Research Trends on English Education in Japan and in the US

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Abstract
The present study investigates research trends on English/language education in Japan and in the US. The articles of JACET Journal, JALT Journal, and TESOL Quarterly published from 2005 to 2010 were analyzed according to themes and research methods. In an attempt to explore the topics and the areas the researchers have focused upon, 315 articles included in these journals were analyzed and sorted into 12 themes: early childhood education/elementary school education, linguistics, curriculum, SLA, learner factors, vocabulary, phonetics, pragmatics, psycholinguistics, teacher education, testing, and teaching methodologies/skills. As for the research method, each article was categorized as one of the following: experimental study, questionnaire survey, protocol analysis, argumentation, quantitative analysis, or conversation analysis. According to the comparison and contrast of the data of the three journals, it was found that these professional organizations have different interests, needs, and approaches, which may reveal some aspects of realities and issues English/language educators are facing in Japan and in the US. Interpretations and possible implications of the results are discussed in detail.

Key words: research theme, research method, professional organization, journal

Introduction

Academic journals reflect the interests, issues, and concerns of the teachers, educators, and researchers. In this paper, I attempt to probe what areas EFL/ESL teachers in Japan and in the States have been interested
in and how they have pursued their research in recent years by analyzing articles published in three refereed journals, \textit{JACET Journal}, \textit{JALT Journal}, and \textit{TESOL Quarterly} during the period from 2005 to 2010.

JACET (Japan Association of College English Teachers) and JALT (the Japan Association for Language Teaching) are the leading professional organizations of English/language teaching professionals in Japan. JACET was established in 1962, and it has approximately 2,800 members (http://www.jacet.org/index.html), and JALT was founded in 1975 and has 3,000 members (http://jalt.org/). There have been some studies which reviewed their characteristics of research areas, research methods, pedagogical levels and so forth.

Oka analyzed the articles of \textit{JACET Journal} published from 1975 to 2003 in respect to research themes and topics, concluding that argumentative studies on philosophies of English education are in decline, and SLA studies with data-driven statistics are gaining more and more impact in Japan (2004). Kimura et al. focused on the articles published in recent issues and confirmed that the same tendency continued for recent years at Japanese academia of English education (2011). It is noteworthy that another research journal in Japan, \textit{JALT Journal} reveals changes which are similar to those of \textit{JACET Journal}; Stapleton and Collette point out that the generalist papers which used to dominate the early volumes have been replaced by skills-based studies focusing on a certain level and a discrete population (p.86, 2010). Based upon these previous studies, it can be said that EFL educators and researchers in Japan are more or less concerned about particular methodologies and discrete processes of language learning, and that they attempt to seek solutions by employing quantitative frameworks.

In this research, I would like to analyze these two Japanese journals and \textit{TESOL Quarterly}, a leading international journal published in the States. TESOL, Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, was founded in 1966, and has 12,618 members as of March 2012 (http://www.tesol.org/). I would like to analyze the articles published in these three journals between 2005 and 2010, compare and contrast the findings, and discuss interpretations and implications.
Method

Journals

JACET Journal is a refereed semiannual journal published by Japan Association of College English Teachers. The volumes from 46 (2005) to 51(2010) were analyzed in this study. This journal was first published in 1970, and currently invites contributions in the form of full-length articles, research notes, and book reviews; in this study, 83 papers of the first two genres were counted.

JALT Journal is published twice a year by Japan Association of Language Teachers which has a peer review system. In this study, I analyzed 60 articles published in Volume 27.1 (2005) to Volume 32.2 (2010), excluding book reviews.

TESOL Quarterly is a research journal published by the largest organization of TESL/TEFL in the States, TESOL. Among the four issues published a year, the third (September) issue is a special collection of articles on a particular topic; therefore, in this study, only the first, second and fourth issues were tallied, and the topics of the third issue will be referred to later in the discussion section. There are several genres of submissions such as articles, forums, brief reports and summaries, teaching issues, and research issues, and articles on book review and reports on other journals were excluded in this study. In total, 172 papers published in the 18 issues from Volume 39, Issue 1 (2005) to Volume 4, Issue 4 (2010) were analyzed.

Framework

Nunan proposed several categories of research themes (1992) and Oka adapted his categories in his research (2004). However, there are obviously new trends and development emerged after these studies, and it was necessary to edit the existing framework. In such a situation, five members of JACET Journal editing committee reviewed the existing schemes of research methods and themes and created an original framework. Therefore, it can be said that the framework of this research was created with a bottom-up approach derived from the perspectives of JACET Journal.
Research themes.

The framework of research themes was derived from the 28 research fields which are specified in the current submission guidelines of the JACET Journal. The fields were grouped into 13 categories for the sake of feasibility, and manageability of the data analysis. They are as follows:

1. Curriculum, ESP, language policy, and pedagogy
2. Early ELT, immersion education, and bilingualism
3. English linguistics, syntax, and semantics
4. Learner beliefs, learning strategies, and motivation
5. Lexicography, vocabulary, English usage, and corpus
6. Phonetics, phonology, and pronunciation
7. Pragmatics and sociolinguistics
8. Psycholinguistics
9. SLA and interlanguage
10. Teacher education
11. Testing / Assessment/Evaluation
12. Teaching methods and techniques and CALL
13. Others

The categories, based upon skills such as listening and reading, were not included, because most articles have a combination of themes such as “testing of listening proficiency” and “development of presentation skills through computer programs.” In order to secure the reliability of the data, two raters analyzed the same article and discussed when there were discrepancies between their judgments. When an article covered plural topics, it was grouped under the category which was most prominent.

Research methods.

From the perspective of research methods, a new framework of categories was created in response to the approaches and methods of research which are frequently seen. The following framework was established after a process of trial and error, and it was used in the preliminary studies of Kawano and Kimura et al (2009, 2011).
1. Experimental Study/Measurement of the Effects of the Treatment: In this type of research, effectiveness of a treatment or a teaching technique/method is measured mainly by a pre-test and a post-test.

2. Questionnaire Survey: A large scale questionnaire survey is conducted and analyzed with reference to statistical significance and its implications.

3. Case Study: Small number of research subjects in the non-maneuvered settings are observed and analyzed from various perspectives.

4. Protocol Analysis: Data is collected from reflections on conversation and behavior, and analyzed within a specific framework.

5. Literature Review: Existing studies, phenomena, or issues is/are critically reviewed and argued.

6. Quantitative Analysis: A large-scale, empirical investigation is conducted and analyzed statistically.

7. Conversation Analysis: Interaction between a pair or communication among a group is recorded and analyzed according to an established scheme.

8. Others

Two raters examined papers separately, and compared results. When combined methods were encountered, they were discussed before deciding into what category a particular paper fell.

**Results**

**Research themes.**

*JACET Journal* had 83 research articles in total during the period of 2005 and 2010, which indicates that there are nearly 8 articles in each issue. As Table 1 shows, the category with highest frequency is teaching methods and techniques (24.1%), followed by learner beliefs, learning strategies, and motivation (16.9%), and lexicography, vocabulary, and English usage (15.7%). As is shown in Figure 1, there were articles on phonetics (9.6%), testing (8.4%), and SLA (6.0%). There were few articles
on curriculum, ESP, language policy, and pedagogy (1.2%) and teacher education (1.2%). During tallying procedures, it was noted that there was a shift of dominant categories every year. For instance, a few studies on learner beliefs, learning strategies, and motivation were published in 2005 and 2006; however, after that, such studies focusing on learner factors have decreased. In summary, *JACET Journal* is most interested in teaching methods and techniques, comprising a quarter of all the articles published in the recent years.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Research Themes of Papers Published in 2005-2010</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>JACET Journal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Themes (Topics)</td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum, ESP Language policy, Pedagogy</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early ELT, Immersion education</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English linguistics, Syntax, Semantics</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learner beliefs, learning strategies, Motivation</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lexicography, vocabulary, English usage</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phonetics, phonology, pronunciation</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pragmatics, sociolinguistics</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psycholinguistics</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SLA, Interlanguage</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher education</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Testing/assessment/evaluation</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching methods and techniques (CALL etc.) program evaluation</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In *JALT Journal*, there were 60 research articles in the years 2005-2010, with the average number of articles being 5 in each issue. No themes occupied more than 20% of all the studies. In other words, it had a good balance of topics except for linguistics and psycholinguistics.
The most frequent topics were on curriculum, ESP, language policy, and pedagogy was (18.3%); followed by learner beliefs, learning strategies, and motivation (16.7%); testing/assessment/evaluation (15.0%); and SLA, teacher education, and teaching methods (8.3%). Among papers sorted into “others” were those on Japanese language acquisition, socio-cultural factors of language learning and gender issues in language programs. On the contrary, no papers on phonetics or psycholinguistics were published in recent years.

TESOL Quarterly had different trends from these Japanese journals. Teacher education had the highest percentage (14.5%); followed by curriculum, ESP, language policy, and pedagogy (11.6%); teaching methods and techniques (11.6%); SLA (11.0%) and pragmatics and sociolinguistics (10.5%). Among studies sorted into “others” were a wide range of social issues and cultural concerns such as the impact of terrorist attacks on ESL education, and reports on particular language programs in vernacular languages. There were no studies on English linguistics, syntax, and semantics, and only one paper on phonetics during the six years.

In addition to the issues, which were covered in this study, issues with special topics are published every year, which convey messages and opinions by researchers and educators in the ESL/EFL fields. Here are the themes of the special issues:

- 2005 (Volume 38, Issue 3) Pronunciation
- 2006 (Volume 39, Issue 3) Race and TESOL
- 2007 (Volume 40, Issue 3) Language Policy
- 2008 (Volume 41, Issue 3) Psycholinguistics and TESOL
- 2009 (Volume 42, Issue 3) Teacher-based assessment
- 2010 (Volume 43, Issue 3) Migration and Adult Language Learning

These special issues obviously indicate the keen interest of the editors and researchers, and at the same time it shows and the gravity of issues in the community.
Research methods.
As the next step, I analyzed the three research journals by reviewing the articles from the perspective of research method. According to the careful perusal, *JACET Journal* had experimental studies, which conduct pre-tests and post-test and can be found in 30.1% (Figure 4) of the articles. Questionnaire surveys were 16.9%, and quantitative analyses, which employ numerical measurement, were 13.3%. Qualitative research such as case studies (12.0%) and protocol analyses (10.8%) were fewer than quantitative research. There were only two literature reviews / argumentative studies (2.4 %) published during these six years. Taking the tendency of research themes into consideration, it can be said that experimental studies, which prove the effectiveness of teaching methods and techniques through conducting pre-test and post-test comparisons, are popular research in JACET Journal.

Table 2
Research Methods of Papers Published in 2005-2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>JACET Journal</th>
<th>JALT Journal</th>
<th>TESOL Quarterly</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>percentage</td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experimental Studies</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>30.1%</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questionnaire Survey</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>16.9%</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case Studies</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12.0%</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protocol Analysis</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10.8%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reviews</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quantitative Analysis</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>13.3%</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversation Analysis</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10.8%</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*JALT Journal* had different tendencies from *JACET Journal*; first, there were only 5 articles with experimental manipulation (8.3%) during six years. 18.3% of the articles were conversation analysis, and 15.0% were case studies. In comparison to JACET Journal, it had more reviews.
(13.3%). Although JACET and JALT are both Japan-based organizations of English/language teachers, they have different interests and approaches to research in their professional practices.

As for TESOL Quarterly, 20.9 % of all the articles were literature reviews. The case study articles occupy 18.6%, and 13.4% were experimental studies. It became quite obvious that TESOL encourages the contribution of theoretical argumentation and qualitative research, and actually proposes research guidelines for qualitative studies, case studies, conversation analysis, and critical ethnography on its website for the purpose of ensuring the research standards for such studies.

**Discussion**

In this study, three research journals on EFL/ESL education, two published in Japan and one in the States, have been analyzed according to themes and methods. Here, I would like to discuss similarities and differences by comparing the results of individual journals. First, the similarities of the three journals were topics in which researchers had common interests: three journals were found to include studies on teaching methods/ techniques, which occupy nearly or more than 10 % of the journals. In other words, researchers in Japan and the States were equally devoted to find good teaching methods or techniques in recent years. Also, learner factors such as beliefs, learning strategies and motivation were the common areas of interests in three journals. SLA had 5 to 11% in three journals, indicating that there were researchers in Japan and the States who had explored the process of foreign/second language acquisition in recent years.

On the other hand, there was a considerable difference in the number of qualitative studies. Especially, TESOL Quarterly published more qualitative analyses such as reviews, case studies, and protocol analysis than the other journals. Qualitative analysis and quantitative analysis have different purposes and there are some research questions, which can only be scrutinized through qualitative approaches, and in that sense, TESOL Quarterly is more brave in advocating various approaches than the journals published in Japan.
The three journals were found to have different patterns in the distribution of themes, which may derive from the responsibilities and situations of the members of each organization. For instance, *JACET Journal* had more cases of lexicography, linguistics, and phonetics which were rarely found in the other two journals; a possible reason for this tendency would be that linguistics, phonetics, and phonics are the traditional disciplines popular in the undergraduate courses in English education in Japan. Another characteristic is that *JACET Journal* has had one paper on teacher education, which seems strange, because many JACET members are involved in teacher training, education planning and implementation.

Both *JACET Journal* and *JALT Journal* included papers on testing to some extent in almost every issue, while *TESOL Quarterly* had few studies on testing. A possible reason for this difference is that teachers and educators in Japan are in the position to create entrance exams, which play an important role in education in Japan. In the United States, the language skills of high school graduates are usually evaluated with well-established assessment tools such as the ACT and SAT tests which are often used as an admission requirement to the university, and teachers usually do not have to plan, write, and mark entrance exams every year. However, in Japan, teachers have to create and mark entrance exams every year, spending considerable time and effort on duties related to the entrance exams.

Another notable difference was that *TESOL Quarterly* was more concerned about social and cultural aspects of second language learning than the other two journals. Taking the membership and location of TESOL into consideration, it is quite natural because ESL educators in the States face with political and financial issues related to their teaching situations. It is not to say that Japanese educators neglect these factors, though it is true that researchers in Japan tend to avoid acting proactively on political, social and cultural matters through the writing of academic papers.

In this study, the journals were analyzed in regards to methods and themes. Though it revealed general tendencies of the three journals, further research which looks into more detailed distribution by country of the contributor and the number and the level of the subjects, would be necessary in order to form a more comprehensive picture of the academic
communication of ESL/EFL researchers.

References