

# An Empirical Study on Effective Teacher Training Sessions for English Teachers in Elementary Schools

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**Abstract** This study explored effective teacher training sessions for Japanese elementary school English teachers. This study examined the effectiveness of a typically-used element in teacher training sessions, giving game instructions, through measuring a difference in the scores between pre- and post-tests. More specifically, this study attempted to answer the following questions: (a) how one practice session affects the scores of a control group, (b) how five practice sessions affect the scores of an experimental group, (c) whether there is any difference in the scores between the two groups. The results of statistical analyses imply that the experimental group improved their skills in giving game instructions through the five practice sessions, and also had significantly higher scores in the post-test compared to the control group. These results indicate that future teacher training sessions should allot more time to actually practicing certain skills in order to better prepare teachers to teach English effectively.

**Keywords:** teacher training, elementary school English teachers, giving game instructions

## 小学校英語指導者のための効果的な研修内容に関する実証的研究

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**要旨** この論文は小学校における日本人英語指導者のための効果的な研修内容を実証的に追求するものである。具体的には研修内容として頻繁に用いられる英語でのゲームの指示方法を取りあげ、被験者がゲームの指示方法の練習前と練習後に受験したテスト結果を分析した。被験者は統制群と実験群に分けられ、統制群は1回のみの練習を行い、それに対し実験群は5回の練習を行った。この実験における調査内容は以下の3点である。1) 1回のゲームの指示方法の練習は統制群のテスト結果にどのような影響を与えるのか。2) 5回のゲームの指示方法の練習は実験群のテスト結果にどのような影響を与えるのか。3) 統制群と実験群の練習後のテスト結果に差はあるのか。統計分析の結果によると、実験群のみが練習後にテストの点数が伸びていること、また統制群と比較して練習後のテストの得点が有意に高いことが分かった。これらの結果は、今後の研修において指導技術(例:英語でのゲームの指示方法)の練習により研修時間を割くことが指導技術向上に有効であることを示唆している。

**キーワード:** 教員研修、小学校英語指導者、ゲームを使った指導

## Introduction

The current course of study for elementary school education in Japan (the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), 1998) was put into effect at public elementary schools in April, 2002. This course of study included information about classes, entitled Integrated Studies, which encompassed English activities for the first time as part of an international understanding element. In the MEXT's scheme, English activities were only one of the possible options to be taught under the international understanding element. However, according to the latest official report on the current situation of English education in public elementary schools (MEXT, retrieved July 5, 2010), English activities were conducted at 97.1% of these institutions in 2007. It was also reported that homeroom teachers were in charge of teaching English in more than 90% of classes at all grade levels. Furthermore, in March, 2008, the Ministry introduced a revised course of study for elementary school education (MEXT, 2008a). This new course of study will be put into effect in April, 2011. Within this revised course of study, all fifth and sixth graders will be required to have a foreign language class, i.e., English class, once a week, and homeroom teachers will be mainly responsible for teaching it. There are three objectives to this course of study: (a) to foster understanding of languages and cultures, (b) to promote active participation in communication, and (c) to develop basic communication skills (MEXT, 2008a). The first two objectives were part of the current course of study (MEXT, 1998), making the third objective the only addition to it.

While English activities have become more prevalent and will be required in public elementary schools, the issue over the quality of teaching has repeatedly been one of the obstacles elementary schools have faced. In other words, more than 90% of English classes are currently taught by homeroom teachers (MEXT, retrieved July 5, 2010) who are not necessarily trained English teachers. Therefore, the level of English teachers in terms of their English ability and teaching skills has been at the center of discussion among in-service teachers and researchers (e.g., Butler, 2005; Higuchi, Kanamori, & Kunikata, 2005). In order to more effectively promote a higher quality in elementary school English education nationwide, effective teacher training sessions should be offered to elementary school English teachers. Considering the current situation, this paper explores effective teacher training sessions for elementary school English teachers.

## Teacher Training for Elementary School English Teachers

The MEXT has organized a three-year (2007 to 2009) systematic teacher training program on elementary school English education, preceding the implementation of a required English course at the elementary school level in 2011. In 2007, as a first step in this program, an independent administrative institution, the National Center for Teacher's Development, offered a training course (called *Chuou-kenshu*) for teachers' consultants in charge of the English education of each prefectural or municipal board of education. This training course was originally planned for two years, 2007 and 2008, targeting different groups of people each year, but it was extended to 2009. This training was given as a five-day (2007 and 2008) and a three-day (2009) intensive course in five geographic areas nationwide (National Center for Teacher's Development, retrieved August 13, 2010; Nishizaki, 2009). This training course was meant to equip these teachers' consultants with necessary knowledge and skills in teaching English at the elementary school level, in order for them to organize a training session for elementary school teachers in their own prefectures. This training course covered both theoretical knowledge and practical skills. As an example, the former in 2009 included the following: background and principles of elementary school English activities, solutions to problems in implementing an English program, and theoretical aspects of communication activities. The latter in 2009 included the following: use of textbooks, English notebooks (*Eigo noubo*) (MEXT, 2009a), and an electronic blackboard, both of which were distributed by the MEXT; methodology in teaching songs and chants, and team-teaching; use of classroom English; development of curricula and lesson plans; and preparation and demonstration of an actual class (National Center for Teacher's Development, retrieved August 13, 2010).

As a second step in the three-year teacher training program, the teachers' consultants who had participated in the above training course were required to organize a training course (called *Chukakukyoin-kenshu*) for elementary school teachers of their prefectures in 2008 and 2009. This training course was planned for five consecutive days (25 hours) each year, targeting different groups of people. The teachers' consultants mainly organized the course, using the content of what they had learned in the above training and also the guidebook for training on elementary school English activities, distributed by the Ministry (MEXT, 2009b). This guidebook included information about theoretical and practical aspects of the teaching of English at the elementary school level, and also included advice and materials for self-study. According to the guidebook, this training course was meant to develop a leader of English activities at each elementary school

(called *Chukaku-sha*), who would be responsible for improving English and teaching skills of other teachers at his/her school, through achieving the following three objectives. First, the leader has to teach other teachers basic knowledge and skills in teaching English. Second, he/she has to give feedback on English classes conducted by other teachers, in order to improve the quality of their English classes. Finally, he/she has to give advice to other teachers on self-study materials, and also has to organize routine group study sessions on English or teaching skills for all teachers at his/her school (MEXT, 2009b).

As a last step in the three-year teacher training program, the leaders at each school who had taken the training course were supposed to organize training sessions (called *Konai-kenshu*) for other teachers in their school for a total of 30 hours over the two years, 2008 and 2009 (MEXT, 2009b). However, most elementary schools planned to organize these training sessions for 2009 and 2010 instead of 2008 and 2009, preparing their teachers to be ready for a required English class starting the following year, 2011 (Nishizaki, 2009). According to the guidebook (MEXT, 2009b), the leaders have to fulfill two responsibilities: (a) they have to decide on a curriculum and methodology in teaching English, and organize training sessions reflecting opinions from other teachers; and (b) they have to have sufficient teaching skills in order to be a role model for other teachers. The guidebook suggests that the training sessions focus on improving teachers' English and teaching skills. Materials distributed by the Ministry such as the textbooks, English notebooks (*Eigo nouto*), and their teaching manuals; a CD and software for an electronic blackboard, supplied with the textbooks; and the guidebook are recommended to be used in these training sessions (MEXT, 2009b).

### Research Questions

Researchers (e.g., Butler, 2005; Higuchi, Kanamori, & Kunikata, 2005) have argued that the MEXT should offer ample training courses to elementary school teachers before and after the implementation of required English classes in 2011. Moreover, a number of researchers have suggested appropriate topics for training sessions based on the sessions they have already offered (Kawakami, 2008; Miki, 2006, 2009; Shintani, 2007) or the feedback they have received from the participants in previous training sessions (Hojo, 2009; Ito & Kanazawa, 2006; Kanazawa & Ito, 2007; Kobayashi & Miyamoto, 2007, 2008). Yet, to date, few empirical studies on the effectiveness of the contents of training sessions have been done. Empirical studies on the effectiveness of certain

contents of training sessions could greatly contribute to improving the quality of teacher training. Therefore, this study empirically explored the effectiveness of a specific training element, giving game instructions, through measuring a difference in the scores between pre- and post-tests. Giving game instructions was chosen as the specific training element for this study because it had been one of the most typical topics used in teacher training sessions (Kawakami, 2008; Miki, 2006, 2009; Shintani, 2007). Specifically, this study attempted to answer the following research questions:

1. Does one practice session help participants in a control group to improve their skills in giving game instructions?
2. Do five practice sessions help participants in an experimental group to improve their skills in giving game instructions?
3. Is there a difference in the results of pre- and post-tests on giving game instructions between the control and experimental groups?

## Method

### *Participants*

The participants in the study were 49 second to fourth-year university students who were in two *Methodology of Teaching English I* classes taught by two different Japanese instructors, including the author, in the first semester in 2010. This methodology class is one of the required classes in an English teaching certificate course offered to literature, economics, and law majors at the university. In order to take the methodology class, the students are required to have a minimum TOEIC (the Test of English for International Communication) score of 450, and the average score of the participants in this study was 525, ranging from 450 to 860. In this study, the 49 participants were divided into two groups: 26 students who took the other instructor's class as a control group, and 23 students who took the author's class as an experimental group. In the control group, there were 11 male and 15 female students, and their average TOEIC score was 530, ranging from 450 to 700. In the experimental group, there were 14 male and 9 female students, and their average TOEIC score was 519, ranging from 450 to 860.

### *Materials*

#### Test materials

The same two games were chosen for both pre- and post-tests in which the participants were evaluated on their skills in giving game instructions as if to elementary school

students. The two games were chosen from a revised list of games for elementary school students, which had been developed by the author (Matsunaga, 2009b). In the previous study, a list of games had been examined by two groups in order to confirm the appropriateness of the content, i.e., content validity, for evaluating in-service elementary school teachers' (participants') skills in giving game instructions. The two groups were: (a) two university teachers who were doing research on elementary school English education, and also had teaching experience at the elementary school level, and (b) two in-service elementary school teachers with more than 5 years of English teaching experience. Through this process, only the games which had been agreed upon by all four people had been left on the revised list of games (Matsunaga, 2009b). The two games in the present study were the *secret word game* and the *can you . . . ? game* (see the Appendix for test cards for secret word game & can you . . . ? game). These two games were chosen based on the level of difficulty as deemed by the two groups so that the test included both easy and difficult sets of game instructions. More precisely, the former, the secret word game, was evaluated to be easy whereas the latter, the can you . . . ? game, was evaluated to be difficult by all four people as mentioned above.

#### Rating scales

In evaluating the participants' performance in giving game instructions in this study, the rating scales for teaching skills previously developed by the author were utilized (Matsunaga, 2009a). The participants' game instruction skills were assessed based on the following four criteria related to teaching skills: (a) overall task fulfillment, (b) recognition of student level, (c) instructional language, and (d) fluency. Then, a holistic category, i.e., (a), and analytic categories, i.e., (b), (c), and (d), were added for each of the two games. In addition, four levels were employed for the game instruction skills: (a) level one, less than 60%; (b) level two, 60% to 69%; (c) level three, 70% to 79%; and (d) level four, more than 80%, with level three being set as a satisfactory level (see Matsunaga, 2009a for the rating scales of teaching skills).

#### *Procedures*

##### Instructional materials

Although taught by two different instructors, the two *Methodology of Teaching English I* classes, i.e., the control and experimental groups, shared the same syllabus and were conducted in virtually identical ways. In this methodology class, the students



learn theoretical aspects of English teaching such as objectives of English education and roles of teachers, and they also learn practical skills such as teaching the four skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), preparing them for their *Methodology of Teaching English II* classes in which they will plan and conduct actual lessons. The only difference between the classes was that the control group received one 30-minute practice session on giving game instructions, while the experimental group received five 30-minute practice sessions. All of the sessions were conducted in regular class times during a 14-week semester.

The experimental group received 30-minute practice giving game instructions in five classes from weeks four to eight, and five different games were chosen for the sessions. The five games were selected on a frequency basis from the textbooks, *English Notebook 1 and 2 (Eigo nouto 1, 2)*, which were distributed by the Ministry (2009a) and have been used at public elementary schools. The five games were: (a) a bingo game, (b) a finger pointing game (*Yubisashi-gemu*), (c) a Japanese card game (*Karuta-gemu*), (d) a stereo game, and (e) a concentration game. Although the same type of game as the secret word game also frequently appeared in the textbooks, it was excluded from the five games for practice since it was one of the two games included in the pre- and post-tests. In each session, working in groups of three to four people, the participants received a practice card, which included the information: the name, objectives, procedures, and Japanese instructions of the game. In creating five practice cards, the author referred to the teacher's manuals for the textbooks. Then, they were given four minutes to prepare to act out the game instructions in English to other members in the group. After this group practice, the instructor (author) demonstrated the same game instructions as an example, focusing on instructional language and interaction with students. Following this example, the participants were given five minutes to improve their original instructions, and then they acted out the instructions again to other members in the group. While the participants prepared for the second time, the instructor helped the participants to revise their instructions when necessary.

The participants in the control group practiced giving game instructions of one of the five prescribed games, the finger pointing game (*Yubisashi-gemu*), in class during the fifth week of the semester. This was the same week in which the experimental group also practiced the same game. Procedures of this one practice session followed the same manner as those of the experimental group. The author gave the control group one practice session instead of no sessions because she planned to examine a difference

in the effectiveness of training patterns between one-time and multiple sessions.

### Pre- and post-tests

The participants in both groups took an interview-style pre-test in the second or third week of the class. The interview test consisted of the two games (the secret word game and the can you...? game), and was given individually by an interviewer (instructor) in his/her office for 10 minutes. In the interview test, a participant was given a test card for each game which included the information: the name, objectives, procedures, and Japanese instructions of the game; then, after four minutes of preparation time, the participant had to act out giving the game instructions as if to elementary school students in English. In addition, all interviews were video-recorded with permission by the participants. In order to evaluate the interviews, the interviewer of each group (the instructor of the group) served both as an interviewer and a rater. After the initial interview, the original interviewer reviewed the video-recording and rated it based on the rating scales described above. Then, the other interviewer reviewed the same video-recording and re-rated it on a different day. If the two interviewers disagreed on their rating, they discussed it until they agreed on the same rating. After the pre-test, the participants in both groups individually received a report from their instructors, which stated their levels (level one to four) on each of the two games along with a list of brief level descriptions. The same interview test was administered as a post-test with both groups with the same procedures in the 12<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup> week of the class.

## Results

### *Research questions one and two: Difference in pre- and post-test scores of the two groups*

In order to see whether a one-time practice session of giving game instructions improved the control group's skills in giving game instructions, two paired-samples *t* tests were conducted to evaluate the effects of the training on the scores of each of the two games between the pre- and post-tests. For game 1 (the secret word game), the results indicated that the mean score for the post-test ( $M=50.50$ ,  $SD=22.76$ ) was not significantly greater than the mean score for the pre-test ( $M=49.42$ ,  $SD=22.10$ ),  $t(25)=1.69$ ,  $p=.10$ . For game 2 (the can you...? game), the results also indicated that the mean score for the post-test ( $M=17.50$ ,  $SD=9.00$ ) was not significantly greater than the mean score for the pre-test ( $M=20.35$ ,  $SD=9.11$ ),  $t(25)=-1.58$ ,  $p=.13$ . These results indicated that the participants in the control group did not improve their skills in



giving game instructions through a one-time practice session in class.

In order to see whether participation in five-time practice sessions of giving game instructions improved the experimental group's skills in giving game instructions, two paired-samples  $t$  tests were conducted to evaluate the effects of the training on the scores of each of the two games between the pre- and post-tests. For game 1, the results indicated that the mean score for the post-test ( $M=65.63$ ,  $SD=13.23$ ) was significantly greater than the mean score for the pre-test ( $M=49.17$ ,  $SD=21.73$ ),  $t(22)=4.37$ ,  $p=.00$ . For game 2, the results also indicated that the mean score for the post-test ( $M=52.34$ ,  $SD=22.01$ ) was significantly greater than the mean score for the pre-test ( $M=16.71$ ,  $SD=6.37$ ),  $t(22)=6.70$ ,  $p=.00$ . These results indicated that the participants in the experimental group improved their skills in giving game instructions through participating in five practice sessions, as compared to their control group counterparts who only participated in one practice session.

*Research question three: Difference in pre- and post-test scores between the two groups*

First, two sets of ANOVAs (one-way analysis of variance) were conducted to evaluate the relationship between training patterns and a difference in the scores of the pre-test. The independent variable, training patterns, included two levels: one time (control) and five times (experimental). The dependent variable was a difference in the scores of the pre-test. The ANOVA for game 1 was not significant,  $F(1, 47)=.00$ ,  $p=.96$ . The ANOVA for game 2 was also not significant,  $F(1, 47)=.27$ ,  $p=.61$ . These results indicated that there was no significant difference in the scores of the pre-test between the control and experimental groups.

Second, two sets of ANOVAs were conducted to evaluate the relationship between the training patterns and a difference in the scores of the post-test. The independent variable, training patterns, again included two levels: one time (control) and five times (experimental). The dependent variable was a difference in the scores of the post-test. The ANOVA for game 1 was significant,  $F(1,47)=7.45$ ,  $p=.01$ . The strength of relationship (effect size) between the training patterns and the difference in the scores, as assessed by  $\eta^2$ , was .35, which is regarded as having a medium effect (Cohen, 1988). The ANOVA for game 2 was also significant,  $F(1, 47)=27.75$ ,  $p=.00$ . The strength of relationship between the training patterns and the difference in the scores, as assessed by  $\eta^2$ , was .37, which is also regarded as having a medium effect (Cohen, 1988). These results indicated that there was a significant difference in the scores of the post-test between

the control and experimental groups, yielding higher scores for the experimental group. Moreover, the effect sizes in the post test suggested that the training patterns moderately affected the variance of the difference in the scores of both games. Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations of the pre- and post-test scores of the two groups.

**Table 1.** *Means and standard deviations of pre- and post-test scores of two groups*

		Control ( <i>n</i> =26)		Experimental ( <i>n</i> =23)	
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Game 1	Pre	49.42	22.10	49.17	21.73
	Post	50.50	22.76	65.63	13.23
Game 2	Pre	20.35	9.11	16.71	6.37
	Post	17.50	9.00	52.34	22.01

### Discussion and Conclusion

While English activities will be required in public elementary schools in 2011, the quality of teaching has repeatedly been questioned by in-service teachers and researchers (e.g., Butler, 2005; Higuchi, Kanamori, & Kunikata, 2005). Responding to this problem, the MEXT organized a three-year (2007 to 2009) teacher training program (National Center for Teacher's Development, retrieved August 13, 2010; Nishizaki, 2009). In this plan, the MEXT aimed to gradually implement the policy of offering training sessions nationwide, eventually reaching all elementary school teachers; however, researchers have found this approach insufficient in providing teachers with adequate training (Kawakami, 2008; Shintani, 2007). To date, a number of researchers have suggested appropriate topics for training sessions based on the sessions they have already offered (Kawakami, 2008; Miki, 2006, 2009; Shintani, 2007) or the feedback they have received from the participants in previous sessions (Hojo, 2009; Ito & Kanazawa, 2006; Kanazawa & Ito, 2007; Kobayashi & Miyamoto, 2007, 2008). Although their ideas undoubtedly provide us with a valuable source of insight, little empirical effort has been made to examine the effects of these training sessions in improving the teaching skills of teachers. Following the above discussions, this study explored the effectiveness of multiple training sessions on giving game instructions, one of the typical elements included in the training sessions, through measuring the difference in the scores between pre- and post-tests.

In this study, the control group received one 30-minute practice session whereas

the experimental group received five 30-minute practice sessions. The practice times were organized this way so that the control group would experience a typical time allotment for giving game instructions in training sessions conducted by prefectural and municipal boards of education (Kawakami, 2008; Miki, 2006, 2009), and the experimental group would experience a time allotment the author believed effective in order to improve giving game instruction skills of the participants. The results of statistical analyses implied that offering the participants five practice sessions for the experimental group, instead of only one session for the control group, helped to significantly improve the experimental group participants' skills in giving game instructions. This means that the typical time allotment for giving game instructions in current training sessions may not be sufficient for improving the participants' skills, and therefore, more time should be spent on practice. Although further research needs to be done to examine exactly how much more time is necessary for positive effects, the positive results obtained from this study can help to lead future research in the right direction.

The following limitations should also be considered when interpreting the data in this study. First, the participants in this study were university students who were in an English teaching certificate course, and therefore, they did not necessarily represent elementary school teachers in general. For example, considering the fact that the participants in this study had an average TOEIC score of 525, their English proficiency may have been higher than that of average elementary school teachers. On the other hand, the participants in this study did not have experience in actual English teaching or managing students in classroom, which elementary school teachers would have experienced. Second, this study covered only one typical area of training sessions, giving game instructions, and resulted in restricting positive effects of practice only to this area. With these limitations, however, this study still offers valuable implications for future research in effective teacher training. For instance, the research method in this study can be applied to different areas of teacher training sessions such as classroom English; these different areas should be examined for their effectiveness on improving certain skills of teachers. And the author hopes that an accumulation of more empirical data of this kind will help improve the development of teacher training courses, making training sessions more meaningful and effective for elementary school teachers.

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## Appendix

### A Translation of the Test Card for Secret Word Game

Giving instructions for a game (for the interviewee)

Game: Secret word game

Objectives: Students will learn names of occupations, and will be able to repeat them after the teacher.

Style: listening game, conducted in pairs

Prepared materials: Picture cards of various jobs, an eraser

Procedures:

1. Students work in pairs, sitting face to face. Each pair puts an eraser between them.
2. The teacher says one of the occupation names on the board, and the students repeat it after the teacher. However, when the teacher says the secret word, students should not repeat the word. Instead, they have to pick up the eraser. Those who grab the eraser, earn 1 point.

Test criteria for giving instructions:

#### Giving instructions for the game

The interviewee must include the following instructions. He/ she is also expected to effectively use the prepared materials and appropriate gestures.

**Required instructions:** (the following instructions are given in Japanese, except for 1, 6 & 7.)

1. Let's play the Secret Word game!
2. Work in pairs.
3. Sit face to face with your partner. Then, put an eraser between the two of you.
4. Repeat the word after me.
5. But, when I say the secret word, "carpenter," do not repeat it.  
You must pick up the eraser!

----- end of the test -----

6. You get the eraser, and you get one point.
7. You get more points, and you are the winner.



## A Translation of the Test Card for Can You ...? Game

Giving instructions for a game (for the interviewee)

Game: Can you ...? game

Objectives: Students will be able to ask and answer questions, using “Can you ...?”  
“Yes, I can. / No, I can’t.”

Style: interview game, conducted in pairs

Prepared materials: a worksheet (which details five people and six things each person  
can or cannot do)

Procedures:

1. Students work in pairs, sitting face to face. Each student chooses who he or she will become from the five people on the worksheet, but does not tell the partner his or her choice.
2. The students in pairs ask and answer questions, using “Can you ...?” “Yes, I can. / No, I can’t.” The student who can guess who his or her partner is with fewer questions will be the winner.

Test criteria for giving instructions:

### Giving instructions for the game

The interviewee must include the following instructions. He/ she is also expected to effectively use the prepared materials and appropriate gestures.

**Required instructions:** (the following instructions are given in Japanese, except for 1 & 7.)

1. Let’s play the Can You ...? game!
2. Work in pairs, and sit face to face with your partner.
3. Look at your worksheet. Choose one person you want to be.
4. But, do not tell your partner who you are.
5. Ask and answer questions, using “Can you ...?” “Yes, I can. / No, I can’t.”
6. When you know who your partner is, ask your partner “Are you ...?”

----- end of the test -----

7. Ask fewer questions, and you are the winner.