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First-year Japanese University Students' Language Learning Beliefs: Continuity and Change

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Abstract

Japan's government has mandated a shift from traditional to communicative methodologies in secondary English classrooms (Tanabe, 2004), but it is unclear whether this has affected student beliefs about language learning. This study investigates the beliefs of 315 incoming university students at a large private university in Japan from 2006 through 2011 using Sakui and Gaies's (1999) 45-item beliefs survey. Factor analysis found four belief factors: Positive Attitude, L1 Instruction Orientation, Traditional Orientation, and Expectations for School. Although ANOVA found no significant differences among the cohorts for the means of the four belief factors or for English proficiency scores, cluster analysis found three orientations: traditionalist, independent, and persevering. Learner beliefs about the insufficiency of English education at school, the importance of listening and speaking practice, and the role of culture and other outside factors appear relatively stable in spite of curricular changes. However, in contrast to earlier studies (Riley, 2006; Sakui & Gaies, 1999), learner beliefs are not linked to traditional or communicative methodologies, but to personal goals, language choice, and the growing normalcy of English. We conclude that students' beliefs, though stable, are also sensitive to social change, evolving even before curriculum changes are implemented.

Keywords: learner beliefs, Japan, communicative methodologies, curricular change

Introduction

When meeting a new cohort of entering university students, English teachers benefit from knowing what they believe about language learning (Cotterall, 1999; Wenden, 1986). One reason is that, like many other individual learner variables, beliefs influence the process and the product of learning (Ellis, 2009) because they are related to strategy use (Wen & Johnson, 1997) and to language learning anxiety (Young, 1991). Another reason is that students' beliefs about language learning often differ from the informed beliefs held by their university language teachers. When examining the beliefs held by 744 incoming students and their 34 English teachers at one university in Japan, Riley (2006) found significant differences in beliefs about the need for error correction, about the use of the L1, and about the effectiveness of practicing with classmates. Such mismatches between teacher and student beliefs can prevent instruction from being as effective as it could be.

The transition from secondary to tertiary language learning is a pivotal time for learners and their beliefs. Although beliefs have been characterized as resistant to change (Pajares, 1992), the more recent sociocultural view of beliefs sees them as complex and contradictory, stable yet changing. Beliefs can be affected by experiences and by significant others. Language beliefs are personal and situated, emerging as students experience particular classroom events (Barcelos & Kalaja, 2011). Beliefs about language learning held by students at the time of entry to university are particularly in flux: Some will deepen and others will change as the students experience different teaching methods, teacher expectations, and learning environments than what they experienced in senior high school (Peng, 2011).

In Japan, senior high schools are required to follow the Course of Study (COS) guidelines, in which the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) lays out national standards for developing curriculum, designing courses, and conducting classes. The 1989 COS, implemented in 1994, included oral communication classes with the aim of developing positive attitudes toward communication. A decade later, the 1999 revision of the COS for foreign languages, implemented in 2003, clearly aimed to develop communication abilities as well as positive attitudes. The revision's stated objectives were "to develop students' basic practical communication abilities such as listening and speaking, deepening the understanding of language and culture, and fostering a positive attitude toward communication through foreign languages" (MEXT, 1999, Section 8). Reacting to globalization in various fields, MEXT also established an action plan to cultivate "Japanese with English Abilities" (MEXT, 2003, p. 1) with specific recommendations to be carried out by the nation as a whole to improve the quality of

language education (Tanabe, 2004). The action plan included suggestions to improve English classes by conducting most of the classes in English and by introducing a large number of activities where students use English to communicate (MEXT, 2003).

Accordingly, secondary language classrooms adapted more communication-based teaching; however, a strong duality developed in the way English is conceptualized, administrated, and taught. The bulk of time is spent on grammar and reading skills for entrance test preparation, areas which are almost always taught by Japanese teachers using a traditional approach. To a lesser extent, listening and oral communication skills are taught by Japanese or native-speaker teachers using a communicative approach (Sakui, 2004). According to Sakui, it is the lack of any link or consistency between these two approaches that has come to characterize English education in Japan today.

To solve this problem and to compel teachers to put more emphasis on communicative language teaching and less on grammar-based instruction, further changes to the COS were deemed necessary. The 2011 COS emphasizes the linking of the four skills, relegates grammar as a support to communication, and requires teachers to conduct their classes mostly in English (Tahira, 2012). Although it is not clear to what extent Japanese senior high school teachers have implemented previous curriculum changes, the 2011 COS will be implemented in 2013. Underwood (2012) found that teachers generally have a favorable attitude toward this new curriculum, but anticipates that some teachers will find it difficult to implement the new curriculum due to social and context-related factors: a misguided belief that grammatical knowledge is central to university entrance exams, lack of training and time, student resistance, and pressure from colleagues. These are much the same reasons that were given for difficulties in implementing the 1999 COS.

In this way, the past two decades have been a time of transition for secondary Japanese learners of English and possibly for their epistemological beliefs. An important question for university instructors is whether incoming students' beliefs are influenced by these changes in secondary curriculum and methodology. In this study, we attempt to capture trends in incoming students' beliefs using a survey.

In the 1970s and 1980s, survey instruments were created to operationalize learner attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs, and survey-based research on beliefs continues to be dominant (Wesley, 2012). The oldest and best-known instrument is Horwitz's (1988) Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI), designed to explore how the beliefs of foreign language university students differed from those of their teachers. It originally consisted of 34 items in five logically related groups: beliefs about foreign language aptitude, the difficulty of language learning, the nature of language learning,

communication strategies, and motivation. However, subsequent studies (Nikitina & Furuoka, 2006; Truitt, 1995; Yang, 1999) using factor analysis to confirm the dimensionality of these groupings had mixed results. Riley (2006) points out that the BALLI was not specifically designed as a research tool: Horwitz reported her results as percentages of modal responses of particular items, it had a low internal reliability, and it did not stand up to statistical analysis.

A new 45-item instrument was developed by Sakui and Gaies (1999) to examine the beliefs of Japanese learners at a time when communicative language teaching was being added to traditional translation-based *yakudoku* methods. In 1996 and 1997, they administered it to 1,296 non-English majors in 2- and 4-year colleges, and found it to be both valid and internally reliable. Of the items, 25 fell into four empirically-derived categories: beliefs about a communicative orientation, about a traditional orientation, about the quality and sufficiency of classroom instruction, and about aptitude and difficulty.

The Sakui and Gaies (1999) instrument has since been used in several studies at the Japanese university and secondary level. Riley (2006) had 504 students at a Tokyo university complete the Sakui and Gaies survey upon entry to the university in April and again in December, with significant differences being found in responses to about one-quarter of the items between the two administrations. The Riley study is important because it verifies the robustness of the Sakui and Gaies survey. There was a high ($\alpha = 0.89$) level of consistency between the mean responses in the two studies; in addition, regarding the organization of student beliefs, both studies had a four-factor structure with fairly similar items loading on factors related to communicative and traditional orientations. Yonesaka (2008) administered two Japanese versions of the Sakui and Gaies survey to 220 entering English-major students at a private Japanese university. She also found a four-factor structure, including two related to the two orientations. The Sakui and Gaies instrument has also been used at the secondary level with similar results. Richard (2011) administered it to 542 senior high school students in three senior high schools in the Tokyo area. He found strong correlations between the rank order of items in this survey with that of Sakui and Gaies, and he also found a four-factor structure.

Because of the robustness of the Sakui and Gaies (1999) instrument, we decided to use it to investigate trends in the beliefs of incoming university students regarding traditional and contemporary communicative approaches. Although curriculum changes can be mandated, belief changes cannot. However, we expected that changes in the secondary curriculum would allow teachers to provide students with more affordances (Barcelos &

Kalaja, 2011; Peng, 2011) that would strengthen students' beliefs regarding a communicative approach. We also expected that, because beliefs influence learning (Ellis, 2009) and are related to actions (Barcelos & Kalaja, 2011), there would be a trend for improvement in students' receptive language proficiency.

The hypotheses are:

H0: There will be no trend for change in the factors underlying entering students' stated beliefs about language learning or in students' receptive language proficiency.

H1: The factors underlying entering students' stated beliefs about language learning will show a trend for change away from a traditional orientation and towards a communicative orientation.

H2: Entering students' receptive language proficiency will show a trend for improvement.

Method

Participants

Participants were 315 newly admitted first-year students in the English Language and Cultures Department at a large private university in Japan, randomly chosen from the entering cohort from 2006 through 2011. Cohort of 2006 = 63, Cohort of 2007 = 51, Cohort of 2008 = 54, Cohort of 2009 = 49, Cohort of 2010 = 47, Cohort of 2011 = 51. They were roughly the same age, from the same area, and from similar socio-economic backgrounds.

Measures

The participants' stated beliefs were assessed by the Sakui and Gaies survey regarding beliefs about language learning. Although the belief survey items are presented in this paper in English, the actual questionnaire consisted of the original items in Japanese as obtained from Sakui. (Because Sakui and Gaies used multiple translations when developing their survey, this is a slightly different Japanese translation than the instrument that Riley received from Gaies.)

Participants' receptive English proficiency was measured by an in-house English placement test (100 items, $\alpha = .780$). The test was constructed by eliminating every other item from a commercially available TOEIC practice test so that it could be administered within a 90-minute class period. The raw scores were weighted to produce an estimated TOEIC score. The placement test was piloted ($N = 99$) at the beginning of 2005. It was found to correlate fairly well ($.671; p < 0.01$; 2-tailed) with

actual TOEIC scores later achieved by the students, and thus was judged to be a good indicator of students' general receptive English proficiency. In addition, the choice of a TOEIC-based test has strong face validity, not only because of its importance as a job qualification in Japan, but because all continuing students in this department are required to take the TOEIC test each year for ongoing class placement purposes.

Procedure

Every year from 2006 through 2011, the beliefs questionnaire was administered during English orientation at the beginning of the school year. Half of the students were randomly given the present version of the beliefs survey, while half of the students answered another version that was subsequently abandoned. Students were informed of the purpose of the survey and were requested to participate. The written instructions included an explanation that results would be anonymous and would not impact students' grades in any way. Using optical answer sheets, the participants marked each statement about language learning with 4 *Strongly agree*, 3 *Agree*, 2 *Disagree*, or 1 *Strongly disagree*. There were no questions from the participants, and it took them approximately 15 minutes to complete the survey. Eight answer sheets were incomplete or mismarked and were discarded, leaving 315 valid response sets that were automatically read by a scanning machine.

Every year from 2006 through 2011, participants' receptive English proficiency was measured by the in-house test administered on the first day of English classes to all first-year students. Late or absent students took the test at a later sitting. The test was administered in the same way as an official TOEIC test. Two of the participants did not take the placement test, for a total of 313 placement scores.

Results

Descriptives

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for the 45 items on the survey. The broad range of mean responses shows that the respondents took the survey seriously. In general, the learners agreed most strongly with items that refer to the usefulness and enjoyability of English. Although 2 *English conversation class should be enjoyable* received the second highest mean score, it also had the lowest SD of all items, so some students disagreed quite strongly with this notion.

Learners disagreed most strongly with items that refer to the sufficiency of school in learning English and to the idea that English should only be studied for entrance exams. Learners disagreed 45 I with am satisfied with the English education I have received. With

the highest SD of all items, this item confirms that students felt strong and uniform dissatisfaction with their English education so far.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

| Item | M | SD |
|---|----------|-----------|
| 11 In learning English it is important to repeat and practice a lot. | 3.71 | 0.54 |
| 2 English conversation class should be enjoyable. | 3.64 | 0.49 |
| 5 It is useful to know about English-speaking countries in order to speak English. | 3.59 | 0.59 |
| 17 If I learn to speak English very well, I will have many opportunities to use it. | 3.41 | 0.70 |
| 40 I study English because it is useful to communicate with English speaking people. | 3.29 | 0.70 |
| 15 Listening to tapes and watching English programs on television are very important in learning English. | 3.29 | 0.57 |
| 28 Some languages are easier to learn than others. | 3.28 | 0.60 |
| 21 If I learn to speak English very well, it will help me get a good job. | 3.20 | 0.73 |
| 43 The longer I study English, the more enjoyable I find it. | 3.20 | 0.66 |
| 31 Speaking and listening to English are more useful than reading and writing English. | 3.12 | 0.64 |
| 13 If you are allowed to make mistakes in the beginning, it will be hard to get rid of them later on. | 3.12 | 0.66 |
| 29 You can learn to improve your English only from native speakers of English. | 3.10 | 0.72 |
| 1 It is easier for children than adults to learn English. | 3.10 | 0.66 |
| 39 If my teacher is a native speaker, he/she should be able to speak Japanese when necessary. | 3.06 | 0.64 |
| 24 Japanese think it is important to speak English. | 3.00 | 0.65 |
| 34 I can improve my English by speaking English with my classmates. | 2.98 | 0.64 |
| 37 I should be able to learn everything I am taught. | 2.90 | 0.71 |
| 4 I believe that someday I will speak English very well. | 2.89 | 0.68 |
| 35 I make mistakes because I do not study enough. | 2.86 | 0.73 |

| Item | M | SD |
|---|----------|-----------|
| 8 In English classes, I prefer to have my teacher provide explanations in Japanese. | 2.82 | 0.72 |
| 44 If I heard a foreigner of my age speaking English, I would go up to that person to practice speaking. | 2.78 | 0.72 |
| 12 I would feel embarrassed to speak English in front of other Japanese students. | 2.72 | 0.75 |
| 19 Learning English is different from learning other subjects. | 2.70 | 0.66 |
| 36 To say something in English, I think of how I would say it in Japanese and then translate it into English. | 2.66 | 0.73 |
| 22 It is easier to read and write English than to speak and understand it. | 2.64 | 0.77 |
| 7 Considering the amount of time I have studied English, I'm satisfied with my progress. | 2.54 | 0.71 |
| 32 Learning a word means learning the Japanese translation. | 2.53 | 0.74 |
| 41 To understand English, it must be translated into Japanese. | 2.48 | 0.75 |
| 38 I want my teacher to correct all my mistakes. | 2.39 | 0.67 |
| 9 It's O.K. to guess if you don't know a word in English. | 2.36 | 0.81 |
| 18 It is easier to speak English than to understand it. | 2.33 | 0.78 |
| 30 Some people are born with a special ability which is useful for learning English. | 2.30 | 0.79 |
| 14 Learning English is mostly a matter of learning grammar rules. | 2.26 | 0.70 |
| 42 It is easier for someone who already speaks a foreign language to learn another one. | 2.19 | 0.66 |
| 10 If a person studies English by himself for 1 hour a day, he will be fluent in English in 5 years. | 2.15 | 0.77 |
| 45 I am satisfied with the English education I have received. | 2.12 | 0.84 |
| 26 Japanese are good at learning foreign languages. | 2.06 | 0.61 |
| 20 Learning English is mostly a matter of translating from Japanese. | 2.00 | 0.68 |
| 25 People who speak more than one language well are very intelligent. | 1.95 | 0.65 |
| 3 In order to learn to read and write English very well, English education at school is enough. | 1.95 | 0.59 |

| Item | M | SD |
|---|----------|-----------|
| 16 Girls are better than boys at learning English. | 1.95 | 0.68 |
| 23 People who are good at math and science are not good at learning foreign languages. | 1.82 | 0.65 |
| 33 I studied English only to pass the entrance exam. | 1.77 | 0.79 |
| 27 In order to speak and understand English very well, English education at school is enough. | 1.74 | 0.63 |
| 6 You shouldn't say anything in English until you can speak it correctly. | 1.50 | 0.69 |

Factor analysis

Factor analysis was conducted to determine which belief survey items should be included when measuring differences in beliefs among cohorts. The dimensionality of the 45 items was analyzed using principal component analysis. Three criteria were used to determine the number of factors to rotate: evidence from the Sakui and Gaies study (1999) that multiple factors would emerge, the scree test, and the interpretability of the factor solution. After eliminating items with low commonalities, a Varimax rotation procedure for maximum likelihood was repeated while further eliminating items. During the final procedure, four factors emerged after six iterations with 18 items loading at 0.35 or more. The rotated solution, as shown in Table 2, yielded four interpretable factors, with item 41 crossloading on two factors.

Table 2. Final Factor Loadings on the Four Belief Factors

| Item | F1 | F2 | F3 | F4 |
|----------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| 43 Enjoy more and more | .577 | | | |
| 40 Useful to communicate | .574 | | | |
| 4 Will speak well | .517 | | | |
| 44 Self-start conversation | .511 | | | |
| 17 Future opportunities | .506 | | | |
| 11 Repetition important | .465 | | | |
| 21 Get good job | .414 | | | |
| 33 Entrance exam | -.411 | | | |

| Item | F1 | F2 | F3 | F4 |
|-------------------------|-------|------|------|------|
| 12 Shy with classmates | -.376 | | | |
| 8 Teacher use L1 | | .774 | | |
| 39 NSTs can use L1 | | .652 | | |
| 36 Think in L1 | | .440 | | |
| 32 Vocab needs L1 | | | .596 | |
| 41 L1 for understanding | | .458 | .569 | |
| 20 Translate from L1 | | | .552 | |
| 14 Mostly grammar | | | .529 | |
| 27 School sufficient SL | | | | .722 |
| 10 Fluent in 5 years | | | | .521 |

After reverse-scaling the negatively loading items 33 and 12, composite scores were created for each of the factors. Higher scores indicate stronger beliefs along that dimension. Internal consistency for each of the factors was examined using Cronbach's alpha. (See Table 3.) Fairly high internal consistency was found for the first three factors. Factor 4 has lower reliability because it consists of only two items.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics for the Four Beliefs Factors

| Factor | Items | M | SD | Skew-ness | Kurtosis | Alpha | % of var. | Cum. Var. |
|----------------------------|-------|------|------|-----------|----------|-------|-----------|-----------|
| F1 Positive Attitude | 9 | 3.11 | 0.39 | -.389 | .068 | .73 | 12.26 | 12.26 |
| F2 L1 Instruction & Use | 4 | 2.76 | 0.53 | -.247 | .378 | .73 | 9.30 | 21.56 |
| F3 Traditional Orientation | 4 | 2.32 | 0.51 | .089 | -.070 | .68 | 8.28 | 29.84 |
| F4 Expectations for School | 2 | 1.95 | 0.58 | .255 | .158 | .54 | 5.40 | 35.24 |

Factor 1 was labeled *Positive Attitude*. Its high mean of 3.11 and low SD of .39 indicate that students agreed quite strongly and uniformly with the items loading on this factor. Students saw English communication as enjoyable and useful (Items 43 and 40), and

believed that it would help them get a good job (Item 21). They believed that they would be able to speak English very well in the future (Item 4) and that they would have many opportunities to use it (Item 17). In addition, the students understood that developing oral communication involves active participation on their part, through repetition and practice (Item 11), and by taking the initiative in conversations with foreigners (Item 44). Being embarrassed to speak in English with classmates (Item 12) or studying only in order to pass university entrance exams (Item 33) are incompatible with this positive attitude and load negatively on this factor. Although the items do not specifically refer to a particular pedagogy, the belief that English communication can be useful and enjoyable derives from students' experiences in communication-based classes, as well as from Japanese media in general.

Factor 2 was labeled *L1 Instruction and Use*. Students preferred their teachers to provide explanations in Japanese (Item 8) and expected their native-speaker teachers to be able to use Japanese when necessary (Item 39). Both items load very strongly on this factor, with Item 8 loading the most strongly of any item in the study. Moreover, students believed that in order to understand an English utterance, they would need to translate it into Japanese (Item 41), and they believed that in order to speak in English, they would need to think in Japanese and translate their thought into English (Item 36). In other words, this dimension concerns students' beliefs about the primacy of the L1 regardless of teaching methodology: people in Japan think in Japanese and use Japanese, so it is natural that secondary English teachers in Japan predominantly use Japanese in the classroom. With a mean score of 2.75 and an SD of .53, students agreed with this factor, but less strongly and with less uniformity than they agreed with Factor 1. Some students may have wondered whether the English experience that they hoped for in Factor 1 could be attained through Japanese.

Factor 3 was labeled *Traditional Orientation*. This factor concerns traditional grammar-translation pedagogy and its use of the L1. Learning an English word means learning the Japanese translation (Item 32) and understanding English means translating it into Japanese (Item 41). In fact, learning English is mostly a matter of translating from Japanese (Item 20) and of learning grammar rules (Item 14). This orientation reflects students' secondary classroom experiences that involved mostly studying grammar and translating from the L1. This factor's mean score of 2.32, close to the middle of the 4-point scale, and its SD of .51 show that the students were ambivalent about the grammar translation orientation of their English education so far.

The fourth factor was labeled *Expectations for School*, indicating students' expectations for their university education. This factor's low mean score of 1.95 and high SD of .58

indicate that students disagreed with the items. They did not expect that the amount of English they would learn at school would be enough for them to be able to understand and speak well (Item 27) or that they would become fluent after studying English an hour a day for five years (Item 10). Additional items may be needed to adequately capture students' expectations of their schooling.

To investigate the relationship among these four factors and with students' receptive English proficiency, correlation coefficients were computed among the four factors and the English placement scores. (See Table 4).

Table 4. Correlations among the Four Belief Factors and English Placement Scores

| | F2 | F3 | F4 | Placement score |
|----------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|------------------------|
| F1 Positive Attitude | -.163** | -.078 | -.131* | .077 |
| F2 L1 Instruction & Use | | .579** | .158** | -.278** |
| F3 Traditional Orientation | | | .184** | -.272** |
| F4 Expectations for School | | | | -.080 |

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

The placement scores correlate moderately negatively with L1 Instruction and Use (Factor 2) and Traditional Orientation (Factor 3). Students with higher placement scores had a weaker traditional orientation and fewer expectations that instruction should take place in the L1. However, placement score is not correlated with Positive Attitude (Factor 1) or Expectations for School (Factor 4).

L1 Instruction and Use (Factor 2) and Traditional Orientation (Factor 3) are strongly correlated with each other. This is not surprising, as both factors encompass the notion of L1 use. Students who believed that instruction should be given in the L1 also tended to believe in the efficacy of traditional grammar-translation instruction. In addition, L1 Instruction and Use (Factor 2) and Traditional Orientation (Factor 3) have a weak correlation with Expectations for School (Factor 4), indicating that students who had a more traditional orientation also had slightly stronger expectations that their university experience would result in oral fluency.

We ran ANOVA to test the null hypotheses that neither the factors underlying students' stated beliefs about language learning nor their receptive language proficiency would show longitudinal change. Contrary to our expectations, ANOVA found no significant

differences among the cohorts for the means of the four belief factors or for the placement scores. Because we could not reject the null hypothesis, we decided to search for consistent patterns of beliefs across the cohorts.

Cluster analysis

A cluster analysis was run on the students' responses to the items loading on the four belief factors (N = 315) and on their placement scores (N = 313). The scores were not standardized. Initial analysis indicated three or four clusters. A hierarchical cluster analysis using Ward's method with Euclidean distance was run for both a three-cluster and a four-cluster solution. This was followed by one-way ANOVA and Tukey post-hoc tests to determine significant differences among the clusters. The three-cluster solution (see Table 5) was chosen because nearly all differences among clusters were significant and also for its interpretability. For the three-cluster solution, there was a statistically significant ($p < .005$) difference among groups for all four factors and for the placement score as determined by one-way ANOVA (Factor 1 $F(2,312) = 15.082, p = .000, n^2 = .09$), Factor 2 $F(2,312) = 45.713, p = .000, n^2 = .23$), Factor 3 $F(2,312) = 78.247, p = .000, n^2 = .34$), Factor 4 $F(2,312) = 222.933, p = .000, n^2 = .59$), Placement score $F(2,310) = 6.400, p = .002, n^2 = .04$). The Tukey post-hoc test showed significant ($p < .05$) differences among all groups for all four factors, and significant differences ($p < .005$) between Cluster 1 and Cluster 3 for the placement test.

Table 5. Means and SD for Belief Factors and Placement Scores by Cluster

| | Cluster 1 Traditionalist | Cluster 2 Independent | Cluster 3 Persevering |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| F1 Positive Attitude | 3.11 (0.38) | 3.26 (0.30) | 2.96 (0.44) |
| F2 L1 Instruction & Use | 3.07 (0.38) | 2.76 (0.59) | 2.48 (0.40) |
| F3 Traditional Orientation | 2.70 (0.37) | 2.17 (0.55) | 2.02 (0.30) |
| F4 Expectations for School | 2.31 (0.37) | 1.32 (0.26) | 2.19 (0.46) |
| Placement Scores | 395.8 (101.3) | 424.9 (101.2) | 446.8 (109.6) |

Students in Cluster 1 ($n = 115$) are characterized by a lower placement score (395.8), a strong belief in L1 Instruction and Use (Factor 2), and a fairly strong agreement with a Traditional Orientation (Factor 3). Although they rated Expectations for School (Factor 4) more highly than other students, the score of 2.31 is at the middle of the 4-point scale,

indicating somewhat ambivalent expectations regarding the possibility of acquiring oral skills at university. Students in this cluster can be labeled as *Traditionalist* in orientation.

Students in Cluster 2 ($n = 103$) are characterized by a strong Positive Attitude (Factor 1). At the same time, they strongly (1.32) and clearly ($SD=.26$) disagreed with Factor 4, the expectation that university schooling alone would enable them to be fluent within five years. Overall they tended to agree with L1 Instruction and Use (Factor 2) and disagree with Traditional Orientation (Factor 3), but the high SDs for these two factors indicate variation in their attitudes. Students in this cluster can be labeled as *Independent* in orientation.

Students in Cluster 3 ($n = 97$) are characterized by high placement scores and a clear ($SD=.30$) disagreement with the Traditional Orientation (Factor 3). Although they rated L1 Instruction and Use (Factor 2) less highly than students in the other two clusters, their mean rating of 2.48 is at the midpoint of the 4-point scale, indicating a neutral but not negative attitude. As indicated by the fairly high SDs on Positive Attitude (Factor 1) and Expectations for School (Factor 4), these students exhibited more variation in their positive attitude and expectations. Despite their lack of confidence in traditional methods, students in this cluster had achieved higher English proficiency, and can be labeled as *Persevering* in orientation.

Discussion

In this section of the paper, we discuss our results against the background of fifteen years of secondary curriculum change, and we compare our results to those of Sakui and Gaies (1999) and Riley (2006). They collected their data in 1997 and 2002, respectively, from students who had completed their secondary English studies under the 1989 COS, which emphasized a positive attitude toward oral communication. In contrast, the data for the present study were collected from 2006 to 2011 from incoming university students who had done all of their senior high school studies under the 1999 COS, which emphasizes communication ability and under the 2003 Action Plan which suggests that high school teachers use English.

For a long-term perspective on responses to individual survey items, we compared items that received the strongest responses, a mean score over 3 *agree* or below 2 *disagree*, in the three studies. (See Table 6.)

Table 6. Items with Strongest Agreement or Disagreement in the Three Beliefs Studies

| Item | Sakui and Gaies | Riley | The present study |
|---------------------|------------------------|--------------|--------------------------|
| 1, 2, 5, 11, 15, 28 | Agree | Agree | Agree |
| 3, 6, 23, 27 | Disagree | Disagree | Disagree |
| 7, 20, 26, 45 | Disagree | Disagree | |

In all three studies, six items received a mean score over 3 *agree* and four items received a mean score of less than 2 *disagree*. These results suggest that students are likely to strongly agree or disagree with some notions regardless of changing emphasis in curricular goals: the insufficiency of English education at school, the importance of listening and speaking practice, the role of culture, and the role of outside factors such as the age of the learner. In contrast, we found that students no longer strongly disagree with four items: 7 *Considering the amount of time I have studied English, I'm satisfied with my progress*; 20 *Learning English is mostly a matter of translating from Japanese*; 26 *Japanese are good at learning foreign languages*; and 45 *I am satisfied with the English education I received*. This indicates that students who studied under the 1999 COS, while not fully satisfied with their secondary English education, are at least less dissatisfied and more confident, possibly due to social as well as curricular changes.

The four belief factors that emerged in this study are also interpretable in terms of Japanese secondary English education and society as a whole. We found our results to be somewhat similar to the factors of Sakui and Gaies's (1999) and Riley's (2006) study, which confirms the stability of the underlying factors (see Table 7). At the same time, differences in our findings regarding communicative and traditional orientations can be accounted for by changes in Japanese education and society, and thus are worth discussing in detail.

Table 7. The Four Belief Factors in the Three Studies

| | Sakui and Gaies (1999) | Riley (2006) | Present study (2012) |
|----|---------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|
| F1 | Communicative Orientation | Communicative Orientation | Positive Attitude |
| F2 | Traditional Orientation | Traditional Orientation | L1 Instruction & Use |
| F3 | Quality & Sufficiency | (Unnamed) | Traditional Orientation |
| F4 | Aptitude and Difficulty | (Unnamed) | Expectations |

In all three studies, seven items (4, 11, 17, 21, 40, 43, and 44) related to a positive, goal-oriented orientation with a strong willingness to prepare and practice to communicate orally, loaded onto the first factor. In the previous studies, Factor 1 also included four items that did not load in our study: 2, 5, 15, and 8 loading negatively. Three of these (2 *English conversation class should be enjoyable*; 5 *It is useful to know about English-speaking countries in order to speak English*; 15 *Listening to tapes and watching English programs on television are very important in learning English*) are considered mainstays of communicative language teaching. Thus, previous studies rightly interpreted this factor in terms of methodology. It reflected students' experiences in communication-based classrooms that emphasize students' active participation in enjoyable activities teaching useful expressions.

Although Items 2, 5, and 15 have dropped out of Factor 1, they are among the items that our students agreed with most strongly. Students still want to do these things, but may not necessarily rely on English classes to do them. Our Factor 1 is more centered on a future-oriented belief that students will have many opportunities to use English, reflecting the tenet that the ability to use English is necessary or desirable in today's global economy as stated in MEXT (2003). The belief statements in Factor 1 center less on methodology than on positive, personal goals; thus, we have named Factor 1 differently than the other two studies.

Factor 1 *Positive Attitude* also includes two items that had not loaded onto the first factor in the other two studies: 33 *I am studying (studied) English only to pass the entrance examinations* and 12 *I would feel embarrassed to speak English in front of other Japanese students*, both loading negatively. These indicate the growing significance and normalcy of English in students' lives and may also signal their determination to enter this university's English Language and Cultures Department.

In the other two studies, Factor 2 concerned a traditional orientation, with four items (8, 32, 36, and 41) loading onto it in both studies. In the present study, this factor is now

split into L1 Instruction & Use (Factor 2) and Traditional Orientation (Factor 3). Similarly to Factor 2 in the other studies, our Factor 3 reflects student beliefs regarding their secondary English experiences in reading and grammar classes that emphasize grammar, vocabulary study, and translation into the L1.

In this study, L1 Instruction & Use emerges as a separate factor, indicating that students no longer believe that language choice is equated with teaching method: they accept that the L1 may be used for instruction in communicative classes as well as in traditional classes. Students also expect their native-speaker teachers to be bilingual, possibly because many high school native-speaker teachers reside permanently in Japan and speak Japanese. These students are sensitive to social change, showing changes in belief patterns even before curriculum changes have been implemented.

Conclusion

No significant differences were found among the cohorts for the six years of this study, either for the four belief factors or for English proficiency. We found that beliefs are deeply embedded in the Japanese secondary culture of learning. Entering students come from a pool of senior high schools that are judged to produce students who would be able to pass the entrance exams for this university. This self-regulating, closed-loop system is resistant to change, so that students emerging from that system show little belief change from year to year. The stability is internally maintained by teachers and textbooks, despite changes in curriculum. A similar situation may exist in other foreign-language contexts, particularly in Asia, where a strong exam culture has influenced teaching and learning practices, and where language education policies are often imposed in a top-down manner (Butler, 2011). Although national curricula may be changed by *fiat*, the classroom actions and beliefs of teachers—and students—cannot.

Despite the lack of change over time, nevertheless, even within the specific micro-culture of one department at one university, students have one of three orientations in their beliefs about language learning: traditionalist, independent, or persevering. Further research could examine how students draw on their beliefs while they are at university, and whether students with certain orientations are more successful in EFL courses. Given the purpose of this study, to find broad influences of secondary curriculum on beliefs over a long period of time, using a normative approach was not unreasonable; however, in further research, we would use a qualitative approach to triangulate and strengthen data.

Our strongest findings emerged through a comparison with earlier studies. Unlike in earlier studies, the factors underlying student beliefs are no longer linked to teaching methodologies, but to attitudes about personal goals, language choice, and the normalcy

of English. In Japan and many other EFL contexts, the methodology question cannot be underestimated, and classroom teachers still struggle with the dilemma of reconciling grammar-translation with communicative language teaching. However, students seem to have somehow reconciled the inherent discrepancy of an educational system that uses NNESTs to teach through grammar-translation and NESTs to teach through communicative language teaching. What underlies their beliefs is not methodology, but “possible selves” (Dörnyei, 2009) who have personal goals and live in a world in which both Japanese and English are acceptable.

We also conclude that students’ beliefs are sensitive to social change, sometimes evolving even before curriculum changes are implemented. The clearest example of social change in Japan may be the transformation of society due to social media. Like other young people around the world, many students can and do use social media in English to overcome their geographic, linguistic, and cultural isolation, and language teachers are also starting to find ways to incorporate new technologies into the classroom. In this way, learners negotiate their beliefs with the larger society, and perhaps even help to drive some of the curricular changes.

In our introduction we mentioned that mismatches between teacher and student beliefs can prohibit effective instruction. Mismatches are dealt with most effectively in the classroom when teachers engage students in learning strategy training that includes discussion of beliefs about language learning. In Japan, these student voices also need to be heard by MEXT, which ultimately sets the goal and rationale for English language learning. English teachers worldwide might also ask themselves whether the high-level government agencies that set curricular goals and standards have their fingers on the pulse of those they serve, the students.

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