Lessons Learned from the Recollection

of Past Teacher Characteristics in Japan

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Abstract

This paper explores how Japanese university freshmen recalled their secondary school English teachers. The hope of the research is that descriptions of the "best" and "worst" teachers' character traits and actions might prove useful to current and aspiring Japanese EFL instructors. Written narratives (n = 84) describing participants' relationships with English were coded for every mention of teachers, and the data was analyzed using quantitative and qualitative methods. Questionnaire data was also collected from a separate group of participants (n = 86) to assess what descriptive words best applied to their best and worst past teachers. The results showed that more than half of the students included teachers in their writings about their relationship with the English language, and that positive teacher influences were associated with higher academic performance after a year of university courses. The narratives also revealed the markedness of fluent speech, the importance of rapport and humor, and that lasting memories were also formed outside the classroom. The questionnaire results suggested that the best teachers were associated with quality teaching, friendliness, fairness, and being interesting, whereas the worst teachers were perceived as defiant and challenging, but still interested in teaching English.

Introduction and Background

Second language (L2) researchers have used varying autobiographical expressions, like learning diaries, interviews, memoirs, and journals ever since narrative studies theories took root in the social sciences over forty years ago (Pavlenko, 2007). The relatively open-ended format of narrative inquiry can offer insights into language learners' thoughts, attitudes, beliefs, and feelings that are not easily accessed via more restrictive questionnaires. For example, it has proven useful in investigating content, form, and thematic topics, from considering transition anxiety (Schumann & Schumann, 1977; Bailey, 1983); learning strategies (Vajirasarn, 2014); gender, race, ethnicity, and class differences (Ogulnick, 1998; Oxford, 2011); learner agency (O'Sullivan, 2010); and nearly any other imaginable focus of sociolinguistic SLA inquiry (Pavlenko, 2007). In the present context, however, narrative inquiry data was paired with quantitative questionnaire data in a multi-method approach to explore how former students recollected their Japanese secondary school English instructors.

There is no doubt that ESL instructors affect student results, both by the instruction they provide and the motivation to learn they inspire in their students. Naturally, the characteristics and practices of the best teachers has received considerable attention in the literature over time. Every conceivable social science research method has been employed to investigate the topic, including the interpretation and analysis of interviews, class evaluations, questionnaires, written narratives, and classroom observations from both teachers' and students' perspectives.

Students and teachers can differ on their beliefs about what counts as best teacher characteristics and practices (Liando, 2010; Stavrou, 2020), but both perspectives hold value and have a long history. Over 125 years ago in 1896, H. E. Kratz lamented the tendency to simply defer to "the standpoint of some eminent educator," and instead set out to "glean some of the characteristics of the best teacher from the standpoint of the pupil" (p. 413). In addition to understanding that students experience multiple teachers and are keen observers, Kratz justified his approach by suggesting "those characteristics which impress the pupils favorably, which lead to a sympathy and cooperation so essential in the school room, must have some value" (p. 413). The current report, which also makes use of student views, agrees with Kratz's sentiment that positive impressions produced by educators hold considerable value. The "sympathy and cooperation" that leads from favorable teacher impressions might now be conceived of as effective academic motivations and attitudes, or the desire to learn.

Researchers have since relied on or incorporated student input to better understand prized teacher traits. Some research has studied individual traits from the perspective of students. For example, Veldman and Peck (1963) analyzed student evaluations ($n = 554$) to identify five valued teacher characteristics groupings: 1. Friendly, Cheerful; 2. Poised, Knowledgeable; 3. Interesting; 4. Strict; and 5. Democratic. Others have considered a wider variety of teacher characteristics and incorporated various stakeholders. For instance, using stakeholders in 3rd to 5th grade education in Virginia, Hill (2002) considered personal efficacy; personality traits; values, morals, and ethics; instructional strategies; classroom management; and relationships with students from teacher, student, parent, and administrative points of view. Still others have delved into teachers' philosophical approaches to education and their approaches to classroom interactions. For instance, Ken Bain's (2004) methodologically rigorous research in the USA involving hundreds of interviews, class evaluations, and classroom visitations, detailed in his book *What the Best College Teachers Do*, identified at least four broad key concepts common to the best college teachers: "knowledge is constructed, not received," "mental models change slowly," "questions are crucial," and "caring is crucial."

The above examples relate to different stages of education across various disciplines in the USA, but some (e.g., Borg, 2006; Lee, 2010) have argued that EFL teaching is distinctive from other subjects due to the "nature of the subject, the content of teaching, the teaching methodology, teacher–learner relationships, and contrasts between native and non-native speakers" (Borg, 2006, p. 3). If EFL instruction is distinctive, best teacher practices and

effective personal traits would be expected to differ as well. Focusing on EFL teachers in Indonesia, for example, Liando's (2010) questionnaire data found that students ($n = 126$) believed best teachers should be friendly, humorous, nice, and intelligent, but should also explain things well and make the course interesting (pp. 122-3). But the data also looked into non-verbal teacher immediacy behaviors and found that students wanted their teachers to "look at the class when talking," "smile at the class as a whole," have "a relaxed body position when talking to the class," and to ask "questions and encourage students to talk," suggesting the importance of more personal / conversational attitudes in the classroom than might be needed when teaching chemistry or physics, for example (pp. 124-5). Similarly, Bell (2005) found that effective FL teachers had enthusiasm for the target language and culture, linguistic competence, and that they effectively used group work, error correction, focus on form, and cross-cultural differences. These unique features of EFL teaching suggest that the teacher is not simply there to pass on sterile information to receptacle-like students, but rather to mirror some dimensions of bond-forming communicative language use within pedagogic practices.

Even within EFL, due to culture-based contextual differences, the makings of an effective teacher do not necessarily conform to a universal standard of practice, though there are probably commonalities shared by the "best" teachers (Borg, 2006). Even though a long line of researchers has investigated the qualities of effective teachers in various contexts, the conclusions only partially apply to the quasi-parental/institutional Japanese secondary school context in which the entire school serves as a self-contained, multi-faceted, nurturing, communal, educational, social space from early in the morning till late in the evening. Therefore, the following research has attempted to add to the literature on what makes a Japanese English teacher effective, or at least to leave a positive impression, in the context of Japanese secondary schools. Statistical and hermeneutic approaches were applied to the data sets and then triangulated to better understand the mental representations of teachers held by recent high school graduates. The researchers hope the revealed insights can shine some light on how Japanese students perceive their best and worst former English teachers, as these insights might prove useful to current and aspiring Japanese EFL instructors.

The First Data Set

Methods

The first data gathered from written learning narratives were primarily qualitative, but also contributed some useful quantitative insights. The second data, which will be presented in the second part of this report, were quantitative questionnaire data. For the first data, private university freshmen majoring in science and technology ($n = 84$) wrote about their past English learning experiences during the first day of English class. An analysis of the data explored how students constructed and articulated their past English learning narratives, or the stories they tell themselves about their relationships with English (for full results and discussion, see Cacali

& Germinario, 2021), but the current report will only concern itself with a detailed analysis of written descriptions pertaining to past English teachers.

A diagnostic writing worksheet, entitled "English and Me" instructed the participants to write about their past and potential futures with English for twenty minutes. Though they were free to reflect about anything relating to the topic, a number of guiding questions were included. The most germane questions for the subject at hand were, "Tell me about your past English teachers. Were they good? Bad? Do you have a favorite English teacher?" The writings were then collected and coded for the presence or absence of 14 narrative elements that were selected for possible influences on motivation and academic success, such as *states good at English*, *states poor at English*, *likes English*, *dislikes English*, *desires future proficiency* (for career or for cultural interaction), *mentions learning strategy*, *sense of accomplishment*, *time spent abroad*, and most importantly for this study, *positive teacher influence* and *negative teacher influence*. These codes, along with the participants' final English writing grades for two semesters, were entered into SPSS ver. 23 for statistical analysis.

Quantitative Results and Discussion

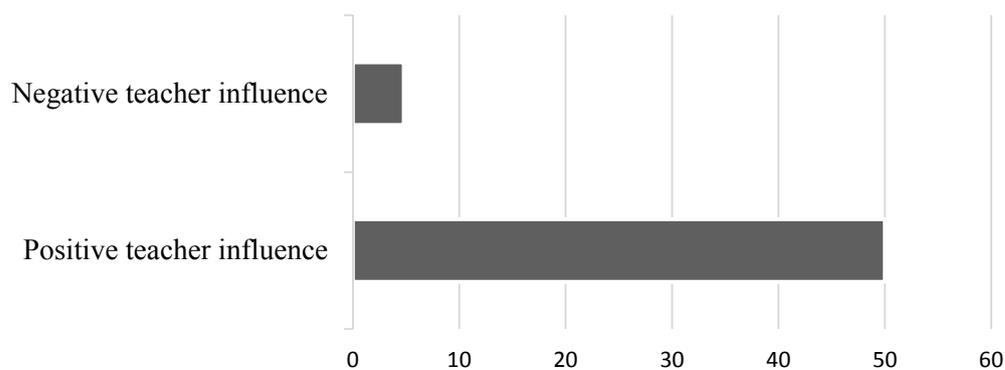Chart 1: Instances of Narrative Elements by Percentage

Chart 1 shows instances of the relevant narrative elements relating to teacher influence by percentage. Interestingly, only 4.8% of the respondents made mention of negative teacher influences while ten times as many (50%) mentioned a positive teacher influence. This hesitancy to remark on teachers in a negative light was repeated in the second data set and will be discussed further below.

The participants were then divided into quartiles based on final grades after one year of university-level English writing classes, and the highest ($n = 21$) and lowest quartiles ($n = 21$) were compared to see which narrative elements were associated with academic success.

As can be seen in Chart 2, none of the students in the quartile with the highest grades mentioned negative past teacher influences in their writing during their first day of class,

Chart 2: Narrative Elements in Highest & Lowest Quartile by Percentage

■ Lowest Quartile   ■ Highest Quartile
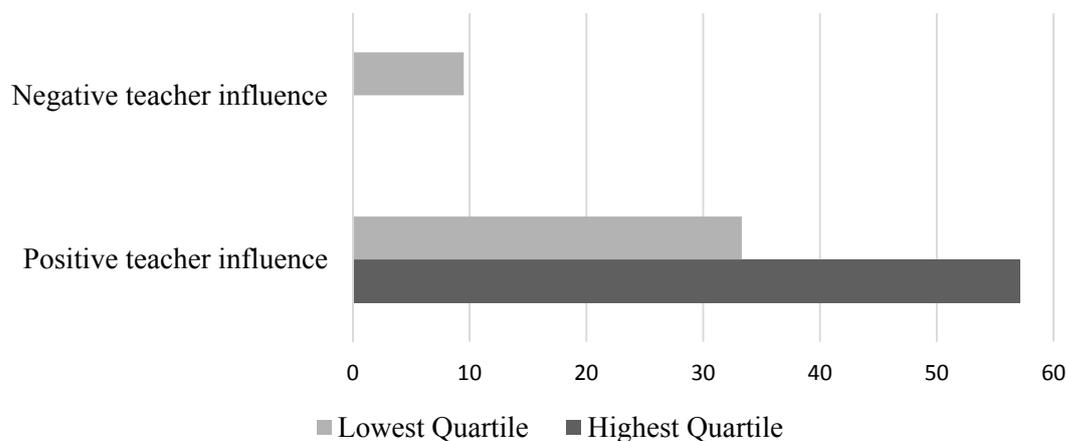
whereas 9.5% of the students in the lowest quartile did. An inverse pattern emerged concerning positive teacher influences, with 57.1% of the highest quartile verses 33.3% of the lowest quartile having written about positive teacher experiences. To summarize charts 1 and 2, more than half of the written narratives included teachers when considering relationships with English, with most of these images being positive. Moreover, reporting past positive teacher experiences was 1.71 times more common in the group associated with greater future academic achievement. The influence of positive teacher/student experiences that emerged was also reflected in the narrative writing, sometimes rather explicitly. Some examples of teacher influence include those who stated, "When I took his English class, I like English more;" "Soon, I became to like English, and it became my best subject. I think it's thanks to my English teacher;" "I became to like English resent. Because my English teacher of high school is fun and very kind;" and "But I changed to like English for teachers in it." Given the potential positive influence, it seemed worth taking a more detailed look at the language participants used in the 46 narratives that directly mentioned past teachers.

Qualitative Results and Discussion

Though students may have simply been using words to fill the required lines of their writing diagnostic worksheet without a strong desire to truly communicate, ideally, language was a tool for conveying meaningful information about past teachers to a real or imagined interlocutor (their new English instructor in this case). Only a few narratives described English abilities ($n = 4$) or English-related knowledge that was imparted ($n = 3$). All the expressions of English ability were related to speaking and include the following: "[the teacher is] good at speaking English," "He is Japanese, but he speaks English very fluently," "[a] very good English speaker," and "his pronounce is very good." Speaking is the most salient performance of language in a classroom setting, so it is no wonder that it also left the greatest impression on students. Imparted knowledge was implied in many narratives by generic phrases like "his

class is good and interesting," or "her class is happy," but the following were the only direct references to English being taught: "She teached me English and give me many knowledge," "they were very good at teaching English," and "She teached how to speak English and structures." There were also a couple of mentions of imparted knowledge unrelated to forms and functions of English, including "He gives me importance of English," and "She advised me about my Dream plan." These two were interesting because they highlighted the teacher's role as academic motivator. Both drawing attention to the importance of the subject being taught and directing thoughts to successful future selves are useful strategies for generating intrinsic motivation (Dörnyei, 2009; O'Donnell, 2003).

While the positive descriptions of teachers were directly related to English use, instruction, and motivation, other narratives mentioned teachers who fostered rapport with students in contexts both related and unrelated to English study. Giving an exact number of rapport-related mentions is difficult due to the subjective assessment involve, but some representative explanations of favorite teachers suggested "He is kind and teach and comedy;" or "my past English teacher is very kind. Always English teacher has snack. And English teacher give me the snack. The snack is very good;" or "He is very kindful, hospitable, and gentle. When I took his English class, I like English more." There were also four mentions of favorite teachers telling "American" jokes, enjoying comedy, and being funny. Although most interactions with teachers probably occurred within classrooms, it is worth considering that the narratives described an accumulation of memories and moments with one or more teachers throughout years of school life. The 'spatial turn' (Benson, 2021; Mills & Comber, 2015) in language learning emphasized the range of environments in which learners engage with a human and nonhuman, tangible and intangible resources during any given day, not just with teachers in classrooms. Some memory-forming interactions with teachers unrelated to English class in the narratives included "He is very friendly and enjoy some sports with students;" "He play the shakuhachi. I surprised that play;" and "He is a very good dancer. … His dance club was top of the world. I want to be like him." These narratives highlight the interpersonal human component that extends beyond the classroom and that is sometimes overlooked during teacher training, but which makes lasting impressions on students.

The Second Data Set

Up to this point, general descriptions, comments on language efficiency, types of knowledge imparted, and descriptions of rapport building inside and outside the classroom have been addressed. It was believed that a catalogue of adjectives used to describe favorite teachers would also provide insights into what led to lasting impressions from past instructors, but ultimately the infrequency of descriptors necessitated a second undertaking of data collection in the form of an online questionnaire focusing on adjectives describing character traits and phrases concerning participants "best" and "worst" past English instructors.

Methods

The questionnaire was administered during class to freshmen university students (*n* = 86) from a different institution than the written learning narratives. As with the narratives, students were informed that their data would be used for research purposes and that they could opt out without any repercussions, as some chose to do.

From the written narratives there were 29 instances of the all-purpose *good*, followed by other repeating adjectives including *kind* (17), *interesting* (6), *smart* (4), *funny* (2), *happy* (2), *friendly* (2), and *beautiful* (2). One difficulty that may explain the paucity of variety was that the participants were writing their narratives in English without access to a dictionary and, therefore, had a limited range of vocabulary to draw on. To mitigate this weakness, the questionnaire was created with questions and answers written in Japanese first followed by English. The short questionnaire asked "Which words describe your BEST (JHS or SHS) English teacher? (Choose all that apply)." A couple questions later, the word "WORST" replaced "BEST." In an effort to broaden the range of adjectives while considering the frequently used words above, the following adjectives were presented as options: *friendly*, *interesting*, *fair*, *relaxed*, *creative*, *defiant/challenging* (this final response contains two English words because the Japanese used was 挑戦的, which is difficult to neatly translate).

Results and Discussion

Before presenting the results, a notable occurrence is worth addressing. As was the case in the first data, in which there was a noticeable lack of narratives describing negative teacher influences or descriptions, the second data also showed a considerable drop in participants who were willing to label their "worst" past teachers with descriptors (with only 64 responses to the questions), or even worse, to pass judgement on English teaching skills or knowledge (*n* = 57). When the same questions targeted their best teachers, every one of the 86 participants responded. The narratives provided some possible explanations. While some written narratives described the act of language learning as difficult because of having "to remember many words" or disliking grammar, they still often recounted positive teacher influences despite the struggles. In other words, struggles with the language were rarely attributed to the teacher. This probably has something to do with the self-effacing Japanese students' willingness to attribute poor results to either bad luck or a lack of personal carefulness and effort rather than blaming others (Kawanishi, 1995). Whatever the reason, this aversion to openly criticizing teachers meant that the insights available through this research largely relate to positive traits, or what teachers should do, rather than what they should avoid doing.

Chart 3: Words to describe the BEST/WORST English teachers by percentage
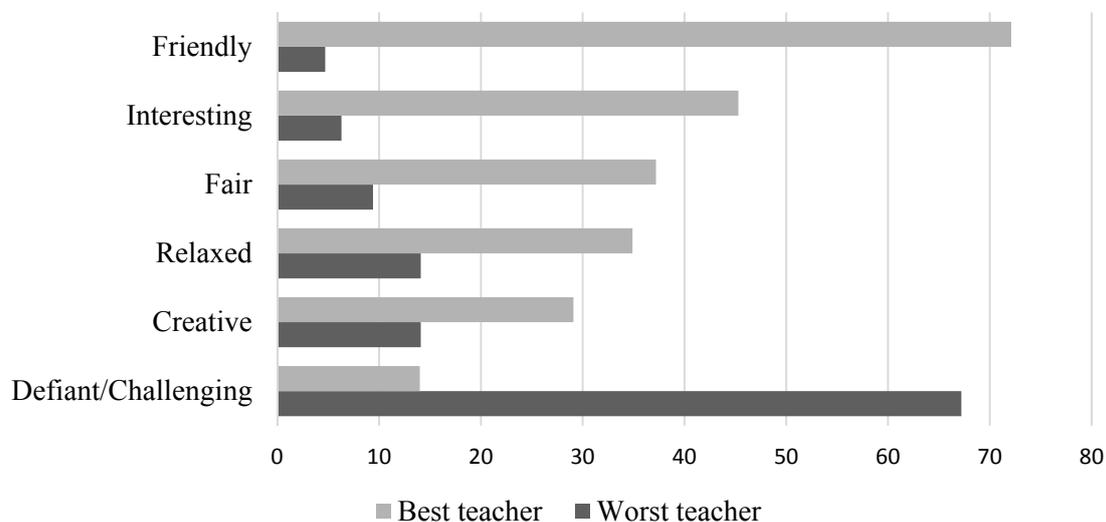
Turning to the results displayed in Chart 3, the most striking visual impression is the mirror image created when rank ordering the best teacher results from highest to lowest percentage. The adjectives, and their signified concepts, *friendly* (72.1% vs. 4.7%), *interesting* (45.3% vs. 6.3%), and *fair* (37.2% vs. 9.4%) were overwhelmingly associated with the best teachers. These were followed by *relaxed* (34.9% vs. 14.1%) and *creative* (29.1% vs. 14.1%), which were still twice as likely to be selected to describe excellent teachers. At the bottom, *defiant/challenging* (14% vs. 67.2%) was far more likely to be used to describe worst teachers. Many of the prized character traits, like being friendly, interesting, and fair aid in producing social interactions that are engaging and rapport building. Fortunately, these traits can also be cultivated by teachers in their interactions with students.

Chart 4: Words and prases to describe the BEST/WORST English Teacher characteristics by percentage
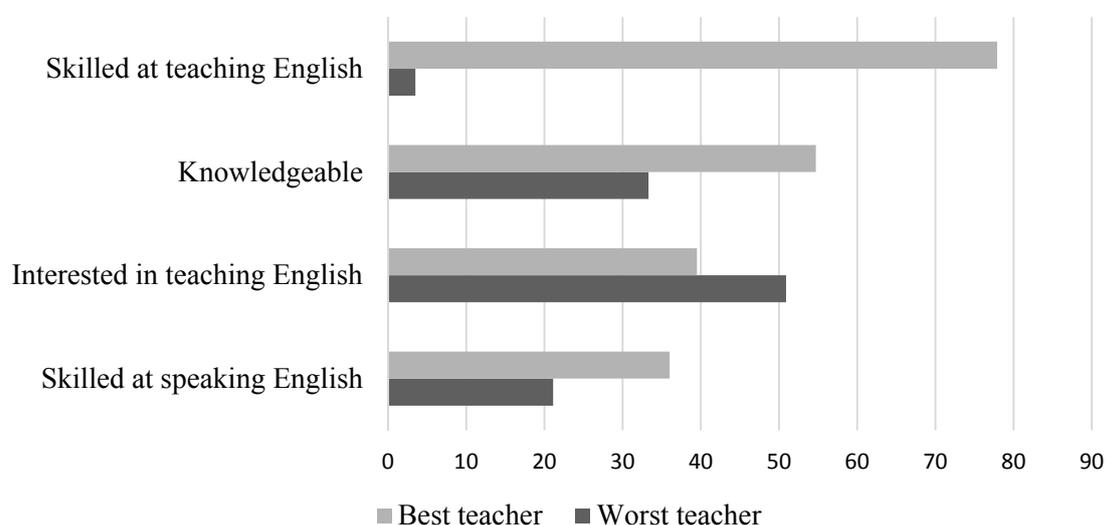
Chart 4 also compares best and worst teachers, but this time the words and phrases focused on characteristics more related to the act of teaching. The biggest difference can be seen regarding *skilled at teaching English* (77.9% vs. 3.5%) which seems like a concept that would naturally diverge as it is at least partially included in the definition of "best" and "worst" teacher. However, it was included to see if rapport alone could somehow supersede teaching competence. The results suggest that this is not necessarily the case, unless sufficient rapport distorts the judgements about teaching abilities. The two responses that suggest an academic knowledge of and skill in using English, that is *knowledgeable* (54.7% vs. 33.3%) and *skilled at speaking English* (36% vs. 21.1%) also favored the best teacher, but not by such wide margins. On the other hand, the response that required participants to assess the internal motivations of their instructors, *interested in teaching English* (21.1% vs. 50.9%), was more often used to describe the worst teacher. It may be that a stern or serious approach to education was associated in students' minds with an earnestness regarding teaching, which ultimately gave the impression of interest in teaching, but this result was more likely derived from a failure to provide a "none of the above" option. Without this choice, participants probably felt the need to choose the most neutral option. This same shortcoming may have also distorted the *defiant/challenging* responses in Chart 3.

Conclusion

In conclusion, a number of details concerning the characteristics and actions of teachers emerged while exploring the data sets. In line with the complexity of student/teacher relationships and the roles teachers have in varying contexts, no universally consistent lessons emerged from the participants' narratives, but general patterns did surface. Rapport building and the associated characteristics, such as being interesting, funny, friendly, and fair, were associated with favorite and best teachers in both the written narratives and the questionnaire data. While teacher training often centralizes on language acquisition as an outcome of classroom practices in classroom settings, there is an underlying foundation of natural language learning and rapport building that occurs informally in a multitude of settings (Dixon et al., 2012). Indeed, the teachers mentioned in the narratives included positive impressions formed in multiple formal and informal contexts. The rapport built by bringing snacks to class, playing sports or musical instruments, sharing dance moves, or discussing future dreams became the foundation from which further motivation, lasting impressions, and language learning could occur. Positive teacher experiences were associated with higher future grades and motivation to learn English beyond high school and into university, so teachers should consider ways to cultivate the performance of favorable personality traits when dealing with students and building rapport.

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