; and the three-way interaction between HRT, ALT, and seating.

The results of the factorial ANOVA fit the data very well, $R^2=0.9799$. Significant effects were found for differences in each individual class, $F(22, 41)=4.29$, $p=0.03$, partial $\eta^2=0.93$, seating assignment conditions, $F(2, 41)=5.71$, $p=0.03$, partial $\eta^2=0.62$, ALT involvement combined with seating, $F(1, 41)=9.31$, $p=0.02$, partial $\eta^2=0.57$, and HRT combined with seating, $F(1, 41)=12.09$, $p=0.01$, partial $\eta^2=0.63$. All other factors, namely the grade level, use of specialized classrooms, the role of the ALT alone, the role of the HRT alone, and the 3-way interaction between HRT, ALT, and seating failed to show significant effects.

In order to test for further relationships between the data, I tested the pairwise correlations between the variables. Table 1 displays these relationships, showing strong correlations between individual classes, types of seating arrangements, and the involvement level of the HRT. No significant correlation was found between the role of the ALT and any other variable.

	1.	2.	3.	4.
1. Individual class	–			
2. Homeroom teacher	0.80***	–		
3. ALT role	-0.18	-0.04	–	
4. Seating arrangement	0.71***	0.52***	-0.0082	–

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table 1. Pairwise correlations of the independent variables.

Looking at the data visually also shows relationships and meaningful differences. Figure 2 shows the differences in each individual class' engagement, demonstrating some of the large differences that may occur even within schools and grades. Figure 3 shows the differences between the seating types and the degree of involvement of the HRT, indicating consistently higher ratings under conditions where teachers are present and manage seating arrangements. ALTs produce similar patterns of engagement, save during the condition where students are seated in chairs in the same formation as their home classroom.

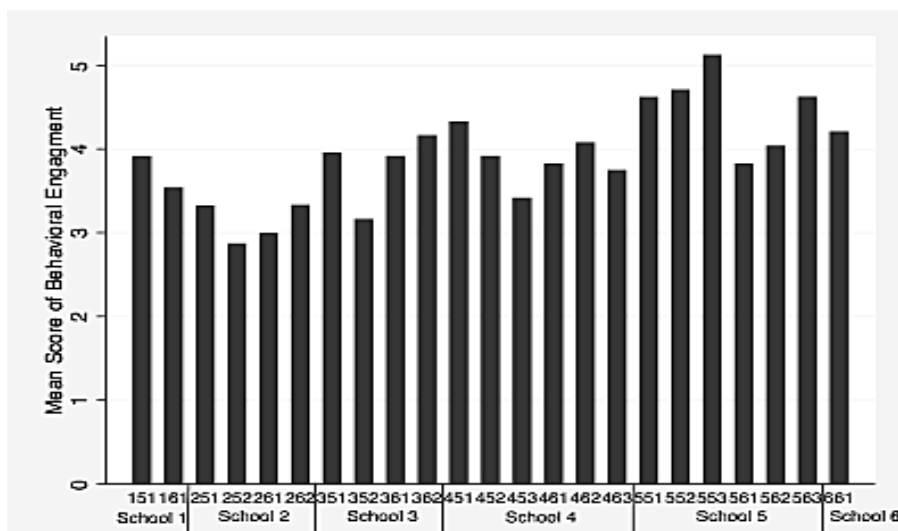


Figure 2. Behavioral engagement: Classes numbered by school, year, and class

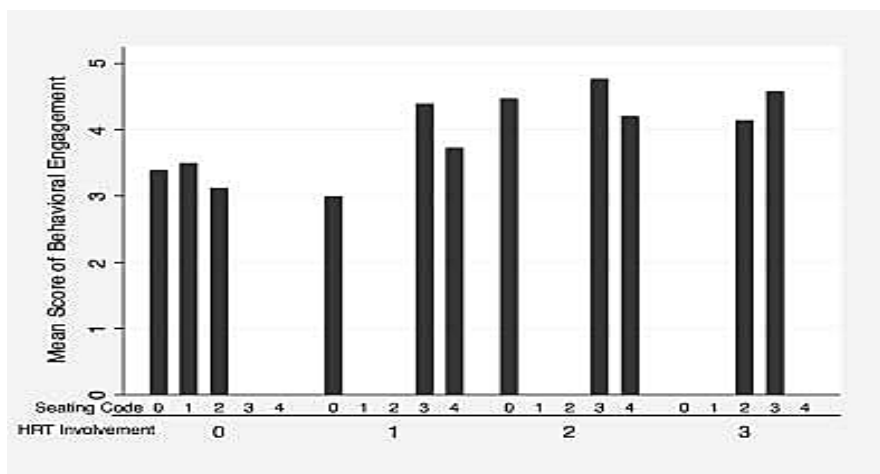


Figure 3. Behavioral engagement separated by seating arrangement and homeroom teacher involvement

Seating Code: 0= sitting on floor no specified arrangement, 1= sitting on floor with arrangements not monitored, 2= sitting on floor with arrangements monitored; 3= sitting in chairs in regular classroom arrangement; 4= sitting in chairs in specialized arrangement.

HRT Involvement: 0= bystander/not present, 1= translator, 2= co-learner, 3= co-teacher

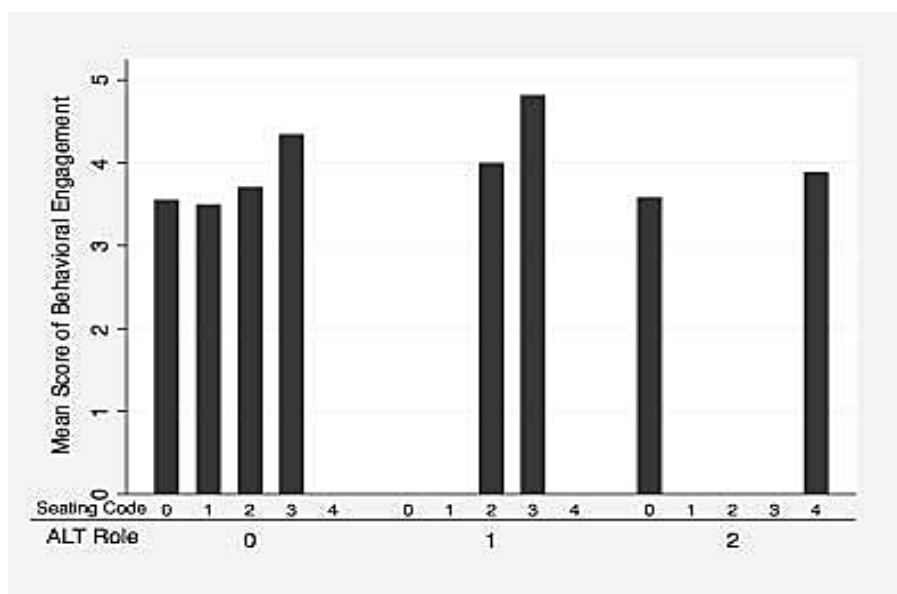


Figure 4. Behavioral engagement separated by seating arrangement and ALT role

Seating Code: 0= sitting on floor no specified arrangement, 1= sitting on floor with arrangements not monitored, 2= sitting on floor with arrangements monitored; 3= sitting in chairs in regular classroom arrangement; 4= sitting in chairs in specialized arrangement.

ALT Role: 0= not present, 1= co-teaching, 2= leading activities

5. Discussion

The findings of this study show that individual differences between classes account for the vast majority of the variance in classroom engagement. This finding mirrors other studies of student peer groups (Kozaki & Ross, 2011; Ryan, 2001), where students may respond strongly to the group atmosphere and match their behaviors with their peers. However, the very high correlation between the classes and the different roles played by the HRT shows that students' engagement may relate to the role that individual teachers play in the classroom.

Likewise, the highest ratings for behavioral engagement consistently happen when students sit in chairs in their original classroom arrangement, and in situations where the HRT is positively involved as a translator, co-learner, or co-teacher. Lower ratings came during classes without clear and explicit seating management, especially in classes where HRTs were not involved. This would indicate the importance of behavioral procedures (Good & Brophy, 2008; Evertson, 1987) as well as the need for the HRT to be involved and present in the classroom to maintain student discipline and continuity.

The lack of management of seating may be a sign of a general lack of clarity and attention to behavioral management on the part of specialist teachers and ALTs, potentially due to a lack of communication of classroom norms. This may also go some ways to explaining the extreme differences in class behaviors even within grades and schools—classes where there is a strong difference between behavioral procedures in the foreign language classes and normal classes may produce strong differences in student engagement. The correlation between HRT involvement, seating arrangement, and individual classes further indicates that seating and other classroom management procedures may differ between teachers and produce different levels of engagement among otherwise similar students, as indicated by the lack of difference between 5th and 6th grade students but strong differences between individual classes. This result requires further investigation using confirmatory methods and the generation of a concrete hypothesis in order to properly indicate a truly causal effect.

Among effects which failed to reach significance, specialized classrooms offered no significant influence in terms of observable student behavior. One potential reason may be the lack of continuity between foreign language classes and other classes due to the physical and psychological distance from the normal study environment. Further confounding this may be the above mentioned common lack of enforcement by Japanese specialist teachers of English and ALTs, who may not know classroom seating arrangements or be aware of homeroom teachers' behavioral procedures and routines. These differences may send the message that different behaviors are tolerable, and thus students may fail to engage with the class and the activities.

At the same time, while the use of specialized classrooms did not have a significant effect in this study, qualitatively these classrooms offer numerous

opportunities for students to interact with English. Even when students were not paying attention in these classes, they were often looking around the room at English-themed decorations. While no quantitative difference was found in students' behavioral engagement, these rooms may offer opportunities for more autonomous cognitive and emotional engagement with English.

6. Conclusions

The empirical findings here confirm the ideas put forth by Good and Brophy (2008) regarding the use of clear procedures in order to promote students' behavioral engagement in the classroom. These results also offer evidence for the appropriate roles of HRTs in English classes, with the bystander role indicated by Aline and Hosoda (2006) eliciting the weakest levels of student engagement, especially when combined with a lack of effective seating management procedures. At the same time, a combination of positive teacher involvement, behavioral monitoring, and clear continuity with normal classes appears to demonstrate the strongest rating for student engagement. Further, the most effective pattern with relation to ALTs appears to be co-teaching in an environment with close continuity with the home classroom. These findings offer clear recommendations for teachers looking to improve student involvement: clearer and more regularized management with greater collaborative involvement from teachers may promote better student engagement with regard to the foreign language.

At the same time, care must be taken with the interpretation of these effects. With a relatively small number of classrooms fitting each condition, current results must be considered as grounds for generating reasonable confirmatory hypotheses rather than definitive findings. While the assumptions for normality were met and the results showed statistically meaningful strong effects, a greater number of classrooms fulfilling each condition may offer better validity and reliability to the data.

Despite these limitations, this study represents one of the first explorations of classroom management elements that influence students' patterns of engagement in elementary FLA classes. Better involvement on the part of HRTs, collaboration with ALTs, and classroom procedures for monitoring behavior can create a meaningful learning environment in foreign language classes in order to promote engagement and develop motivation.

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