EFL proficiency level and differences in Japanese secondary school students' views on the need for pedagogical change

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Abstract

This research focuses on Japanese high school students' views about EFL pedagogy and investigates whether their views differ according to their English language proficiency level as measured by the STEP test and their teachers' pedagogical approach. It explores in greater depth this aspect of a larger study conducted by Ingram, Kono, O'Neill and Sasaki (2008). The views of those who performed at a higher level on the STEP test were compared with the views of those who reported lower levels of performance on the STEP test. Comparisons were made in relation to the two groups' views on perceived changes to the way they may learn English given the opportunity. Insights into pedagogical issues are gained when these student views are considered in relation to teachers' reports about their frequency of use of a range of language learning experiences. It was found that higher proficiency students tended to be more aware of the kinds of language learning experiences that would best facilitate their acquisition of the language and that their recommendations for change concurred substantially with the gaps identified in the teachers' current practice. Overall, the research identifies a need for pedagogical change to facilitate students' practical and functional use of English and the uptake of ICTs to link into communicating for real-life purposes in English. It highlights that students become more aware of the way they learn the language as their English proficiency increases. It also raises the issue of potential professional learning needs of EFL teachers and the priority for further research to investigate in more depth the possible constraints for both students and teachers in facilitating pedagogical change.

Keywords: English as a foreign language, languages pedagogy, language testing, secondary EFL learners, use of ICTs in EFL

Background

Never has scope been so great for considering how pedagogy for teaching English as a foreign language in the 21st century can be enhanced or improved. In a time when the fields of language acquisition theory (Gass & Selinker, 2008) and pedagogical theory (Brown, 2007; O'Neill & Gish, 2008) are so well established and the research and conversations continue in both scope and depth (Fotos & Browne, 2004; Shelton-Colangelo, Mancuso & Duvall, 2007) there remains the possibility that it may be assumed that there is automatic awareness and uptake of improvements at the practical classroom or learning environment level. In one way such an assumption is not surprising since teachers remain busy implementing language programs and not all language program goals are confined to language learning. For instance, the goals of language programs may be purely designed to pass a gate-keeping, paper and pencil test rather than to develop the language learners' conversational skills. So depending on the goals of the language program the implementation and pedagogy may not need to emulate good contemporary practice. However, this research does consider the goals of language teaching to be broad enough to ensure learners acquire a level of English in all four macro skills of listening/speaking and reading/writing that is conducive to their

ultimate engagement with their school, work and/or tertiary demands. It conceives that EFL pedagogy should endeavour to engage students in using the four skills to communicate and interact in the English language for real-life purposes, and that learning should involve development of intercultural literacy (Corbett, 2003). This also sets the expectation that learners should eventually be able to communicate with non-native speakers of English as well as native speakers of English. Teachers need to create a language learning environment that builds on students' existing levels of language competence to provide comprehensible input. This means teachers need to be able to accurately assess and monitor their students' language competence. Overall, today's EFL teachers need to move away from the focus on method and adopt an approach that will maximise students' intercultural literacy (Kramsch, 2002) and ability to communicate (Spada, 2007). As noted by Brown (2007, p.376) an approach is different from a method because it consists of "a unified but broadly based theoretical position about the nature of language and of language learning and teaching that forms the basis of methodology in the language classroom".

In addition, O'Neill and Gish (2008, p.205) raise the importance of assessment practices in relation to the need to ensure that both students and teachers receive feedback that is useful for improving pedagogy and learning. They note that "feedback needs to be constructive and systematic to foster students' confidence, security, self-esteem and aspirations and allow teachers to make adjustments to their pedagogy and practice to improve learning". Thus, in this study the views of students who have participated in a high stakes testing program are considered and explored in relation to proficiency levels assessed by the STEP Test. Issues of testing and pedagogy are also of significance when one examines the nature of traditional and contemporary EFL teaching.

Importantly, research into EFL pedagogy (Folse, 2006; Robinson, 2008) currently identifies rote learning, drilling and practice exercises as discrete, isolated strategies that do not allow the learner to (Ingram & O'Neill, 2003). Similarly, the traditional testing of English through such exercises as multiple choice and fill in the missing word and the like (e.g. for subject verb agreement) do not provide the context for making meaning from the language and therefore support reliance on memorisation an rote learning. However, such practices do continue and are found to be useful in contexts where there are large numbers of students in classes and personalised marking and provision of feedback is prohibited by time (Locastro, 2001). With respect to the Japanese context, in spite of curriculum reform over the past decade there still seems to be difficulties associated with moving towards more communicative language teaching and even more so a recognition of the importance of intercultural literacy (Ingram, Kono, O'Neill & Sasaki, 2008). The results of Gorsuch's (2001) national survey of Japanese high school EFL teachers' across nine prefectures identified several factors that may influence teachers' lack of use of communicative language learning experiences. These included large class size (in excess of 40), the need to prepare for university entrance examinations, students' expectations, the need to focus on the set text book, students' and teachers' English proficiency levels and teachers' professional development.

Although teachers cautiously approved of communicative activities their pedagogy was influenced by the need to maintain control of their relatively large classes, "unfortunately, Japanese teachers seem to consider communicative activities to be 'difficult', even for students in top ranked high schools" (Gorsuch, 1998, cited in Gorusch, 2001). However, public vocational high school teachers were less likely to report that university entrance exams influenced their instruction than teachers at public and private academic high schools. Nevertheless, substantial improvements are being made in such contexts where learners are taught strategies to enhance and take some control over their learning (Luk, 2007). In addition, there are other initiatives that support communication in English. These focus on the development of virtual communities of learners by making use of the internet where learners and teachers are both conversing and using English to go about the business of EFL acquisition in a functional, motivating and practical way (Fotos & Browne, 2004). This approach is

seen as providing positive washback, building confidence and providing a sustained need to use English for authentic communication. In the present research the opinion of students is gauged in relation to their perceived need to change their current language learning experiences. Their views are explored in relation to two levels of student-English language proficiency as measured by their performance on the STEP test and their teachers' reported frequency of use of a range of pedagogical strategies. This exploration is seen as further illumination of the possible impact of globalisation through today's information communication technology on EFL students' perceptions of the way they prefer to learn EFL. In taking into account their English proficiency level and their teachers' reported pedagogical activities, the research contributes to knowledge about the potential effect of recent government changes in language education policy in relation to curriculum and pedagogy for the particular context under consideration. Specifically, the research investigates if EFL proficiency level impacted upon Japanese secondary school students' views on the need for pedagogical change in relation to teachers' reported frequency of language learning experiences.

Methodology

A Survey Questionnaire (SQ) was completed by 632 Japanese EFL high school students and 47 of their EFL teachers from one prefecture in Japan (Ingram, Kono, O'Neill & Sasaki, 2008). In the present report student survey data were split to explore aspects of EFL pedagogy on the basis of students' English language proficiency levels as measured by the STEP Test. The STEP Test is administered by the Society for Testing English Proficiency (STEP), which is Japan's largest testing body (EIKEN, 2007). The STEP Test results are used for a variety of purposes including entry into some Western Universities where proficiency in the English language is essential. The STEP Test measures candidates listening, speaking, reading and writing skills and claims to engage more authentic assessment techniques in its approach. Comparison was made between students whose English language proficiency was categorized as *Higher Level* according to their self-reported STEP Test results (*Higher Level* STEP Test group) and students whose English language proficiency was categorised as Lower Level according to their self-reported STEP Test results (*Lower Level* STEP Test group).

The samples of participating schools, students and teachers

Schools

A total of ten high schools in one prefecture were involved. They varied according to type (coeducational/single gender), differing geographic location (urban/rural), and program (academic/general/specialist curriculum). However, all followed the specified English curriculum where learning English was viewed as important by the education authority.

Students

Since students' survey results were to be explored on the basis of their volunteered English language proficiency levels as set by the STEP Test[1] (EIKEN, 2007), two groups were formed. The first group comprised of students who had achieved at Level 1 to 3 who were counted as *Higher Level* English language proficiency and students who had achieved at Levels 4 and 5 who were counted as *Lower Level*. Where some students had taken several levels of the test during one year their last level passed was recorded. Taking into account some students had not yet taken the STEP Test (273) and some did not fully answer the question to allow them to be categorised (43) this resulted in 222 students being categorized as having a *Higher level* of English language proficiency and 94 students categorised with *Lower Level* English language proficiency. Table 1 shows the

number and proportion of each of these two groups of students who had visited an English speaking country (bearing in mind there may be overlap between activities e.g. a school excursion could involve home stay).

Table 1 Distribution of STEP Test takers' purposes for and participation in visits to English speaking countries

Type of activity	Students with higher-level STEP test English language proficiency n= 40 (18%) (2 did not answer)	Students with lower-level STEP test English language proficiency n= 46 (50%) (3 did not answer)
Studying English	57.5% (23)	48% (22)
Vacation	22.5% (9)	35% (16)
Vacation in home stay	7.5% (3)	6.5% (3)
School excursion	10% (4)	6.5% (3)
Living abroad	2.5% (1)	4% (2)

Overall, relatively few students had visited an English speaking country and for those from both proficiency levels who had, the main purpose was to study English. This was followed by visiting on vacation, visiting via school excursions and least of all, as one might expect, actually living abroad. The duration of such visits to English speaking countries was relatively short with only a minority of students with extended stays, thus the average time spent in weeks would not be expected to have a significant impact on students' proficiency levels (Kohlmayer & Schindehutte, 2001; Mosher, 2002).

Teachers

A total of forty-seven EFL teachers responded to the survey. However, it is noted that because the majority of these teachers (64%) came from three more academically inclined schools, with more experienced, stable teaching staff, the teacher responses may reflect the more academic school experience and in keeping with Gorusch (2001) the potential pressure to teach to prepare students for university. However, on the other hand this demographic tends to reflect in part the current overall situation where the older, more experienced teachers are ensconced in urban schools. Of importance also is the fact that though these teachers are responsible for teaching English and most had taught for eight years or more, none had ever travelled to an English speaking country.

Findings

Teachers' pedagogical approach and students perceived pedagogical needs

Through an examination of teachers' reported frequency of use of specific kinds of language learning experiences and students' views on which experiences they perceive as in need of more time to improve their learning, insights into the nature of the pedagogy in vogue and issues and implications for the future emerge.
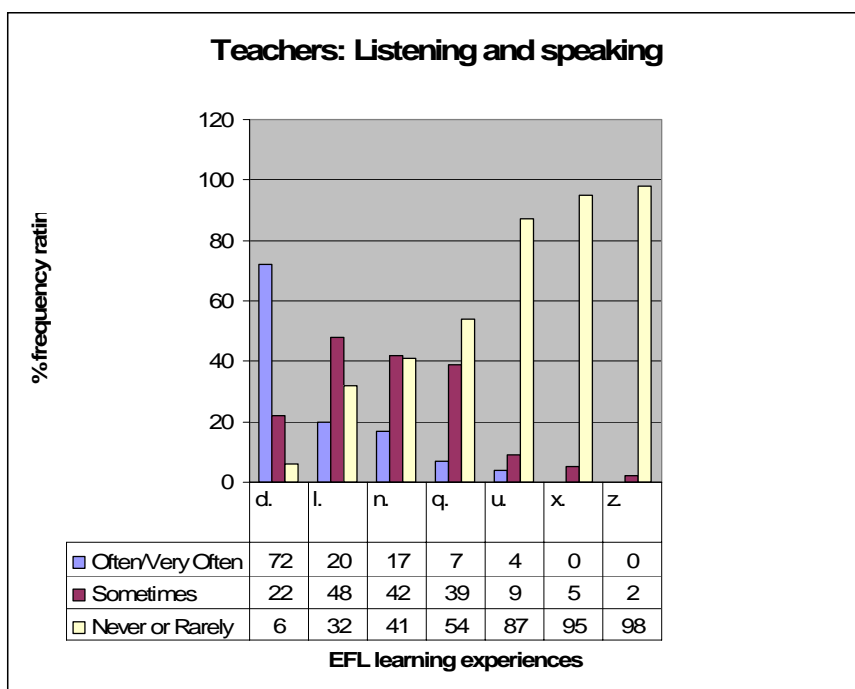
Teachers were provided with a list of twenty-six language teaching experiences (see Appendix A) based on Ingram, O'Neill and Townley-O'Neill (1999) and were asked to rate how often they used each one on a five-point scale of *very often*, *often*, *sometimes*, *rarely* and *never*. These ratings were then collapsed in to very often/often, sometimes and rarely/never. While the teachers were requested to add to the list as necessary any other language learning experiences that they used, none of the teachers added to this list. The students rated nineteen language learning experiences (see Appendix B) with respect to whether the amount of time they spent on each in their language classes was sufficient to support their learning of English. These reflected the items used in the research of Ingram, O'Neill and Townley-O'Neill (1999) and additional items identified as relevant to the Japanese EFL context, provided through consultations with colleagues in Japan (Ingram, Kono, O'Neill & Sasaki, 2008). The students rated each one according to whether there should be no change in the time spent learning English in that way or, more or less time should be allocated to learning in that way in the future. It is noted that there was not a direct match between the specific learning experiences in the teacher and student surveys. This was because of the need to maintain links to replicate previous research (Ingram, O'Neill & Townley-O'Neill, 1999). However, comparison was able to be made because it was possible to group the various learning experiences in relation to the seven areas of Listening and speaking, Reading and writing, Communicative strategies and opportunity to communicate with English speakers, Culturally related learning experiences, Rote learning, drilling and practice exercises, Language interactions through playing games and use of media, and Use of English for work and study. The following section presents teachers' and students' responses in graphical form. It is acknowledged that there is more than one way that these specific learning experiences may be grouped and that where there is obvious overlap a learning experience may appear in more than one group for ease of comparison.

Listening and speaking

Figure 1a shows that while the majority of teachers (72%) used *Listening to recordings, radio or television* very often/often and most others sometimes, this contrasted with the lack of use of learning experiences to facilitate more authentic, purposeful communicative tasks. Almost 100% teachers rarely or never used *Language clubs* or *Language camps* and 87% rarely or never used *Language evenings*. While there may have been limitations for teachers to do this, it is also clear that only 17% of teachers structured the language learning very often/often to have *Student to student conversations*. Similarly, only seven percent of teachers engaged students in *Role plays*, while 54% rarely or never used them in their teaching. Interestingly, almost half of teachers reported that they sometimes used *Interaction with native speakers* in their teaching, with a fifth using this kind of learning experience very often/often, but the remaining 32% using this rarely or never. It was not possible to explore on this occasion whether teachers' proficiency levels impacted on their choice of learning experiences but it is reiterated that the majority of teachers came from the academic schools and none had visited an English speaking country. (It would be pertinent to consider teacher proficiency in any future research).

Consideration of the students' responses in Figure 1b suggest that students with higher level English proficiency levels tend to be more perceptive with regards to how they learn best compared with the students with lower level English proficiency. Students with higher level English proficiency levels see a need to spend more time *Talking with native speakers of English*, *Listening to songs in English* and being *tested on their ability to understand spoken English*. Regardless of proficiency level both groups concurred in relation to time spent *talking in English about Japan and Japanese culture* with approximately 20% recommending more time and 27% of lower proficiency students needing less time compared with the higher proficiency group (13%).

These results also show that students' choice of learning experiences that they think need more class time largely refer to areas that teachers currently neglect. Clearly, speaking is of concern to the students yet teachers are not using the students themselves as a resource to create opportunities for conversing with each other in English.

Teachers: Listening and speaking

	d.	l.	n.	q.	u.	x.	z.
■ Often/Very Often	72	20	17	7	4	0	0
■ Sometimes	22	48	42	39	9	5	2
□ Never or Rarely	6	32	41	54	87	95	98

%frequency ratin

EFL learning experiences

Figure 1a: Teachers' reported frequency of use of specific listening and speaking learning experiences

Code	Language learning experiences
d.	Listening to recordings, radio or television
l.	Interaction with native speakers
n.	Student to student conversations
q.	Role plays
u.	Language clubs
x.	Language camps
z.	Language evenings

Students: Listening and speaking

Students' proficiency level and EFL learning preferences	Hc.	Hi.	Hm.	Hp.	Hs.	Lc.	Li.	Lm.	Lp.	Ls.
Less time	2	6	13	20	15	18	16	27	25	18
No change needed	33	34	65	54	49	40	37	54	51	55
More time	65	60	22	26	36	42	47	19	24	27
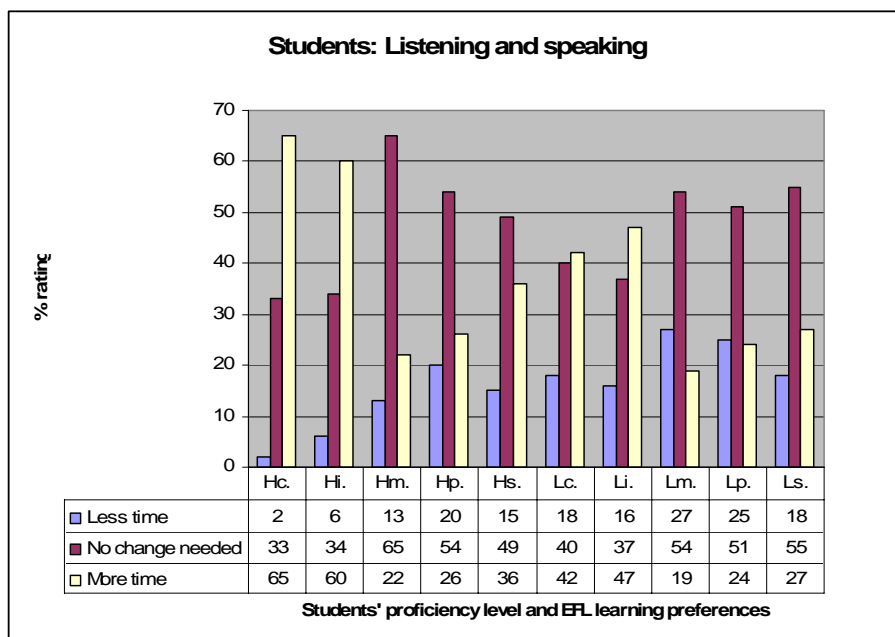
Figure 1b: Higher level STEP Test proficient students' and Lower level STEP Test proficient students' views on changing the amount of time spent on listening and speaking learning experiences
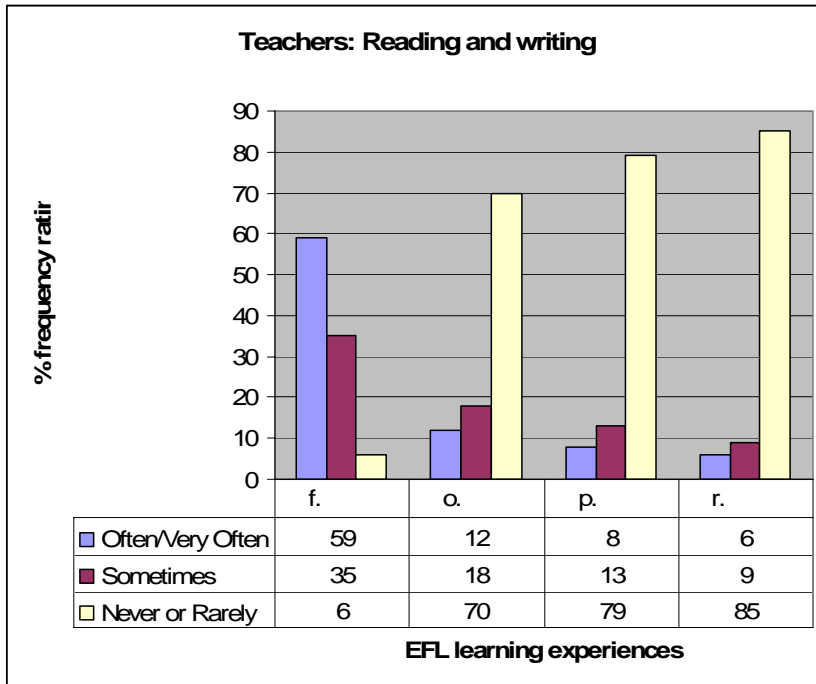
Code		
Higher level STEP Test	**Lower level STEP Test**	**Language learning experiences**
Hc.	Lc.	Talking with native speakers of English
Hi.	Li.	Listening to songs in English
Hm.	Lm.	Talking in English about Japan and Japanese culture
Hp.	Lp.	Testing ability to speak English
Hs.	Ls.	Testing ability to understand spoken English

Reading and writing

Figure 2a shows the majority of teachers *taught writing* very often/often (59%) with 35% reporting that they did it sometimes. However, their teaching of writing showed limited involvement of students in *Story writing* with 85% of teachers using this learning experience rarely or never. Similarly, they were limited in their use of more creative reading strategies with 79% rarely or never using *Free reading* and 70% rarely or never using *Jigsaw reading*.

Figure 2b shows that regardless of proficiency levels students' views of their learning experiences for reading and writing were similar except the higher level proficiency students perceived a need for more time to be spent on *reading* and *writing* (41% and 47% respectively). Again, the responses of the higher proficiency group tend to identify where a noticeable gap has emerged in the teacher data. While teachers were not asked about how often they tested students' ability to read and write
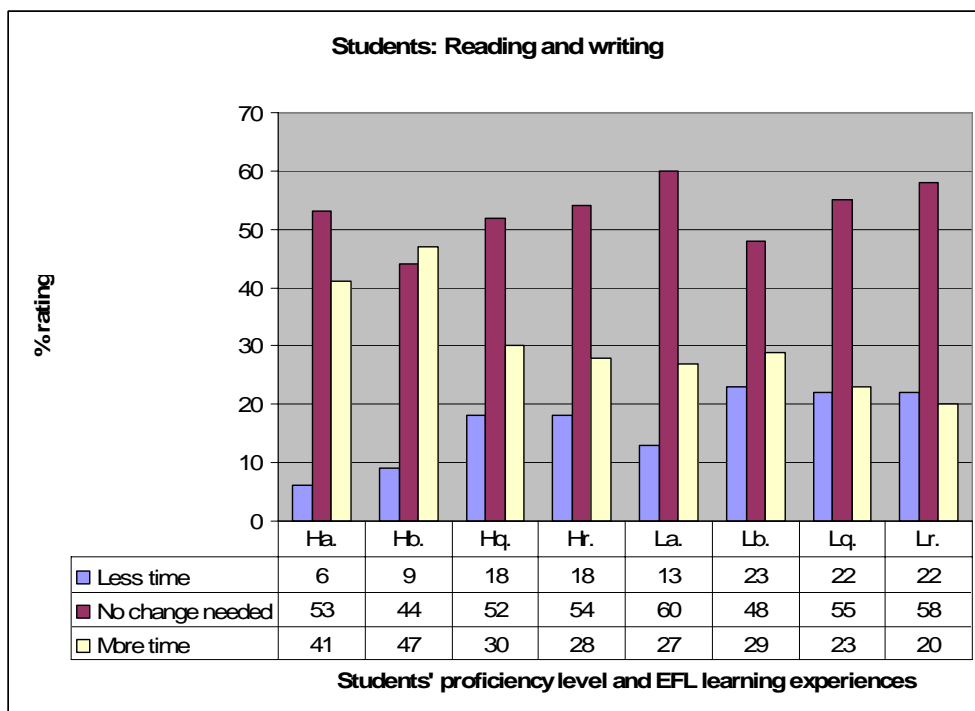
English, students' responses to the time they spend on this show relatively little difference except for the "more time" choice. Approximately 30% of he higher level English proficiency group prefer to have more time spent on testing their ability to read and write English and approximately 20% of the lower proficiency group recommend more time for this. In the main, these results suggest that teachers need to involve students in more purposeful, creative ways to use and develop their reading and writing skills.

Teachers: Reading and writing

	f.	o.	p.	r.
◼ Often/Very Often	59	12	8	6
◼ Sometimes	35	18	13	9
◻ Never or Rarely	6	70	79	85

EFL learning experiences

Figure 2a: Teachers' reported frequency of use of specific reading and writing learning experiences

Code	Language learning experiences
f.	Teaching writing
o.	Jigsaw reading
p.	Free reading
r.	Story writing

Students: Reading and writing

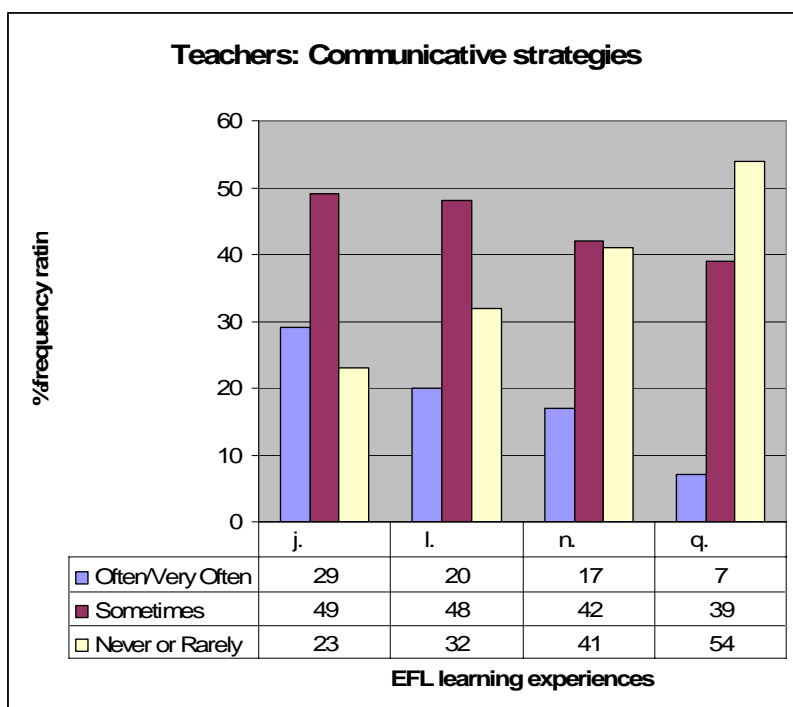| Students' proficiency level and EFL learning experiences	Ha.	Hb.	Hq.	Hr.	La.	Lb.	Lq.	Lr.
☐ Less time	6	9	18	18	13	23	22	22
■ No change needed	53	44	52	54	60	48	55	58
☐ More time	41	47	30	28	27	29	23	20

Figure 2b: Higher level STEP Test proficient students' and Lower level STEP Test proficient students' views on changing the amount of time spent reading and writing learning experiences

Code		
Higher level STEP Test	**Lower level STEP Test**	**Language learning experiences**
Ha.	La.	Reading
Hb.	Lb.	Writing
Hq.	Lq.	Testing ability to read English
Hr.	Lr.	Testing ability to write English

Communicative strategies and opportunity to communicate with English speakers

Figure 3a shows teachers' reported frequency of use of communicative strategies and opportunities for students to communicate with native English speakers in their language learning experiences. The fact that only 29% of teachers report using communicative activities *very often/often* with almost half using them *sometimes* and 23% using them *rarely or never* is of concern. Compared with the later reporting of frequency of use of drills and practice raises the issue of what constraints there might be on teachers' time and practice and also the possibility of their need for professional learning. Similarly, teachers report limited use of learning experiences where students can *interact with native speakers* or be involved in *projects about culture*. In addition, the potential involvement of students in *role plays* is rarely or never used by 54% of the teachers (only 7% do this very often/often). Thus, teachers appear constrained in their practice in terms of a pedagogical approach that aims to engage students in learning experiences that require them to use English for purposeful interaction.
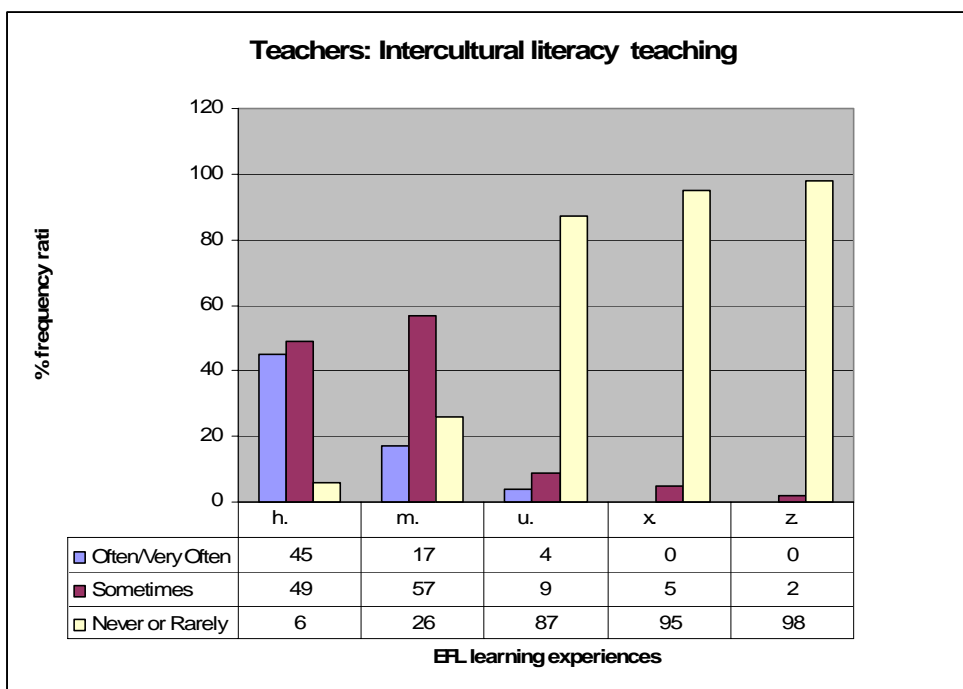
Teachers: Communicative strategies

	j.	l.	n.	q.
Often/Very Often	29	20	17	7
Sometimes	49	48	42	39
Never or Rarely	23	32	41	54

%frequency ratin

EFL learning experiences

Figure 3a: Teachers' reported frequency of use of communicative strategies and opportunities for students to communicate with English speakers in their language learning experiences

Code	Language learning experiences
j.	Communicative activities
l.	Interaction with native speakers
n.	Projects about culture
q.	Role plays

Intercultural literacy learning experiences

As shown in Figure 4a, teachers were asked about their frequency of use of language learning experiences that supported intercultural literacy. Their responses showed that they *taught about culture* more frequently than they involved students in actual cultural experiences such as *Language clubs, Language camps* and *Language evenings*. However, only 45% of teachers taught about culture very often or often and 49% sometimes with only 17% involving students very often or often in *projects about culture*.

Teachers: Intercultural literacy teaching

	h.	m.	u.	x.	z.
□ Often/Very Often	45	17	4	0	0
■ Sometimes	49	57	9	5	2
□ Never or Rarely	6	26	87	95	98

% frequency rati

EFL learning experiences

Figure 4a: Teachers' reported frequency of use of language learning experiences to support intercultural literacy

| Code	Language learning experiences
h.	Teaching about culture
m.	Projects about culture
u.	Language clubs
x.	Language camps
z.	Language evenings

Figure 3b/4b combines Higher level STEP Test proficient students' and Lower level STEP Test proficient students' views on changing the amount of time spent on using communicative strategies and language learning experiences to develop intercultural literacy. A majority of students with higher level proficiency saw the need for them to spend more time on *Talking with native speakers of English* (65%) and *Learning to use English for everyday purposes* (67%) and also *Learning about the culture of English-speaking countries* (50%). To a lesser extent these learning experiences were also identified by the lower proficiency students as needing more time in their language programs (42%, 49% and 29%).

Interestingly, the two groups of students did not differ greatly in their views on how much time should be spent *using the internet to communicate with students in countries where English is spoken* other than 11% more of the higher proficiency level students recommended more time (41% versus 30% respectively). There was also little difference in the two group's views about *learning by talking in English about Japan and Japanese culture*.

Overall, these results reiterate the need for teachers to engage students in learning experiences that allow them to function in the English language in a purposeful way and where they will be able to

develop intercultural literacy so necessary for them to use English for everyday purposes and communicate via the internet with other English speakers.
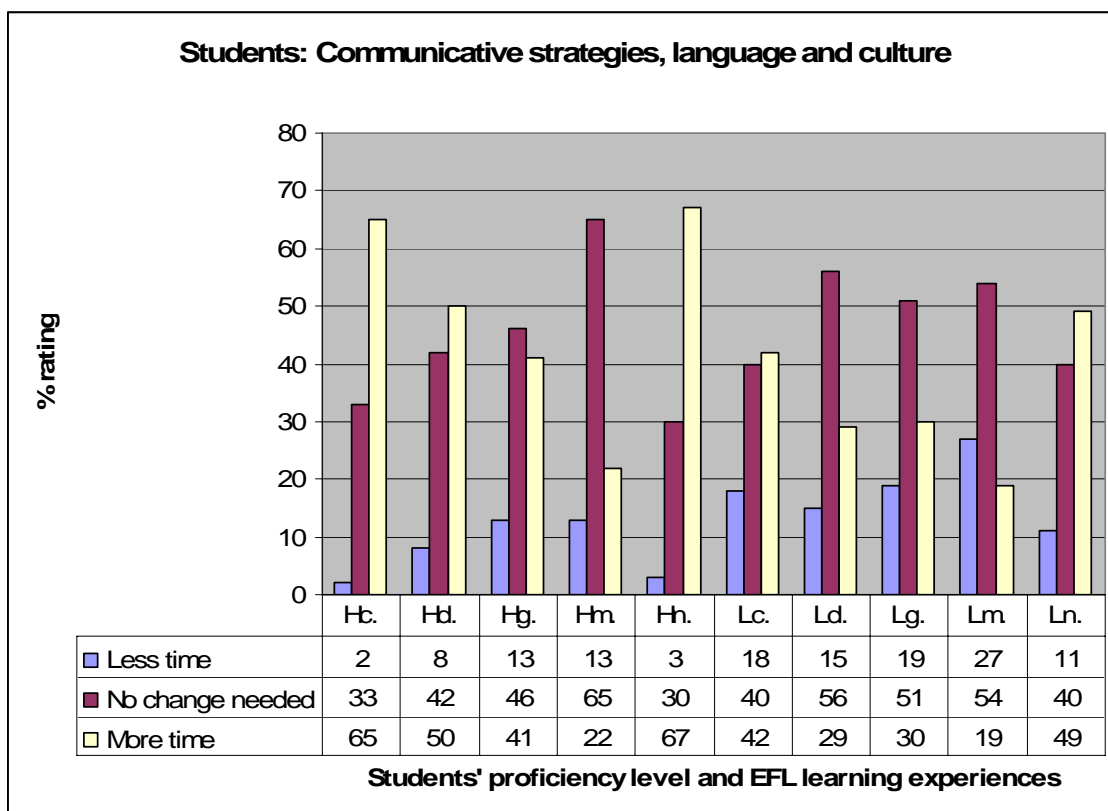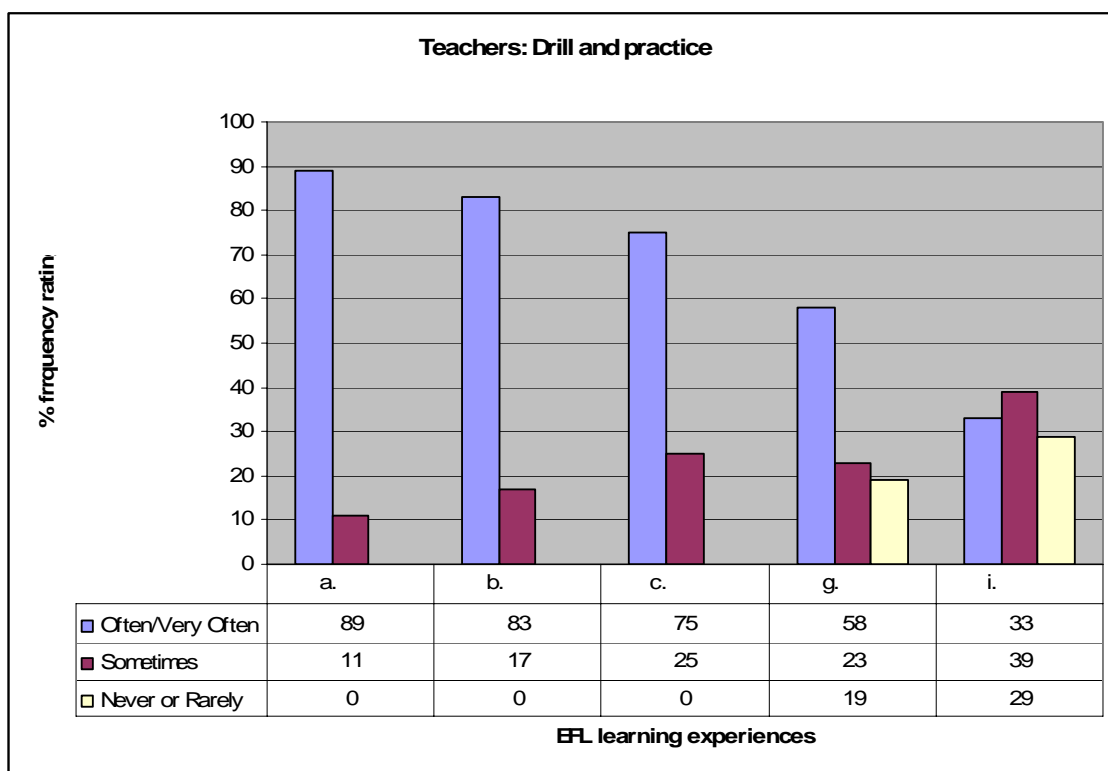

Figure 3b/4b: Higher level STEP Test proficient students' and Lower level STEP Test proficient students' views on changing the amount of time spent on (3b) communicative strategies and (4b) opportunities for students to communicate with English speakers and use of culturally related language learning experiences

Code		
Higher level STEP Test	**Lower level STEP Test**	**Language learning experiences**
Hc.	Lc.	Talking with native speakers of English.
Hd.	Ld.	Learning about the culture of English-speaking countries.
Hg.	Lg.	Using the internet to communicate with students in countries where English is spoken.
Hm.	Lm.	Talking in English about Japan and Japanese culture.
Hn.	Ln.	Learning to use English for everyday purposes.

Rote learning, drilling and practice exercises

Teachers' reported frequency of use of language learning experiences that involved rote learning, drilling and practice exercises was very revealing (Figure 5a). In essence, the vast majority of teachers engaged students in *pronunciation drills* (89%) and *formal grammar teaching* (83%) very often or often. Seventy-five percent of teachers also engaged students very often or often in *grammar exercises*. No teacher reported using these learning experiences rarely or never. However, there was more variability with respect to the use of *translation exercises* with 58% of teachers using them very often or often, 23% sometimes an 19% rarely or never. There was greater variation with regards to *rote memorisation of vocabulary* with 39% of teachers using this strategy sometimes, 33% using it very often or often and 29% using it rarely or never.
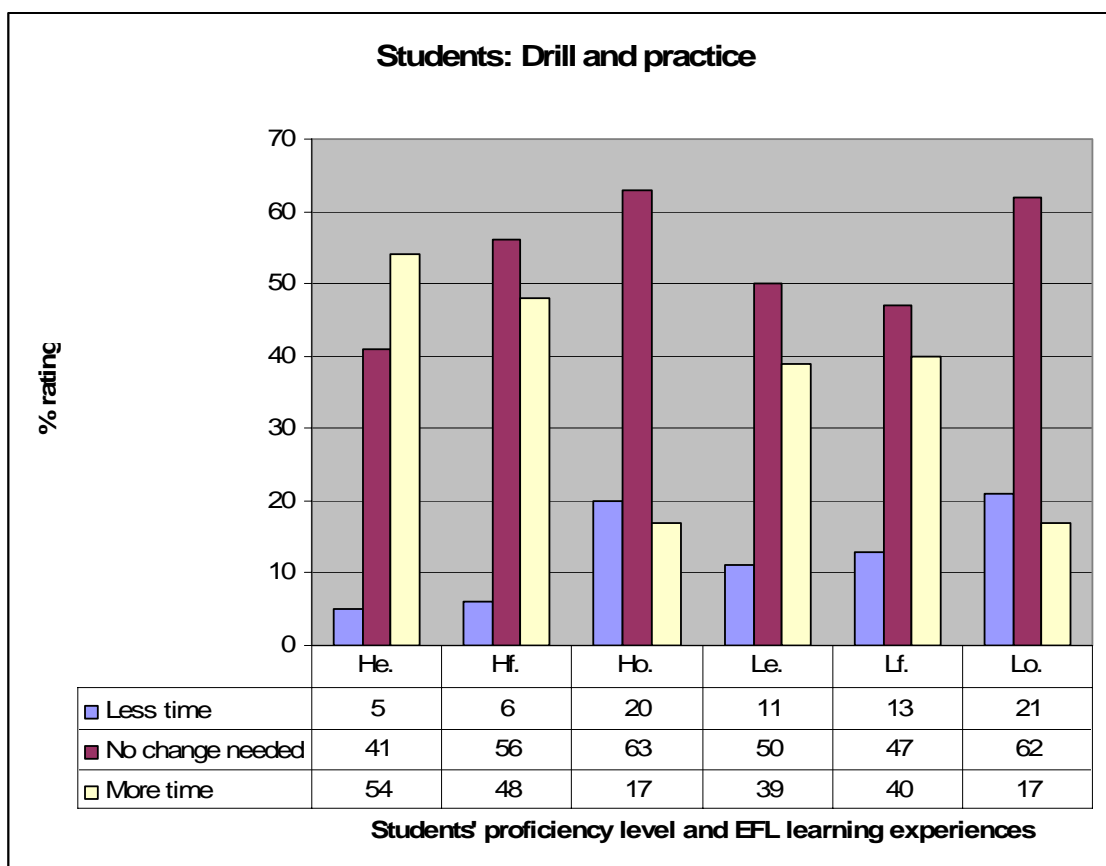
Teachers: Drill and practice

	a.	b.	c.	g.	i.
■ Often/Very Often	89	83	75	58	33
■ Sometimes	11	17	25	23	39
□ Never or Rarely	0	0	0	19	29

% frrquency ratin

EFL learning experiences

Figure 5a: Teachers' reported frequency of use of language learning experiences that involve rote learning, drilling and practice exercises

Code	Language learning experiences
a.	Pronunciation drills
b.	Formal grammar teaching
c.	Grammar exercises
g.	Translation exercises
i.	Rote memorisation of vocabulary

Perusal of Figure 5b shows the views of those students with higher proficiency in English compared with students with lower proficient in English in relation to learning by rote and drilling, and

practice exercises. While the two groups did not differ in their views about *studying the set textbooks* (approximately 20% of both groups recommended both more time and less time) a greater percentage of the higher proficiency group recommended more time be spent on *practising accurate pronunciation* (54%) and *practising accurate grammar* (48%). Thus, students' views do show that they are concerned about English pronunciation and grammar as well as recognising the need for them to participate in learning experiences that provide opportunities to use English in a functional way.

Students: Drill and practice

	He.	Hf.	Ho.	Le.	Lf.	Lo.
■ Less time	5	6	20	11	13	21
■ No change needed	41	56	63	50	47	62
□ More time	54	48	17	39	40	17

Students' proficiency level and EFL learning experiences

Figure 5b: Higher level STEP Test proficient students' and Lower level STEP Test proficient students' views on changing the amount of time spent on use of language learning experiences involving rote learning, drilling and practice exercises
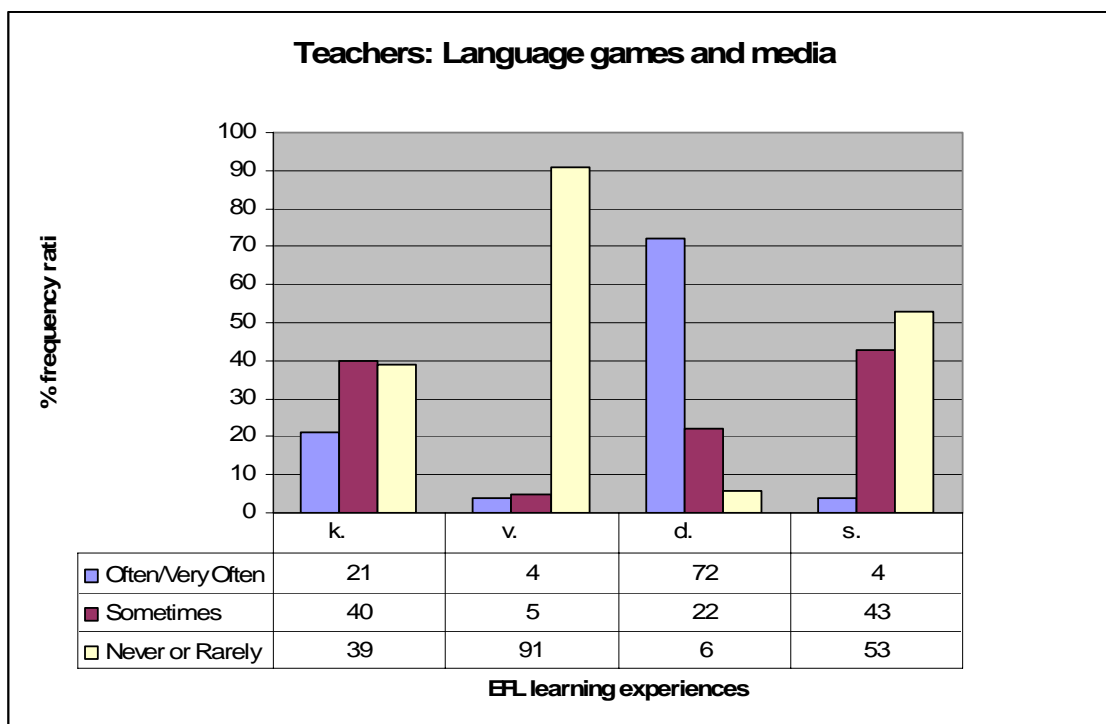
Code		
Higher level STEP Test	**Lower level STEP Test**	**Language learning experiences**
He.	Le.	Practising accurate pronunciation.
Hf.	Lf.	Practising accurate grammar.
Ho.	Lo.	Studying the set textbooks.

Language interactions through playing games and media

When the use of language games and learning through the use of a different media are considered (Figure 6a), 72% of teachers reported involving their students in *listening to recordings, radio or television* very often or often (only 6% rarely or never doing this). However in contrast to this 91%
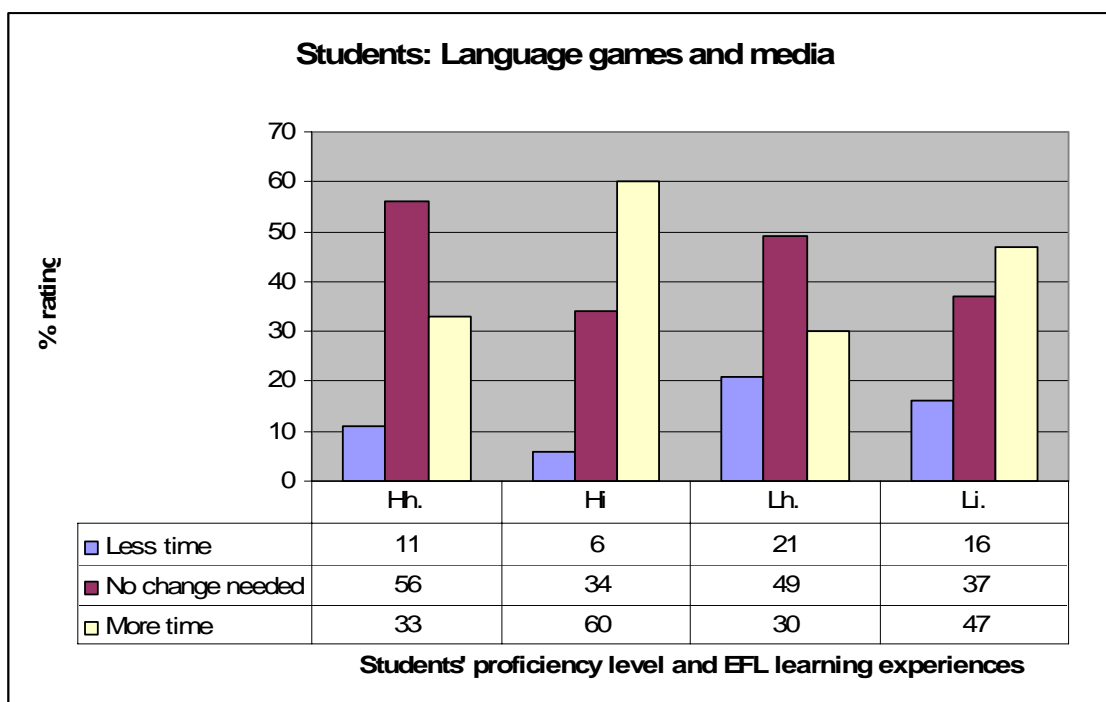
of teachers rarely or never used *computer games and CDs* in their teaching of the English language. Similarly, teachers' use of language games was also limited in that only 21% of teachers used this strategy very often or often while 40% and 39% used it sometimes and rarely or never, respectively. In addition, 53% of teachers rarely or never used *songs* to teach the language. Thus, apart from teachers using *recordings, radio or television* their EFL pedagogy did not take up the opportunities available through the information communication technologies (ICTs) that are widely known today.

Consideration of the views of students (Figure 6b) shows that contrary to teachers' practice, 60% of the higher proficiency group saw a need to spend more time on *listening to songs in English* compared with 47% of the lower proficiency group. Again highlighting the possible use of ICT, to a lesser extent, approximately a third of both groups saw a need to spend more time on *playing language games in English*.

Teachers: Language games and media

EFL learning experiences	k.	v.	d.	s.
Often/Very Often	21	4	72	4
Sometimes	40	5	22	43
Never or Rarely	39	91	6	53

Figure 6a: Teachers' reported frequency of use of language learning experiences that involve playing language games and using media

Code	Language learning experiences
k.	Language games
v.	Using computer games, CD-Roms etc in English
d.	Listening to recordings, radio or television
s.	Songs

Students: Language games and media

	Hh.	Hi	Lh.	Li.
Less time	11	6	21	16
No change needed	56	34	49	37
More time	33	60	30	47

Students' proficiency level and EFL learning experiences

Figure 6b: Higher level STEP Test proficient students' and Lower level STEP Test proficient students' views about changing the amount of time spent on (6b) using language learning experiences that involve playing language games and (7b) using language learning experiences that involve the media

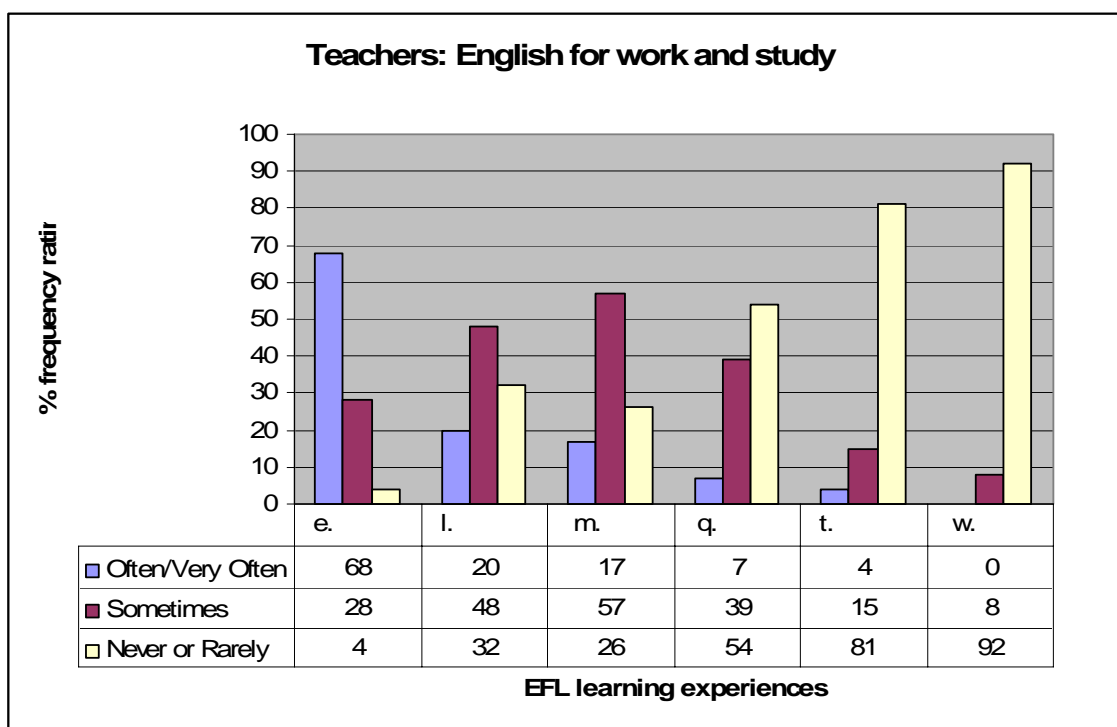| Code		
Higher level STEP Test	**Lower level STEP Test**	**Language learning experiences**
Hh.	Hh.	Playing language games in English.
Hi.	Li..	Listening to songs in English.

Use of English for work and study

In teachers' reported frequency of use of language learning experiences that involved the use of English for work and/or study (Figure 7a) the most prevalent strategy to facilitate this was *directed tasks, including inquiries* where 68% reported using this very often or often. However, balanced against this was the lack of use of ICT skills since 92% of teachers rarely or never involved students in *communication via email* and 81% rarely or never engaged students in *activities involving internet.* In addition, the value of students participating in role plays, language games and interactions with native speakers was also not commonly used.

Students' views on time spent on different strategies that could contribute to using English in a more practical way applicable to work and study show the higher proficiency group more aware (Figure 7b). This group recognised the contribution that *listening to songs in English* can potentially make to understanding English for everyday purposes with 52% recommending more time compared with 37% of the lower proficiency group. Interestingly, approximately a quarter of higher proficiency students recommended more time be spent on Learning English for the job I want to do
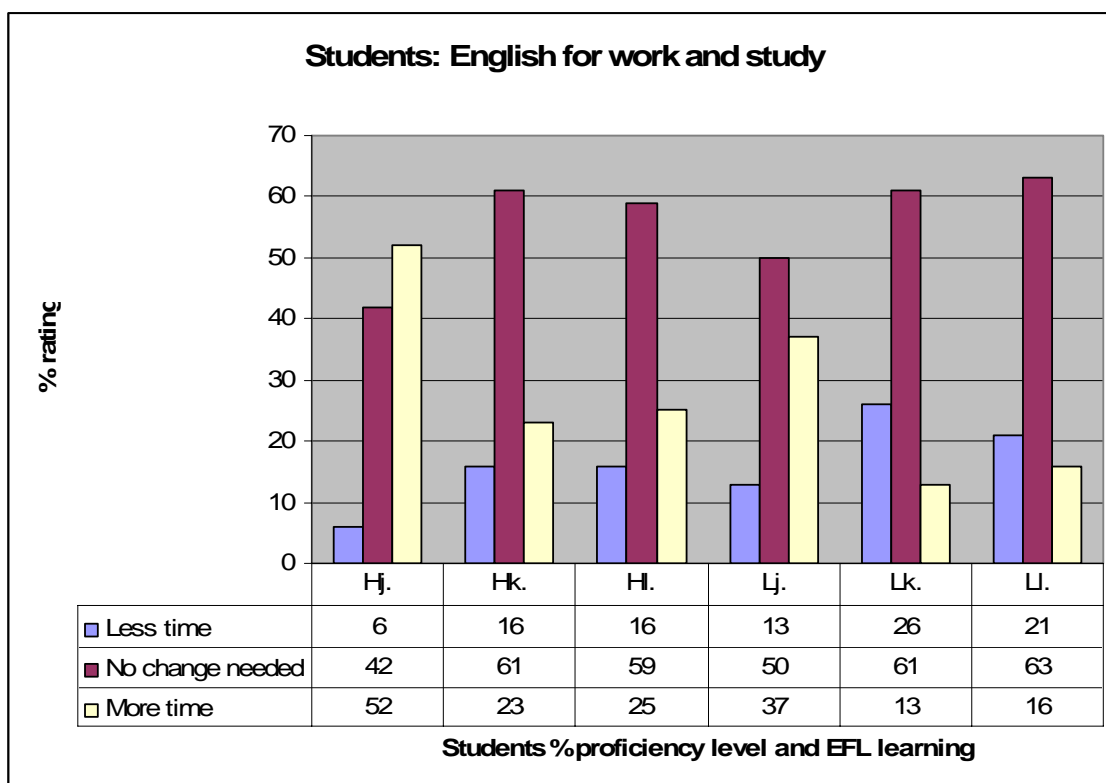
in the future and using English in studying other subjects in school compared with approximately a quarter of the lower proficiency group recommending less time on these learning experiences. Overall it can be argued that the higher proficiency group's responses reflect a greater sensitivity to the kind of learning experiences that best facilitate learning the English language compared with the lower proficiency group whose responses are more conservative when it comes to the possibility of change. These lower proficiency learners appear to be more likely to accept the way they are required to learn and appear to be less aware of how they might change things to learn more effectively.

Teachers: English for work and study

% frequency ratin	e.	l.	m.	q.	t.	w.
■ Often/Very Often	68	20	17	7	4	0
■ Sometimes	28	48	57	39	15	8
□ Never or Rarely	4	32	26	54	81	92

EFL learning experiences

Figure 7a: Teachers' reported frequency of use of language learning experiences that involve the use of English for work and/or study

Code	Language learning experiences
e.	Directed tasks, including inquiries
l.	Language games
m.	Interaction with native speakers
q.	Role plays
t.	Activities involving internet
w.	Communication via email

Students: English for work and study

Students % proficiency level and EFL learning	Hj.	Hk.	Hl.	Lj.	Lk.	Ll.
Less time	6	16	16	13	26	21
No change needed	42	61	59	50	61	63
More time	52	23	25	37	13	16

Figure 7b: Higher level STEP Test proficient students' and Lower level STEP Test proficient students' views on changing the amount of time spent using language learning experiences involving the use of English for work and/or study

Code		
Higher level STEP Test	**Lower level STEP Test**	**Language learning experiences**
Hj.	Hj.	Listening to songs in English.
Hk.	Hk.	Learning English for the job I want to do in the future.
Hl.	Hl.	Using English in studying other subjects in school.

Discussion and conclusion

Overall, the research identifies a need for teachers' pedagogical change to facilitate students' practical and functional use of English and the uptake of ICTs to link into communicating for real-life purposes in English and to develop intercultural literacy in tandem with the language learning.

Consideration of teachers' EFL pedagogy shows a strong focus on traditional language teaching methods with emphasis on drills and practice that included the formal teaching of grammar and use of grammar exercises. This is in spite of the syllabus recommending more contemporary approaches such as the communicative approach. The priority placed on drill and practice exercises is also evident by teachers' lower frequency of use of the broader range of learning experiences that would allow students to be involved in a more authentic use of language. These results also show that

students' choice of learning experiences that they think need more class time largely refer to areas that teachers currently neglect. Clearly, the ability to speak English is of concern to the students yet teachers are not using the students themselves as a resource to create opportunities for conversing with each other in English. That is, the more creative learning experiences that would afford opportunity to involve students themselves for the purposeful and communicative use of English and the acquisition of intercultural literacy are generally used much less frequently. These include such learning experiences as projects about culture, role plays, language games, writing stories and a variety of purposeful reading activities as well as using extra curricular, socially-based activities like language evenings, camps and clubs.

It was found that higher proficiency students tended to be more aware of the kinds of language learning experiences that would best facilitate their acquisition of the language and that their recommendations for change concurred substantially with the gaps identified in the teachers' current practice. The research identifies a need for pedagogical change to facilitate students' practical and functional use of English and the uptake of ICTs to link into communicating for real-life purposes in English. Though it is appreciated that there are possible difficulties in accessing computers and the internet for providing the opportunity for students to communicate and interact with native speakers of English, the research shows that particularly the higher level proficiency group of students see this as an opportunity to improve their acquisition of English in contrast to their teachers' reported minimal use.

Similar concerns emerge when strategies for teaching reading and writing are considered since teachers seem to restrict their pedagogy to more traditional methods and so discount the many potential activities that would involve students in using these macro skills for more authentic purposes. Inevitably, the teachers' approaches to developing students' intercultural literacy appear limited on the basis of their reported pedagogy yet the higher proficiency students appear to have acquired knowledge about how they can best continue to learn. Also impacting upon this is for teachers to appreciate how activities that cause their students to need to use English, such as interactive language games, the use of computer games and other media, can motivate and give purpose to language learning. Similarly, though items to better explore the use of English for work and study were limited in number, acknowledgment of learning English for these purposes was not embedded in the teachers responses, although students identified the need for more time for this.

In conclusion, this research highlights the need for teachers to be made aware of the way the use of ICTs and the internet can enhance English as a foreign language pedagogy. This would mean that teachers need to experience first hand the communicative advantages of setting up and working with such strategies as project-based, task-based learning (Edwards & Willis, 2005; O'Neill, 2008) and the possibilities of the virtual classroom or at the least use of social communications like Skype and Messenger. This, however, would require teachers to participate in professional learning and up-skilling with ICTs. This would seem to be a priority for teachers along with the need for them to appreciate that their students have valuable input to add to the design of language learning experiences. Similarly, there is a need for both teachers and students to be interculturally literate (Corbett, 2003; Nault, 2006) and for teachers to be able to research, evaluate and reflect on their pedagogy and practice in order to take leadership (O'Neill & Gish, 2008) in making changes to enhance their own practice. However, much of this would depend on whether the overall objectives for teaching English relate to students being able to acquire communicative skills and intercultural literacy in the main or being prepared to pass an examination. Thus, any recommendations for change need to occur in the context of an investigation of teachers' views of the possible constraints for them and for their students. While, the teachers involved did not volunteer any personal concerns although asked, given the recent government changes in language education policy in relation to curriculum and pedagogy, this is an area that is recommended for follow up. Given also

that these pedagogical and assessment approaches are similar to those of neighbouring countries such as Korea (Park, 2006), Taiwan (2008) and China (Rao, 2001), it would be pertinent to investigate students' awareness of language learning strategies in more depth according to their proficiency levels and their teachers' pedagogy and assessment in these countries too. It would also be valuable to consider whether teachers' English proficiency levels impacted upon their choice of learning experiences for students, and whether employment of native speakers has a significant impact on pedagogy and assessment in these EFL contexts.

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Appendix A: Language teaching strategies rated by teachers for frequency of use

role plays
plays/playlets
pronunciation drills
jigsaw reading
student to student
conversations
projects about culture
translation exercises
rote memorisation of
vocabulary
story writing
interaction with native speakers
communicative activities
playing language games in English
formal grammar teaching
grammar exercises
directed tasks, including inquiries
free reading
language evenings
language camps
language clubs
songs
activities involving internet
communication via email
teaching of culture
teaching writing
listening to recordings, radio or television
using computer games, CD-Roms etc in English

Appendix B: Language learning experiences rated by students for possible change

reading (comprehension)
writing (composition)
talking with native speakers of English
learning about the culture of English-speaking countries
practising accurate pronunciation
practising accurate grammar
using the internet to communicate with students in countries where English is spoken
playing language games in English
listening to songs in English
learning English for the job I want to do in the future
using English in studying other subjects in school
using the internet in English for research purposes
talking in English about Japan and Japanese culture
learning to use English for everyday purposes
studying the set textbooks
testing ability to speak English
testing ability to read English
testing ability to write English
testing ability to understand spoken English

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1 The STEP Test is administered by the Society for Testing English Proficiency (STEP) which is Japan's largest testing body (EIKEN, 2007) and measures candidates listening, speaking, reading and writing skills and claims to engage more authentic assessment techniques in its approach.