

國學院大學學術情報リポジトリ

Education major students and english major students : differences and similarities in their perceptions of English language activities in the elementary classroom

メタデータ	言語: English 出版者: 公開日: 2023-02-06 キーワード (Ja): キーワード (En): 作成者: 長田, 恵理 メールアドレス: 所属:
URL	https://doi.org/10.57529/00001266

Education Major Students and English Major Students: Differences and Similarities in their Perceptions of English Language Activities in the Elementary Classroom

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【keywords】

Foreign Language Activities, teacher education, pre-service teachers' anxiety

1. Introduction

Although five years have passed since the 2008 announcement of the implementation of the elementary school English program by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), in-service teachers are still struggling with teaching English and communicating with assistant language teachers (ALTs) who are native speakers of English or foreigners with a good command of English. It is very important to train in-service teachers; however, they are already busy with their daily routines and responsibilities and therefore, it seems easier to cultivate new teachers who have acquired skills to teach English in their teacher training courses. In fact, universities with teacher credential courses seem to have made effort to provide English teaching classes and some of them have already made these classes mandatory for students in the elementary school teacher credential program. On the other hand, many others do not have a particular class for elementary school English education because Foreign Language Activities is not a core elementary school subject nor included in Teachers License Act (Izumi, 2012).

There is another argument that English should be taught by specially trained teachers such as junior high school English teachers or people who are fluent in English: in some areas, junior high school English teachers and Japanese teachers of English (JTEs, some of whom may not necessarily have a teacher's license but are fluent in English) are also involved in teaching Foreign Language Activities in elementary school classrooms. Elementary school teachers are highly skilled at teaching younger children but usually not at teaching English, whereas junior high school English teachers may not always have experience in teaching younger learners or knowledge about it. JTEs are likely to be skilled at teaching young children English but there should be something which they have to know: for instance, what the primary education aims at. As workshops and lectures to various groups of people such

as student teachers, in-service teachers and JTEs seem to become more necessary given the recent trend of Japanese English education, it should be considered to seek appropriate and effective methods for training each group. In this study, I investigated the learning needs of people with different educational backgrounds, who may be to teach English in elementary schools, in order to identify what should be taught in each training course.

2. Literature review

2.1. Teacher Education

According to Borg (2006), there are mainly three kinds of factors which have impacts on language teacher cognition: schooling, professional coursework, and classroom practice including teaching practice. Teachers' experiences as learners through schooling can inform cognitions about learning, which affect their teaching. Professional coursework in teacher education system may have an impact on pre-service teachers' existing cognition, but it is a limited impact unless acknowledged. Also, classroom practice and teacher cognition are mutually informing, with contextual factors playing an important role in mediating the extent to which teachers are able to implement instruction which fits their cognition. Takizawa (2011) investigated the impacts of the student teachers' experiences as a learner as well as of the lecture contents on their cognitions using a questionnaire and semi-structured interview. His study revealed that the students who had not yet experienced a teaching practicum used their own experiences of learning English as a model, whereas the knowledge the students gained through lectures was used when they reflected on and restructured their ideas of how to teach and/or when they planned a lesson.

Borg (2006) states, "Although professional preparation does shape trainees' cognitions, programs which ignore trainee teachers' prior beliefs may be less effective at influencing these" (p. 284). The current university students in Japan did experience English learning both at junior high and high schools, but many of them had no English education, or once a month if any, when they were elementary school students. Thus, it is probable that their experience as a learner might not be enough to give an impact on their cognition as a pre-service teacher. Teacher trainers should know their students' educational backgrounds in English learning, explore the students' needs, and carefully tailor what to teach.

2.2. Pre-service teachers' cognition and anxiety

There has not been much research on elementary school pre-service teachers' cognitions about Foreign Language Activities.

Hojo et al (2002) compared how in-service teachers and pre-service teachers in a graduate school perceived the implementation of English education in elementary school by using a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire which consisted of 27 questions. They first asked the participants whether they were for or against the introduction of English education to elementary schools. Twelve items asked about advantages of implementation of English and fourteen about its disadvantages. According to their research, in-service teachers did not necessarily perceived that English education would enhance the flexibility of pupils' thinking, but they felt more strongly than pre-service teachers that pupils could learn English pleasantly and that they could achieve English rhythm. In addition, both in-service teachers and pre-service teachers worried that few Japanese teachers could teach English at elementary school and there were too many pupils in one class for foreign language learning.

Monoï (2011) conducted pre- and post-surveys of elementary school education major students, who took a series of classes for Foreign Language Activities, on their knowledge of, and anxiety about Foreign Language Activities using the questionnaires composed of 39 questions with 5-point Likert scales. She found that among the 39 items surveyed, the top 5 items the students were anxious about at the beginning of the semester were: 1) how to make an annual syllabus; 2) how to teach 5th and 6th graders; 3) how to teach 1st and 2nd graders; 4) how to plan a unit of lessons; and 5) how to write a lesson plan. On the other hand, the post-course survey indicated the different results except for the first one: 1) how to make an annual syllabus; 2) how to write a lesson plan; 3) skills for English pronunciation; 4) how to make use of audio materials such as CDs and DVDs and 5) how to teach writing. In the following year, she conducted another survey of elementary school English-major and non-English-major pre-service teachers, using the same questionnaires as in 2011, in order to examine differences between the groups as well as the different responses between the pre- and post-course questionnaires. As to their prior knowledge of Foreign Language Activities, there was no significant difference between the two groups, while the post-course survey showed that three items had significantly different results between the groups: how the English education was introduced in elementary schools, significance of the introduction of the English education at elementary school, and teacher-training for Foreign Language Activities. As to their anxiety, the pre-course survey indicated a significant difference in only one item, useful methodologies for Foreign Language Activities, whereas there was again only one but a different item which showed a significant difference at the end of the course: how to use multimedia teaching materials (Monoï, 2012).

Even though all the participants of her research were teacher credential course students,

most of them were freshmen, which might have affected the results. I tried to examine not only education major students' perceptions of and anxiety about Foreign Language Activities but also those of English major students, who could be a JTE, so as to explore the different needs of each group.

2.3. Current conditions of elementary school English education

Benesse (2011) administered large surveys on the current English education in elementary schools in 2010. According to their research, 66% of the explored schools answered that homeroom teachers played a main role in English/Foreign Language Activities in 2010, while its proportion was only less than 30 % in 2006 (Benesse, 2007) . The top 5 activities carried out in English Activities are as follows: 1) greeting in English, 2) games, 3) English songs and chants, 4) conversation practice, and 5) pronunciation practice. The average amount of time for training inside their schools was 6.8 hours per year, and about one fourth of the surveyed homeroom teachers never went to a training seminar outside their schools. Many teachers chose useful and practical items as what they needed to know: for example, almost 90% of the in-service teachers considered it necessary to learn teaching tips such as songs, chants and games, and about 60% of them needed to obtain English skills including classroom English. It should be noted that only 30 % of the homeroom teachers were confident in teaching English and more than 70% of them thought that English should be taught not by a homeroom teacher but by a teacher who specializes in teaching English. Although many homeroom teachers are not confident about conducting Foreign Language Activities, there might be more teachers who are interested in it if teacher credential courses at universities offer specific classes for teaching English. In fact, 38% of the universities and junior colleges which have English teacher credential courses have already set up a course for teaching English to children at elementary schools (JACET, 2009, cited in Izumi, 2012) and some universities have established even a special teaching curriculum which aims for training teachers who would specialize in elementary school English education (Izumi, 2012). Although Izumi proposed, in her study, some contents which should be included in such courses, it may be helpful to know the pre-service teachers' cognitions about Foreign Language Activities and add more items to Izumi's to improve such a training course curriculum.

3. Purpose of this study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the different perceptions of "English/Foreign Language Activities" between university students majoring in elementary school teaching

and students majoring in English in order to meet their different needs as well as to revise their wrong impressions, if any, in teacher-training courses. The research questions on the questionnaire were as follows:

- (1) How do the two different types of students perceive Foreign Language Activities?
- (2) What kind of anxieties do they have?

4. Methodology

4.1. Participants

The participants in this study were comprised of those two groups: 31 third-year education major students and 32 second-year and third-year English major students.

I first visited a teacher credential college in the western part of Japan as a lecturer for an intensive course on how to teach English to young children. The students who took this intensive course all wanted to become teachers, and they had just finished their three-week elementary school practicum, where some of them observed English activities but did not conduct any by themselves. They had never learned how to conduct a Foreign Language Activities class when I met them. I asked them whether they were confident about speaking English in the very first class, and all but one said “no”. Next, I taught English major students in a curriculum designing class for elementary school children, one of the compulsory classes in the program for teaching English to children at another university. This university had more than 60 native or near-native speakers of English as teachers and the ratio of native or near-native speaker teachers and students is 1 to 11. Therefore, the English major students had plenty of opportunities to interact with those teachers. The students were required to have achieved 600 or more in the TOEIC test to attend this curriculum designing class. Three out of 32 were taking high school English teacher credential courses while the others were merely interested in teaching English to young children. Only one student had experienced English Activities as a volunteer teacher.

English became compulsory in Grade 5 and 6 in 2011, which means it was not compulsory when the participants were elementary school students. However, there were some elementary schools which had started their own English program, and also some children learned English at private English school. Table 1 shows the participants' experience of learning English in their elementary school days. The number of the English major students who had learned English at elementary school was twice as large as that of the education major students, and the similar result was gained as to the experience of learning English at private English schools. Chi-square tests were used to compare the two groups and the ratios

were significantly different in experiences both at elementary school and at private English schools ($p < .05$). Thus, the education major students had less experience as a learner of English in elementary school than English major students.

Table 1

English Learning Experience in Elementary School Days

	At elementary schools		At private English schools	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
Education major students (n=31)	9 (29.0%)	22	12 (38.7%)	19
English major students (n=32)	18 (56.3%)	14	22 (68.8%)	10

4.2. Data collection and analysis

In the first class, both groups of the students were given a questionnaire that asked them to write about: 1) their impressions of English/Foreign Language Activities in elementary schools; 2) their perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of teaching English in elementary schools; 3) points to keep in mind when teaching pupils English; and 4) their anxiety about teaching English in the classroom (see Appendix). Each semantic unit in the data was coded, labeled, and put into larger categories by two people, myself and another researcher. Since I am the one who taught the participants as well as had experience of teaching at elementary school, I chose a person who had never visited elementary school English classes as a coding partner, assuming that she could see the data more objectively. Then I compared and contrasted both coding sheets, revised labels, and counted the frequencies of the labels.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1. Impressions of English/Foreign Language Activities

Impressions of Foreign Language Activities are shown in Figure 1. More than half of the elementary school education major students regarded Foreign Language Activities as the one having pupils learn English with pleasure, while only one eighth of the English major students did. Moreover, more education major students mentioned 'team-teaching' or 'with assistant language teachers (ALTs)' than English major students. As mentioned earlier, all the education major students had just finished their elementary school teaching practicum

when the survey was conducted and therefore many of them might have seen pupils learning English “pleasantly” with an “ALT” in Foreign Language Activities classes. On the other hand, more than half of the English major students, although they had not done their teaching practicum, experienced learning English when they were elementary school pupils. Does this mean that English activities were not fun for the English major students? In reality, “learning English pleasantly” has been a common impression for elementary school English education (Nakamura, 2003; Hojo et al., 2002). As Borg stated, not only experiences as a teacher and as a student but also knowledge from coursework of teacher training has an impact on teacher cognition. The education major students had never been taught about how to teach English to young children before the survey, while the English major students had studied about theories on second language acquisition and methodologies. This may have affected the results and the English major students may have focused more on other factors than “learning English pleasantly.”

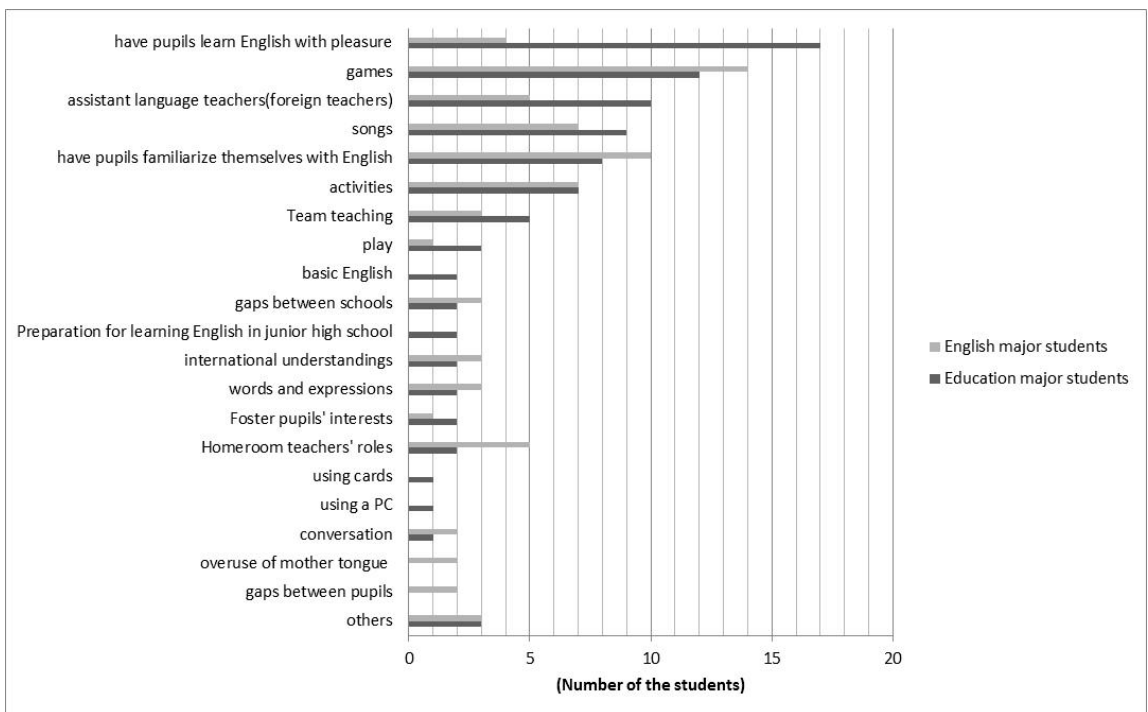


Figure 1. Impressions of English/Foreign Language Activities

As in the survey conducted by Benesse (2011), the top 5 activities in Foreign Language Activities are 1) greetings in English, 2) games, 3) songs and chants, 4) conversation practice,

and 5) practicing pronunciation of English words. Even though most of those five activities are shown in Figure 1, each figure shows that not all the students mentioned them, which means both groups in this survey did not have a clear and detailed picture of Foreign Language Activities. In this respect, teacher trainers should tell the current conditions of Foreign Language Activities or show Foreign Language Activities lesson videos if possible to let their students know more about elementary school English classes.

5.2. Advantages and disadvantages of implementing English

Half of the education major students and the English major students believed Foreign Language Activities would cultivate pupils' positive attitudes towards learning English, but more than half of the English major students also thought it would promote pupils' international understanding (Figure 2) . "Others" includes the positive effects of early English education (English major students) and benefit from well-established English skills thanks to the longer-term learning (education major students) . On the contrary, almost half of the education major students and the English major students expressed concern over the potential negative impact on the pupils' Japanese language acquisition (Figure 3) . Some education major students mentioned the risks associated with the possibility of their teaching English incorrectly, probably because they were not confident in their own English language skills (later shown in Figure 5).

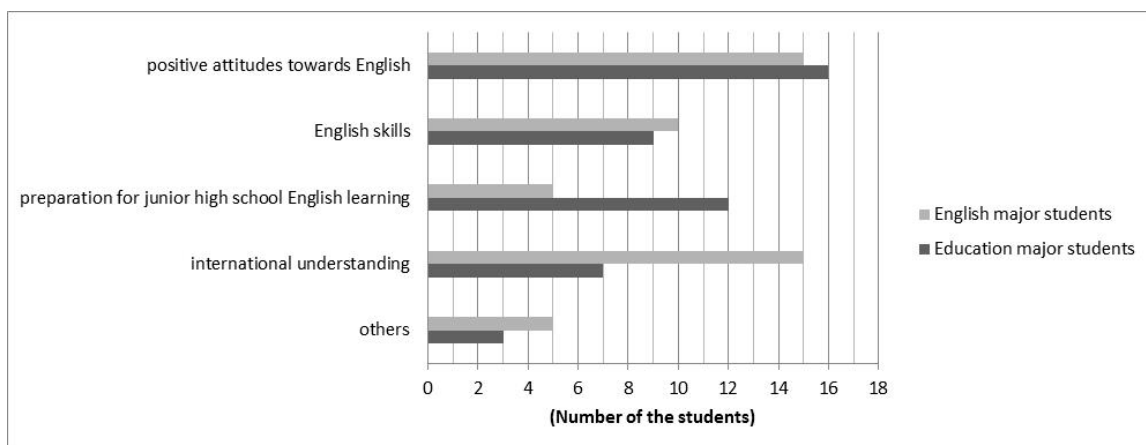


Figure 2. Advantages of implementing English

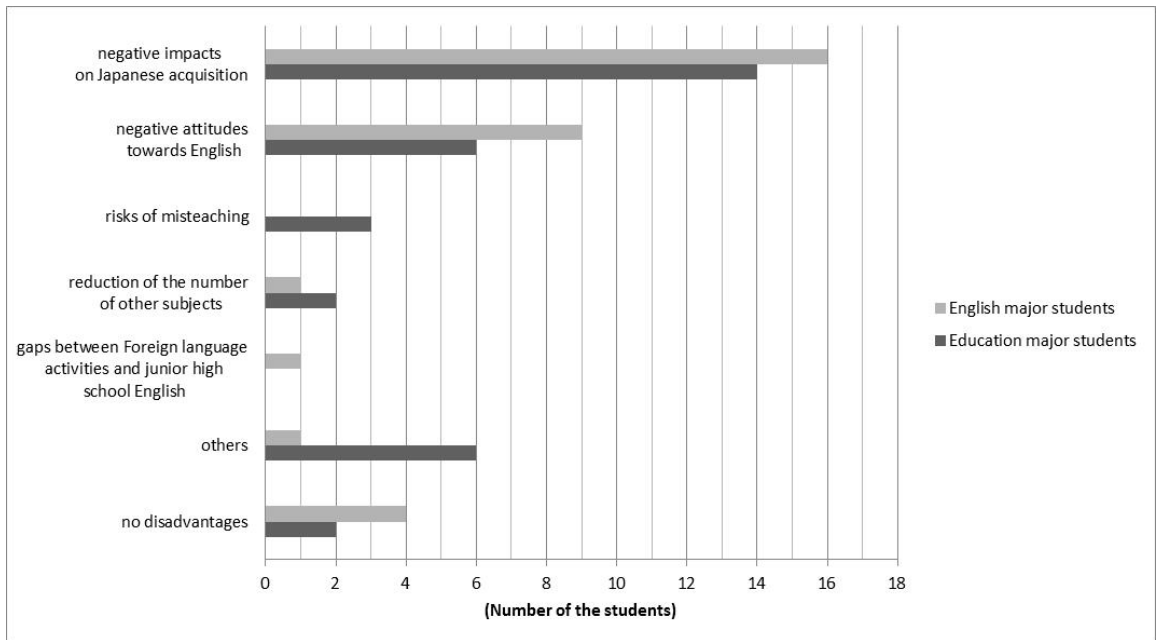


Figure 3. Disadvantages of implementing English

5.3. Points to keep in mind when teaching English in elementary schools

Figure 4 shows key points identified by the surveyed participants that they felt should be taken into consideration when teaching English in elementary school classrooms. The majority of the education major students thought that motivating pupils was most important, while more than half of the English major students felt that general teaching skills such as classroom management and appropriate choice of activities based on the pupils' developmental stages were key points.

Although 'English skills' was not a highly identified topic on the survey, comments made by students are still noteworthy. 8 out of 12 English major students and 6 out of 8 education major students, who mentioned 'English skills' as one of the key points about teaching English, both named English pronunciation. Itoi (2003) surveyed Japanese university students about their beliefs surrounding English learning and found out that 65% of them believed speaking English with correct pronunciation was indispensable. In her paper, Itoi wrote that there is a gap between what is considered an 'acceptable level of pronunciation' and what the students hoped to acquire. She recommended that teachers explain this gap to students in order to reduce their anxiety around their English pronunciation skills.

Of the other key points identified by the survey, 'cooperation with ALTs' and 'international

understanding' were chosen only by the education major students. As later shown in Figure 5, the students' lack of confidence in their knowledge about the target language seems to be strongly reflected in their choice of items on the survey. The reason why the English major students did not mention those might be because they took international understanding as a necessary content in English activities for granted in addition to their own positive attitude toward foreigners which might stem from their educational background.

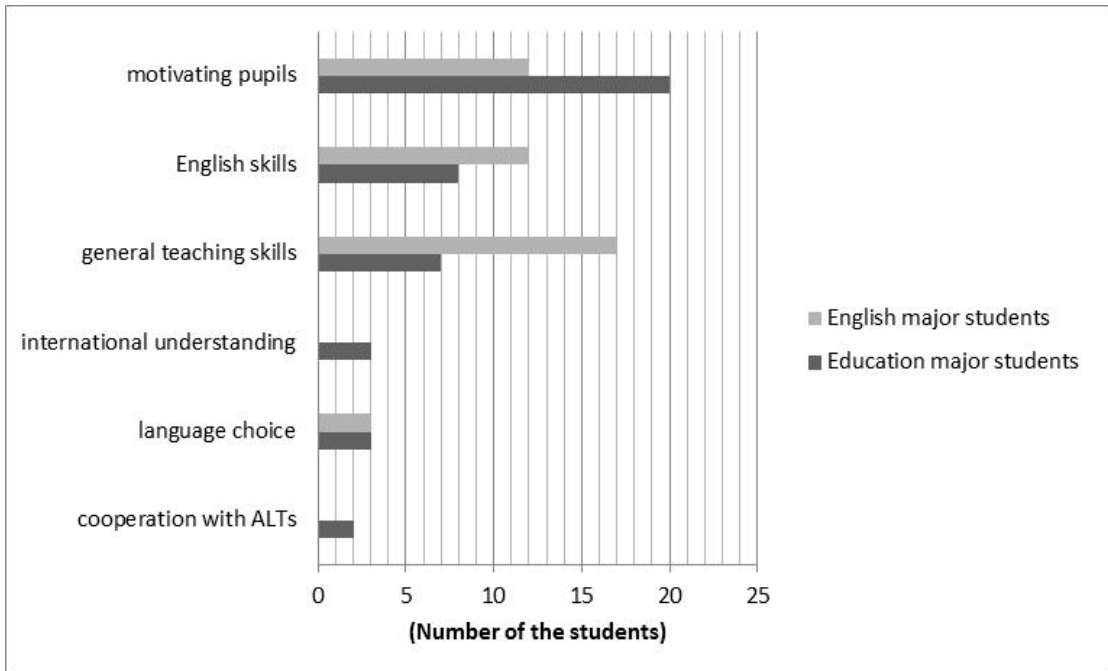


Figure 4. Points to keep in mind when teaching English in elementary school

5.4. Anxieties related to teaching English

The last question on the survey asked the students about their anxieties around teaching English (Figure 5). The top three items identified by education major students were all related to their English skills. A few of them also worried about working with ALTs because they were concerned about their ability to communicate with them in English. Other education major students pointed out that it should be difficult for them to tell the pupils how enjoyable English learning is because they themselves had not enjoyed learning English and were not confident about their current English proficiency. As is shown in Figure 1, one of their highly perceived impressions about Foreign Language Activities is having pupils learn English with pleasure and they must think that they have to conduct enjoyable lessons to motivate their

future pupils (see also Figure 4). Thus, improving the students' English proficiency seems to be a key to success in their conducting English classes. On the other hand, none of them mentioned general teaching skills as a cause of anxiety, probably because they majored in education and had also just finished their elementary school teaching practicum, increasing their confidence in teaching children. A few education major students identified a gap in English abilities between pupils as a source of anxiety because during their practicum they saw that some pupils had a better command of English than others.

As for the English major students, the top 6 items as a source of anxiety for them are English skills, English pronunciation, English teaching skills, motivating pupils, general teaching skills, and language choice, but each figure is not so high. However, it should be noted that "general teaching skills," "language choice," and "way of talking" were mentioned only by the English major students. As previously indicated, most of them had never had an opportunity to observe any lessons except on video when the data were taken, and they may not have been able to draw a clear picture of what would happen in elementary classrooms and this is why some of them were anxious about teaching and talking, that is to say, interaction with pupils.

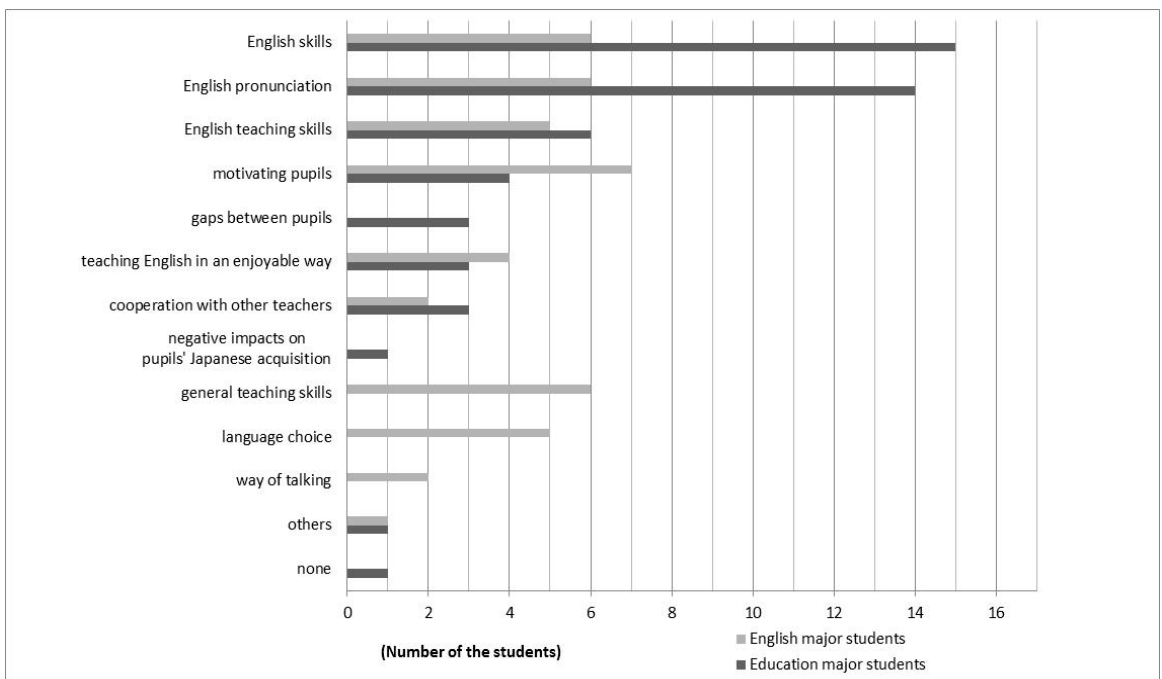


Figure 5. Anxieties around teaching English

6. Concluding remarks

The results of the questionnaire showed some similarities as well as some differences between the education major students and the English major students.

First, both groups of students had some correct impressions about Foreign Language Activities, but did not always draw a clear picture, even though at least the education major students had finished a practicum. Teacher trainers should tell more about what the Foreign Language Activities classes are like or show some classroom videos to let the students know more about English classes.

Second, almost half of both English major students and education major students answered one of the advantages to learn English at earlier age is to cultivate pupils' positive attitude toward English and that one of the disadvantages is negative impacts on Japanese acquisition. Since most of them had not experienced teaching English to children by themselves, it could be assumed these opinions did not arise from their experience but from the public opinion, especially from opinions maintained both by the supporters and the opponents of introduction of English education to elementary school. Pre-service teachers need to learn about language acquisition theories as well as learning theories.

Third, the education major students were most anxious about their perceived lack of English skills, while the English major students were most concerned about classroom management such as general teaching skills, motivating pupils and ways of talking to pupils. This difference revealed in this study may stem from their different educational backgrounds: the education major students had finished their practicum and were ready to become teachers but were not confident about their English, while the English major students had little direct experience planning or observing real elementary school lessons although more than half of them experienced learning English in their elementary school days. Education major students may need more chances to build up enough English speaking skills to mainly conduct Foreign Language Activities, whereas English major students may need to learn about primary education and have a teaching practicum at elementary school.

Lastly, it is striking that not only almost half of the education major students but also one fifth of the English major students had anxiety about their English pronunciation. This means they regarded correct, or native-speaker-like, pronunciation as an essential component to teaching English, which might reflect Phillipson's research (1992) into "native speaker fallacy". In fact, a few education major students mentioned it was good for pupils to learn English from a native speaker because they could then learn correct English pronunciation. However, in his research, Phillipson strongly argues that the language facility of native speakers is something

that well-trained non-native speakers can acquire, and that good teachers are not necessarily native speakers but are teachers who can use their own personal insight into the language learning processes to guide how they teach English. Specifically, Phillipson maintains that non-native English speaker teachers may be better qualified to teach because they have gone through the laborious process of acquiring English as a foreign language. Of course, those pre-service teachers should focus on learning the skills they think they lack and also try to reduce their anxiety about their English pronunciation limitations, but they should know that they could be a good language teacher and role model for their pupils.

Teacher trainers are responsible for providing pre-service teachers with a chance to examine their prior beliefs probably affected by their experiences as learners and by ready-made opinions in order to improve their awareness as a language teacher, and offering appropriate contents which meet their students' needs in a teacher credential course.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by JSPS KAKENHI Grant Number 23520756, titled "Teachers' decision-making process for improving children's communicative competence in Foreign Language Activities." I would like to express my sincere thanks to Ms. Nahomi Machida, who helped me with coding and labeling the data.

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Appendix:

1. 小学校で英語の授業を受けたことがありますか。(ある・ない)
2. 1. で「ある」とこたえた人への質問です。どのくらいの頻度でありましたか。
(年 月 週) に () 回
(例) (年 ① 週) に (2) 回
3. 小学生のとき、英語塾や英会話学校に通っていましたか。(通っていた・通っていない)

以下は自由に答えてください。

4. 公立小学校で行われている外国語活動に対するイメージはどんなものですか。
5. 小学生が英語に触れることでよいことがあるとしたらどのようなことでしょうか。
6. 小学生が英語に触れることでよくないことがあるとしたらどのようなことでしょうか。
7. 外国語活動を行う際に気をつけなければいけないことは何だと思いますか。
8. 外国語活動を行う際にあなたが不安に思うことは何ですか。