The Effects of Environmental Factors on Japanese Primary School Teachers as Language Learners

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to investigate the effects of environmental factors on Japanese primary school teachers as language learners. Regarding environmental factors, we focused on regional conditions of the areas in which teachers are living and working, and the cultural and social contexts in which individuals have lived. Regarding language learner factors, we took a particularly close look at language learner beliefs (i.e., cognitive dimension) and language learning motivation (i.e., affective dimension). The results were considered within the framework of Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). A questionnaire was distributed to primary school teachers and was answered by 200 respondents. Using a cross-sectional study method, subjects were classified into groups by attribution, and then compared statistically. Results suggest that most of the participant teachers are at least somewhat motivated to learn a foreign language. They also suggest that environments closer to the individuals may have some impact on their affective dimension and larger contests at the social level may have some influence on their cognitive dimension.

1. Introduction

Japanese primary schools have recently started officially offering English education to students, and English classes are currently conducted by homeroom teachers who are not professional language teachers. Up until now, studies on language teachers and language learners have developed separately; therefore the previous studies on language teacher cognition have not given much attention to the teacher’s own motivation to learn the language. Likewise, the studies on language teacher beliefs have been examined absolutely as something different from language learner beliefs, even though both are often studied comparatively. In the EFL context, however, non-native foreign language teachers can be considered a group of developing foreign language learners. In particular, even though they will have an important role to play in teaching English to children, Japanese primary school teachers have not taken specialized training in teaching English.
Therefore, it is assumed that they have some different characteristics both as language learners and language teachers compared to professional language teachers.

Bronfenbrenner (1979; 291) stated that, "If you want to truly understand something, try to change it." This emphasizes the function of a life event, i.e. a turning point in the course of one’s life. In a professional context, the introduction of English education in primary schools is just such an event to primary school teachers. It should serve as a good opportunity to understand individual teachers both as language teachers and as language learners, and could be used to improve English education training for primary school teachers, which may become more necessary in the future.

2. Previous Studies

Interactions between language learners and their environments have recently been drawing increased attention under Dynamic Systems Theory (DST) (Dörnyei, 2014; Ellis & Larsen-Freeman, 2009; Hiromori, 2014; Larsen-Freeman & Cameron 2008; Verspoor, de Bot & Lowie, 2011). Traditional views of causality are shifted to focus on co-adaptation and emergence. Context is not seen as a backdrop, but rather as a complex system itself connected to other complex systems, and variability in system behavior takes on increased importance (Larsen-Freeman and Cameron, 2008:200). Learners and teachers are inseparable from their environments and they constantly change over time in response to those environments. To understand teachers and learners better, we should take into account the interplay between individuals and the environments around them from the perspective of DST.

Studies on teacher cognition so far have been often mentioned in connection to the framework by Borg (2006), which consists of four main aspects: teacher’s prior language learning experiences, conceptualizations of teaching during teacher education, contextual aspects and classroom practices. Likewise, Bronfenbrenner saw the process of human development as being shaped by the interaction between an individual and his or her environment. His Ecological Systems Theory states that there are four different levels of environmental influences that can affect human development, and they can be classified into micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems. While Borg sees the environments as being at the same level, Bronfenbrenner sees them in a hierarchically-structured way. If environments also have a mutual influence on each other, we think it is appropriate to consider those environments as hierarchically-structured systems. Thus, in this paper, we try to incorporate previous studies on language teacher cognition into Bronfenbrenner’s framework.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) describes a microsystem as a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person. It refers to the settings that most immediately and directly impact the individuals, such as their roles and experiences. We can see a number of studies on teacher cognition connected to this level of system: studies related to prior language learning experience and influence of their teachers (Ariogul, 2007; Lortie, 1975;
Numrich, 1996; Olson & Singer, 1994; Warford & Reeves, 2003); studies related to knowledge and experiences obtained by teacher education (Farrell, 2003; Flores, 2001; Johnson, 1994; Watson, 2003); and studies by teaching experiences (Breen et al., 2001; Tsang, 2004; Richards, Gallo & Renandy, 2001).

Also, Bronfenbrenner (1979) describes a mesosystem as the interrelation between two or more settings in which the developing person actively participates, such as, for an adult, between family, work, and social life. So, that system can be interpreted to refer to the context in which the teacher operates, including their students and colleagues. Nishimuro and Borg (2013) revealed that teacher practices and cognitions in teaching grammar are influenced by contextual factors such as learners and colleagues. Crooks and Arakaki (1999) also suggested that teachers learn teaching ideas from their colleagues.

An exosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) is described as one or more settings that do not involve the developing person as an active participant, but in which events occur that affect, or are affected by, the individuals. The studies related to this system examine the effects of work environment and living contexts around the teachers (Alexander & Dochy, 1995; Butler, 2005; Richards, Tung & Ng, 1992). For example, Allen (2002) examined regional effects due to urban, rural and other environments, and revealed that the living setting might be one factors affecting teachers. In a Japanese context, Shibata (2013) empirically researched the effects of the existence of American bases and American people on teachers and students in Okinawa, Japan. She indicated that in the study of SLA, it is necessary to consider the social contexts in which teachers and learners are placed.

Lastly, Bronfenbrenner (1979) refers to a macrosystem as consistencies in the form and content of lower-order systems at the level of subculture or a culture as a whole, along with any belief system or ideology underlying such consistencies. The macrosystem changes gradually over time, because with each successive generation, those who have shared a particular event together during a particular time span may make their macrosystem different and unique. Though we can see only a few studies on a macrosystem in the field of language education, Yamazaki (2012), a researcher in the field of teacher education in Japan, revealed a detailed picture of teacher professional development by conducting questionnaire surveys and interviews on Japanese public school teachers every five years. The results showed that each generation has its own variety of unique characteristics in terms of developmental processes.

The studies mentioned above have revealed that each level of environment around teachers somewhat affects professional language teacher mental and practical dimensions. However, most of these studies are confined in each level of these systems and few examine the whole system of environments and interactions between them. Also we can see particularly few studies that associate environmental factors in Japanese primary school teachers. Against that background, Nakamura, Shimura and Hasegawa (2013) examined the transformation of teacher beliefs and their views on education due to their experiences teaching English by comparing experienced and
inexperienced Japanese primary school teachers, through interview and group discussion. The results showed that while inexperienced teachers tended to focus on the educator and materials, experienced teachers of English have a tendency to focus on their learners. Also, experienced teachers think more about basic skills and achievement of scholastic proficiency. Sasajima and Borg (2009:159) pointed out that as teachers get more experienced, they learn to automate their teaching practices and start taking note of teaching content. We can also assume that English teaching experience might give teachers the awareness and cognition of a language learner, and one potential reason for that is they need to learn English themselves again to teach it. This suggested that a change of roles of the teachers (in the microsystem) had some effect on their mental and cognitive dimensions. Also, Nakamura and Shimura (2014) explored the factors influencing teacher’s cognitive and practical dimensions of English teaching using a questionnaire survey. The result showed that teachers in collaborative work settings, where teachers are working together in groups or teams to improve their professional level, have higher self-confidence and more intrinsic language learning motivation. It was also revealed that higher self-efficacy, which represents good relations between teachers and students, and higher workplace-efficacy, which represents good overall school atmosphere, were related with higher self-confidence and more external language learning motivation. This suggested that the workplace environment might have something to do with teacher’s affective and cognitive dimensions.

From the above, we can assume that closer environments (i.e., macro and mesosystem environments) around teachers have some impact on them. If individuals are in a continuous state of change due to interactions with environments with a hierarchically-structured system, it can be supposed that broader regional settings and cultural contexts also have some impact on mental and cognitive dimensions of individual teachers. It would be worthwhile to investigate language teachers as language learners from the perspective of their external environments. In their conceptual framework of total teacher effectiveness, Chung, Tam and Tsui (2002) distinguished between a cognitive dimension (i.e., beliefs) and an affective dimension (i.e., motivation) for teachers. Accordingly, our study focuses on these two dimensions (i.e., language learning motivation and language learner beliefs) in individual teachers.

3. Aim of this study

The aim of this study is to determine the effect of external environments (exo- and macrosystem) on learner factors particular to Japanese primary school teachers. Among learner factors considered to be changeable (Takeuchi, 2010), the focus is placed on language learning motivation (i.e., affective dimension) and language learner beliefs (i.e., cognitive dimension). The following are the research questions (RQ) used in this study.
RQ1: What are the characteristic features of language learners (i.e., language learning motivation and language learner beliefs) particular to Japanese primary school teachers?

RQ2: Are there any differences in language learning motivation and language learner beliefs in Japanese primary school teachers due to living and working conditions?

RQ3: Are there any differences in language learning motivation and language learner beliefs in Japanese primary school teachers due to cultural and social contexts in which individuals have lived?

4. Method

4.1. Participants
A total of 200 Japanese primary school teachers participated in the study, with 134 male (67%) and 66 female (33%) teachers. Twenty-six teachers were teaching special support classes (13%), and this group was the largest. Twenty-one teachers each were teaching 1st and 5th grade (each coming to 10% of the total), and these were the smallest groups. The numbers were quite well-balanced. The total number of participants who had taught English was 149 (74%). Teachers could be divided into four age groups according to the year of implementation of their courses of study under the Japanese national curriculum. Each group was defined as including teachers who were in 7th grade or higher at the time their curriculum was implemented. Group 1 (under the age of 32) consisted of 36 teachers (18%); group 2 (between the ages of 33 and 44) had 40 teachers (20%); group 3 (between the ages of 45 and 53) had 68 teachers (34%); and group 4 (over the age of 54) had 56 teachers (28%). From the demographic data presented by the government (MEXT, 2012), each percentage is close to the overall percentage of teachers in each age group. English ability was self-reported and the following results were obtained: very good (n =12, 6%), good (n =23, 11%), moderate (n =60, 30%), poor (n =68, 34%), and very poor (n =37, 18%). Despite there being a larger number of teachers who reported having poor English ability, it was determined that there are no concerns regarding the acquired data.

4.2 Questionnaire
A questionnaire survey was conducted, and it consisted of several subscales to assess language learning motivation and language learner beliefs of primary school teachers, and to identify the features of two levels of environments around them. The scale developed by Hiromori (2006), based on Deci and Ryan’s self-determination theory, was used to assess learner motivation for English learning. The scale consisted of 25 question items: the lowest level of self-determination (i.e., unmotivated), three levels of extrinsic motivation from less autonomous to more autonomous (i.e., external regulated, introjected regulation and identified regulation), and intrinsic motivation with which actions were performed out of interest and enjoyment. All of these
items were rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Additionally, based on our previous study (Nakamura & Shimura, 2014) using The Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI; Horwitz, 1987), a language learner belief scale with three subscales was created. The self-cognition subscale consisted of four items such as “I believe that I will ultimately learn to speak a foreign language very well”, and presumed to point to level of self-confidence. The mastery-oriented subscale consisted of four items such as “Learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of learning many new vocabulary words” and the skill-oriented subscale consisted of three items such as “I would like to study a foreign language with a native speaker teacher.” All of these items were rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Table 1 shows the questions in each subscale.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>subscale</th>
<th>question items</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-cognition (confidence)</td>
<td>I believe that I will ultimately learn to speak a foreign language very well.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I have a foreign language aptitude.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>It is too early to learn a foreign language.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Learning a foreign language is useful to understand the culture of one’s own country.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mastery-oriented</td>
<td>Learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of learning many new vocabulary words.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Learning outcomes should be evaluated by a teacher.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>If I learn to speak this language very well, it will help me get a good job.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Textbooks are necessary to learn a foreign language.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skill-oriented</td>
<td>I would like to study a foreign language with a native speaker teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>It is important to speak a foreign language with an excellent accent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>It is important to repeat and practice often.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The six basic attributes were also surveyed: Grade they are teaching (including supervisory personnel and special needs classes), Gender, Age, English teaching experience (or lack thereof), English ability (on a scale of five from “very good” to “very poor”) and living conditions (the area in which the teacher lives and works).

4.3. Data Collection

A web-based survey (NTT Com Research) was employed. From the previously registered monitors, primary school teachers were extracted and were asked to cooperate in the survey. Data from 204 respondents without missing values was collected. The response rate was about 58%.
Out of all the respondents, four were over the age of 61 and their data was deleted, leaving a final subject group of 200.

4.4 Data Analysis

In this study, principal component scores (i.e., the integrated scores with the highest interpretability) were calculated and examined. Preceding the principal component analysis, factor analysis (maximum-likelihood method, promax solution) was conducted on each subscale to reduce the question items in order to enhance internal consistency. As a result, seven in total out of 25 question items were deleted from the language learning motivation portion. No question items were deleted from language learner beliefs. After the items were deleted, principal component analysis was conducted on selected items again. Confirming that analysis extracted only one principal component in each subscale, the first component score of each subscale was used for analysis. In addition, to understand the data more accurately and profile the teachers, cluster analysis (K-Means method) was conducted on the language learning motivation scale using the first principal component score of each subscale. Principal component scores were also used for the analysis of language learner beliefs. Data analysis methods for each research question are summarized below.

RQ1: Characteristics of language learner factors among Japanese primary school teachers

Descriptive statistics were examined to understand the features of language learning motivation and language learner beliefs particular to Japanese primary school teachers.

RQ2: Effect of living and working conditions on language learner factors

Table 2 shows the living and working conditions defined based upon our previous study (Nakamura & Shimura; 2014). When there was a plurality of replies (e.g. Special Educational Zone, plus remote areas or small schools), replies were counted and analyzed separately.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area 1</th>
<th>Urban area with high expectations from the stakeholders</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Area 2</td>
<td>Areas where autonomous employment training is actively held.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Area 3</td>
<td>Special Educational Zones supported by the government.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Area 4</td>
<td>Remote areas or small schools</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To examine the differences in language learning motivation in Japanese primary school teachers due to living and working conditions, cross tables (Chi-square tests) were conducted. Also as to language learner beliefs, a t-test with each four areas as the dependent variables and language learner beliefs as independent variables was conducted.
RQ3: Effect of cultural and social contexts on language learner factors

The teachers were grouped into age groups based upon which national curriculum they studied under, and defined by the year that curriculum was implemented. A group of subjects is assumed to have shared particular educational events and learning content during a specific time span. Based on Koizumi (2001), MEXT (2011) and Yamazaki (2012), the characteristics of each group were summarized below.

Group 1 (the 18th course of study, implemented in 2002) was categorized as being the generation which enjoyed a more relaxed education policy, which included reduced hours and curriculum content in primary education. This improvement plan was based upon review of past curricula that placed an emphasis on memorization. English education had much focus on listening and speaking skills. Also, most of this group had potentially experienced some level of English education as students during elementary school. In addition, this group went through programs that emphasized practical teaching during their pre-employment teacher education. Members of this group experienced various new educational policies as students. English teaching in Group 2 (17th course of study, implemented in 1993) focused on four skills – speaking, listening, writing and reading – and valued positive attitudes to communication. Many of them faced a difficult road to winning their positions as teachers, so we can assume that many of them had a clear objective of becoming a teacher. This group was taught under a new concept of scholastic ability, which emphasized the development of abilities that enable children to think and judge independently and to act for themselves (MEXT, 1994). Group 3 (16th course of study, implemented in 1981) suffered a large reduction in curriculum content and school hours (English education was reduced to three hours a week). One of the key characteristics of this group was the implementation of the Joint First-Stage Achievement Test, a nation-wide entrance examination for universities. We can assume that the shift of question format to multiple-choice may have produced some changes in student learning. On the other hand, during this period, classroom communicative activities such as games and pair work drew increased interest. On top of this, this group was taught as the same time that teacher training for beginner teachers was begun. Group 4 (15th course of study, implemented in 1972) was brought up during the economic boom. The key characteristics of this group were merit-based education and the entrance exam race. Cram schools and mass-marketed tests gained popularity during this era. On the other hand, communication in English was emphasized and the ALT (Assistant Language Teacher) system was adopted.

On the whole, we can say the younger the teacher, the more skill- and attitude-focused they are, whereas the older teachers are more mastery-focused. Moreover, members of each group experienced the same events at different periods in their lives. For example, regarding “new concept of scholastic ability” mentioned above, Group 1 and 2 are imposed on it at school as a student, Group 3 and 4 challenged it as a novice and as a veteran respectively.

Cross tables (Chi-square tests) were examined to investigate the differences in language learning motivation in Japanese primary school teachers due to cultural and social contexts.
Regarding language learner beliefs, a one-way ANOVA was conducted with each of the four areas as the independent variables and language learner beliefs as dependent variables.

5. Results

5.1 Characteristics of language learner factors among Japanese primary school teachers

Cluster analysis (K-Means method) determined that language learning motivation could be used to separate participants into four groups. (See figure 1). In Cluster 1 (n=25) the mean scores of every type of motivation except amotivation were high. Cluster 2 (n=72) had relatively high mean values of two higher self-determined motivation types (i.e., intrinsic motivation and identified regulation) compared to the others. Conversely Cluster 3 (n=45) had relatively high mean values of lower self-determined motivation types (i.e., amotivation and external regulation). In Cluster 4 (n = 11) the scores of every type of motivation except amotivation are low. The groups were named after their characteristic: the highly motivated group, the internally motivated group, the externally motivated group and the unmotivated group.

![Figure 1 The result of Cluster analysis on language learning motivation](image)

The number of subjects in each cluster shows that 189 out of 200 teachers are somewhat motivated, especially 92 of them are internally motivated in learning English. To determine why, differences between the groups due to English teaching experience were compared with a cross table (Chi-square tests). The result showed that teachers who have experience teaching English were significantly more likely to be in Cluster 1 (the highly motivated group) and Cluster 4 (the unmotivated group), and conversely teachers who have no experience teaching English were significantly more likely to be in Cluster 3 (the externally motivated group). ($\chi^2 (3) = 12.5, p = .01, \phi = .25$).

Regarding language learner beliefs, table 3 shows the descriptive statistics of each subscale of language learner beliefs. A repeated one-way ANOVA was used to assess the differences between subscale mean scores, and the results revealed significant differences with large effect size ($F (2, 199) = 470.96, p = .00$, partial $\eta^2 = .70$). A Bonferroni test showed significant
differences in all combinations, and comparing average scores revealed that the skill-oriented score was highest, followed by mastery-oriented and self-cognition. Differences of principal component scores in each group due to English teaching experience were compared with a t-test. Results showed no significant difference.

Table 3  Descriptive statistics of language learner belief

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>skew</th>
<th>α</th>
<th>proportion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-cognition</td>
<td>2.84</td>
<td>.76</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.79</td>
<td>61.40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mastery-oriented</td>
<td>3.38</td>
<td>.66</td>
<td>-.42</td>
<td>.65</td>
<td>48.71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skill-oriented</td>
<td>3.93</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td>-.76</td>
<td>.78</td>
<td>69.15%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.2 Effects of living and working conditions (exosystem)

Cross tables (Chi-square tests) were examined to determine any differences in language learning motivation inherent in Japanese primary school teachers due to their living and working conditions (i.e. the four areas). Results showed that teachers in the areas where autonomous employment training is actively held were significantly more likely to be in Cluster 1 (the highly motivated group) and contrary significantly less likely to be found in Cluster 4 (the unmotivated group) \( \chi^2 (3) = 10.22, p = .02, \varphi = .22 \).

A t-test was conducted with the four defined areas as independent variable, and language learner beliefs as dependent variables, to examine the differences in inherent teacher characteristics due to their living and working environments. The results showed teachers in Area 2 (areas where autonomous employment training is actively held) tend to have significantly higher self-cognition (self-confidence) with medium effect size \( t (198) = -2.08, p = .039, d = .43 \), and conversely, show significantly lower tendency for being skill-oriented with small effect size \( t (198) = 2.35, p = .02, d = .40 \). Likewise, teachers in Area 3 (Special Educational Zones supported by the government) tend to have significantly higher self-cognition (self-confidence) with medium effect size \( t (198) = -2.72, p = .01, d = .51 \), whereas there was no significant difference in either language learning motivation or language learner belief between Areas 1 and 4.

5.3 Effects of cultural and social context (macrosystem)

To examine the differences in language learning motivation in Japanese primary school teachers due to cultural and social contexts, the differences between the groups were compared using cross-tabulation (Chi-square tests). The results show no significant differences between the groups \( \chi^2 (9) = 11.20, p = .26 \). Also, a one-way ANOVA was utilized to examine the differences in language learner beliefs due to cultural and social contexts. Results revealed significant differences in self-cognition comparisons with significant differences between group 1 (the youngest generation) and group 4 (the oldest generation). Comparing the average values showed
that group 1 (the youngest generation) has significantly high average scores in a self-cognition belief ($F(3,196) = 3.66, p=.13, \eta^2 = .05$).

Lastly we examined whether there was an interaction between these two levels of environment (i.e., living conditions versus cultural and social contexts) using two-way ANOVA. The result showed no interaction in any combination of language learning motivation and language learner belief ($F (3,192) = 1.07, p = .27, \eta^2 = .02$).

6. Discussion

6.1 Characteristics of language learner factors among Japanese primary school teachers

The descriptive statistics for language learner motivation show that about a half of these teachers are highly or internally motivated to learn a foreign language. These results are unexpectedly high, especially considering that none of them are currently required to study a foreign language as students. Also, when comparing by English teaching experience, it was revealed that teachers who have experience teaching English fall into two opposite groups: those who are highly motivated to learn English and those who are not. This may be caused by differences in their attitude or willingness to teach English, but we need to investigate the reason for this polarization of teachers carefully. On the other hand, it was also revealed that teachers who have no experience of teaching English tend to be externally motivated in learning English. We can suppose that while teachers who have no experience of teaching English feel external pressures strongly, in accordance with experience their motivation for English learning become transmuted into more autonomous. All of these results indicate that the “life event” – of introducing English education into primary schools – might have served as an incentive for these teachers to recommence studying it.

Likewise, the descriptive statistics for language learner beliefs show that these teachers have highly skill-oriented beliefs. As we mentioned above, based on national curriculum, the younger the teacher, the more skill- and attitude-focused education they received, whereas the older teacher got more mastery-focused education themselves. The aim of currently English education at primary schools is not to emphasize mastery, but to foster good attitudes and build a foundation of basic speaking and listening skills. These results suggest that not only the education they received which could have characterized each group, but also the curriculum these teachers are now teaching under, might have some impact on individual cognitive dimension.

6.2 Effects of living and working conditions on language learner factors

The results showed there is significant difference both in affective (i.e., language learning motivation) and cognitive dimension (i.e., language learner beliefs) due to the area in which teachers operate. Especially teachers in areas where autonomous in-service training sessions are
actively held are highly motivated and have particularly high a self-cognition (self-confidence) belief. Also teachers in Special Educational Zones have a higher self-cognition (self-confidence) belief. In regards to these results we need to take teacher bias in these areas into account. For example, there is a possibility that personnel measures implemented in Special Educational Zones may increase the number of highly-motivated teachers. However, from the perspective of interaction between environments and individuals, the existence of these teachers is thought of as one of the environmental factors, and thereby have some influence on other teachers in the same area. Therefore, in line with our research goal, we need to take account of biased samples and their influence on other teachers.

Teachers in Area 2 have a lower skill-oriented belief. Nakamura, Shimura and Hasegawa (2013) revealed that teachers who played active roles in teaching English as members of a voluntary society for teacher-training expressed that their in-class goals had been shifting from trying to foster good attitudes and build a base of speaking and listening skills, to helping students master learning content and encouraging active learning. The results of this study support this. For these reasons, we can assume that teacher autonomy may be connected with teacher beliefs that assign a high value to mastery of learning content.

On the other hand, there was no significant difference in either language learning motivation or language learner beliefs in area 1 (urban area with high expectations from stakeholders) and in area 4 (remote area or small schools). Regarding Area 1, in order to understand the characteristics of teachers who have expectations placed on them by parents or the community to provide a quality education, the selective item “the urban area with high expectation form stakeholders” was set for the questionnaire. However this wording is vague enough that the teachers might have interpreted it in a variety of ways. Likewise with Area 4, the selective item “remote area or small schools” was set for the questionnaire in order to understand the characteristics of teachers who were more likely to be regionally isolated. However, it was discovered that about 40 percent of primary schools in Japan are so-called “small schools,” and that many of those small schools are located in urban areas. Therefore, there is a high possibility that the data gained from these two selective items differs from what we intended to determine. This is a research planning error and we would like to continue to examine teachers in those areas in the future.

6.3 Effects of cultural and social contexts on language learner factors

Regarding the effects of cultural and social contexts (i.e., the patterning of environmental events shared by a group of subjects) on language learner factors, while there was no significant difference in language learning motivation between the groups, there were significant differences in language learner beliefs between the youngest generation (the generation which experienced a more relaxed education policy) and the oldest generation (the generation which experienced cut-throat competition for university places). The youngest generation has a tendency towards
higher self-cognition (self-confidence) in the ability of learning a foreign language and conversely, the oldest generation showed the opposite trend. On this we should take account of the effect of their positions and roles in the workplace, i.e. many of teachers in Group 4 are likely to be in an administrative position and not be currently engaged in teaching English themselves. In addition, we should consider other contributing factors, e.g. the youngest generation might feel confident about their English ability because there is little intervening time between when they were language learners and now. However this result might have an alternative interpretation. People who oppose pressure-free education (characterized by the youngest generation) complain that it may lower student scholastic ability, but that education style may have fostered in students a stronger self-cognitive dimension, especially regarding self-confidence in their English ability.

In addition, as there are no interaction between two levels of the environments, it was suggested that they may affect individuals independently. However, when we consider the environment as hierarchically-structured systems, it would be necessary to carefully consider interactions between the systems in the future.

Based on Bronfenbrenner’s model, the living and working conditions correspond to the exosystem, and the cultural and social contexts correspond to the macrosystem. Nakamura and Shimura (2014) suggested that the mesosystem of workplace environment and relationships between teachers and students affect teachers’ affective dimension. This study suggests that the exosystem (the living and working conditions) of subsequently broader environments might have some effects on both teachers’ affective dimension (i.e., language learning motivation) and cognitive dimension (i.e., language learner beliefs), and that the macrosystem (the cultural and social contexts) might have some impact on individual cognitive dimension (i.e., language learner beliefs). This implies that different levels of environment may have some impact on different dimensions for teachers as language learners. In current language learner research, much of our interest is on micro environments such as classrooms and relationships between students. However, we believe that it would be of some benefit to direct our attention to those broader environments to gain a better understanding of both teachers and learners.

7. Conclusion

This study focused on language learner factors of Japanese primary school teachers, and investigated whether there is difference in their language learning motivation and language learner beliefs due to environmental factors. Regarding Research Question 1, as descriptive statistics showed half of the participant teachers have intrinsic motivation in learning English, we can suppose that the introduction of English education in primary schools may have enhanced their affective dimension. As to Research Question 2, results suggested that living and working
conditions may affect both language learning motivation (i.e., affective dimension) and language learner beliefs (i.e., cognitive dimension) among teachers. The autonomous environment has an especially large impact on both dimensions. For Research Question 3, there are significant difference in a self-cognition (i.e., self-confidence) belief between the youngest and the oldest generations. In addition, it was suggested that not only the education they received but also the educational settings these teachers are now teaching under, might have some impact on their cognitive dimension. The above results suggest that the environments closer to the individuals may have an impact on their affective dimension and larger contests at the social level might affect their cognitive dimension.

It is given that this study will be limited in scope. First, as we employed a web-based survey, there may be deviations in the data. Second, we do not have enough data to generalize the conclusion. Finally, some of the question items needed improvement. However, despite these limitations, we think the present study has provided a new direction for studies on language learners and teachers. This study revealed some of the impact resulting from introducing English curricula and the environmental factors that influence primary school teachers. It also demonstrates the significance of shifting the focus to the broader contexts around teachers and learners. We believe the information obtained is sure to be beneficial in improving teacher working environments and supporting their professional development.

This study is still at the exploratory stage in determining effective factors of environments around teachers. In the next stage, we intend to continue our research with a focus on individual teachers, in order to gain a better understanding of the reality of early English education in Japan through an interpretive approach with interviews and discussions.

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