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## **A Comparative Study of Instruction between International School and Japanese School Teachers**

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This paper presents a survey on the status of different kinds of instruction in an international school and public Japanese schools in order to identify specific professional development needs. Four elementary teachers were interviewed: a third and a fifth grade teacher from an international school along with two teachers of the same grades in a Japanese school. Two junior high school teachers, one each from the international school and a Japanese school were also interviewed. Through this study, it has been found that teachers in both local and international schools put similar values on certain areas (for instance, they respect reading and writing); however, they have different circumstances and perspectives in other areas, such as public speaking and computer use.

卒業資格が日本の学校と同様に認められる場が多くなり、ますます人気を集める“インターナショナルスクール”。一方、学習指導要領の改訂に揺れ、議論が絶えない“公立小中学校”。この2種類の学校を両校の教師による、指導法に関するアンケートへの回答から比較対照する。今回は、特に小学校3年、5年、また、中学生に対する指導法に焦点をあてた。この結果から、両校で共通して指導の重点が置かれている分野(読み・書き)と違いのある分野(発表・コンピューターの活用)が明らかになった。この結果が、両校への理解を深め、また、研修の必要な分野を明らかにする一助となれば幸いである。

## **Introduction**

Since April 2002, elementary schools and junior high schools in Japan have been using the new Courses of Study, whose aim is to have children, pupils and students firmly acquire the rudiments of knowledge and cultivate “a zest for living,” which will then engender in the students an ability to learn and think independently by and for themselves (The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology in Japan [MEXT], 2002). However, in order to react to the rapid internationalization of Japan, and confront the advancing globalization of the world, reform of conventional Japanese education has become a matter of controversy.

Class sizes in junior high school are large - 40 students per class is the norm - and instruction is teacher-centered, that is, whole class teaching. Students generally engage in note-taking for the purpose of passing examinations. The use of small groups for instructional purposes is rare and student presentations are limited. Classroom proceedings focus on the teacher, who elaborates at length during lessons. The blackboard is used to enhance the teachers' explanation and to aid the students' note-taking. Few questions are raised by either teacher or students (Rohlen & Le Tendre, 1996). This is the typical image of a Japanese classroom. Some parents are grateful for the system as Japan has enjoyed a reputation of having produced some of the best students in the world. Most recently, results from the 2000 Program for International Student Assessment serve as evidence (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2001). Others, however, are skeptical about it and seek another type of education to satisfy their desires. One of these choices is an international school.

Although international schools have traditionally been institutions for students from foreign families and returnees, more and more Japanese (i.e., students whose parents are Japanese and have no experience living overseas) are entering international schools. Recently MEXT, for the purpose of promoting the internationalization of education,

declared that international school diplomas are comparable to those attained from a Japanese high school (the Partial Amendment to the School Education Law, 2003), which means students in international schools can choose to enter not only colleges and universities overseas, but also Japanese ones. This change has resulted in an increased interest among some parents to pursue an international education for their children.

Japan, actually, has the largest number of international schools in the world, about 30 (International School Guide, 1999). Twenty-five of them are accredited by American and European associations. The popularity of international schools has increased dramatically, although their capacities are small with tuition fees astronomical compared to Japanese public schools. Despite these drawbacks, Japanese families who send their children to an international school choose to do so because they view it as an advantage and a future investment for their children (Wakabayashi, 2002). HIS (Hokkaido International School) is one such international school. The school consists of preschool, kindergarten, elementary, and secondary level schools and has about 170 children, ranging from three-years-old to 18-years-old. The curriculum in HIS is accredited by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) and it is a member of the Japan Council of International Schools, the East Asia Regional Council of Overseas Schools, American Overseas Schools and the Japan-America Society. HIS is registered by the Japanese Ministry of Education under *gakko hojin* status (HIS handbook, 2003).

Some Japanese parents are eager to enter their children into international schools, whereas other parents want their children placed in Japanese schools even though they, the parents, are not Japanese. Some of the reasons for and against entering an international school can be explained by the parents' preference of teaching style. From my experience in working for two different educational settings: 1. HIS for two years and three months as a Japanese teacher sent by the Sapporo Board of Education; and 2. four years as a Japanese English teacher in a Japanese public junior high school, I

believe that both settings could benefit from each others' experience. Accordingly in order to identify specific professional development needs, this paper presents a pilot study based on an open-ended survey with questions that attempt to isolate some similarities and differences between the two types of schools based on feedback from teachers at one international school and two Japanese schools.

## **Method**

Survey items were generated with a special focus on the four main skill areas in language learning. HIS teachers and public Japanese school teachers (from an elementary school and a junior high school) kindly filled out and returned the survey. A total of four elementary teachers completed the survey, a third and a fifth grade teacher from HIS along with two teachers of the same grades in a Japanese school. In the respective schools, two junior high school teachers were also selected to complete the survey: one from HIS, the other from a Japanese school. The complete series of questions and answers is presented in tabular format in the appendix.

## **Results**

### *Reading*

Four out of four elementary school teachers in the international school and Japanese public elementary school place a special emphasis on reading and set aside time for it. In HIS, this period is called D.E.A.R. (drop everything and read) time and offered daily to students. Likewise, in the public Japanese elementary school, although it has no specific name, students have a similar period daily. Teachers in both elementary schools also recommend and encourage students to read at home. A close similarity is found between the ways teachers try to foster critical thinking through reading. The third grade teacher at HIS tries to develop students' reading strategies to enable students to make connections, question the text, visualize, make inferences, synthesize information and

determine the implication of texts. Similarly, the Japanese third grade teacher's strategies focus on students' ability to compare, relate, and visualize texts using the students' own experience and what they have learned at school. Both of the teachers regard reading as being full of crucial educational opportunities to foster the students' independent thinking and develop their ability to solve problems. Meanwhile, at the secondary level, in both the international and the Japanese school, there is no such period as D.E.A.R. time, or any reading time at all.

Both teachers at HIS and the Japanese junior high school supply their students with only the texts to be used in class, the biggest concern being whether students can understand and master what the teacher teaches. Even though the Japanese English teacher mentions that experience is a tool for fostering critical thinking, there is little relationship with students' experiences in the reading material and there is little effort to make it relate to their experiences. In addition, teachers seem not to pay special attention to students' reading habits at home. This acute decrease of reading at the secondary level is a shared phenomenon between H.I.S. and the public Japanese junior high school.

### *Writing*

All of the teachers agree that continual writing practice makes students good writers. The third graders at HIS write freely for 40-60 minutes every day, and the fifth graders write formally every week and informally every day. Like HIS third graders, the third graders in the public Japanese elementary school write essays on every annual event (in fact, they have annual events almost every month,) and twice a trimester for their language arts and Japanese classes, whereas fifth graders write every week.

To increase and strengthen their vocabulary, especially kanji, both the third and fifth grade teachers at the Japanese school give their students daily word quizzes; in contrast, at HIS neither the third grade nor the fifth grade teacher does this. In higher grades, the

rubrics of the writing section of the secondary level show that teachers of both schools, HIS and the Japanese junior high school, give vocabulary tests periodically. Giving tests and quizzes to young students is surely a controversial issue which some adults point out as being a threat for children to produce good test scores under too much pressure. Still it is important for writers to utilize a variety of vocabulary to convey the true meaning of their writing. So teachers at HIS, instead, encourage students to make their vocabulary notebook and personal dictionary. Giving vocabulary quizzes and tests, however, could be one of the ways to help the students check their vocabulary and foster their writing ability. If it contributes to the outstanding result of Japanese students in the 2000 program for International Student Assessment, as mentioned above, teachers at HIS can take time and consider the pros and cons of giving vocabulary quizzes and tests to their students.

At the secondary level, not only vocabulary tests, but also essay writing is an everyday activity at HIS. The Japanese junior high school English teacher assigns compositions instead of essays (writing an essay in English is too difficult for Japanese junior high school students). All of the teachers take time to proofread, give advice, and encourage students to rewrite their work. This is not easy work. However, the fifth grade teacher from the Japanese elementary school says, "I proofread every single draft of my 40 students' work and give them my advice. The continuation of this kind of correspondence fosters the students' writing ability." Meanwhile, teachers at H.I.S. do not have to proofread every draft of the students' work since students know how to hold "peer conferences" and "small group discussions" before they hand in their drafts to their teachers. These "conferences" are not like formal discussions, but they reduce the teachers' toil to correct careless grammatical mistakes and spelling errors. These informal conferences and discussions seemingly have strong positive effects; for instance, they promote the students' speaking ability.

All the teachers at HIS and at the Japanese schools put similar values on writing.

However, the method in which they facilitate the use of writing in the two types of schools varies. One of them is the starting grade of vocabulary testing and the other is having “the peer conferences” in writing class. Specifically, the small group discussion and peer conferences at the international school’s writing class appear to bring significant rewards. Japanese schools may wish to explore the use of such practices given the positive impact they seem to have.

### *Public Speaking*

A teacher at HIS says “I find Japanese students have a hard time expressing and sharing their thinking in class discussions. This may be due to their weak English skills; however, even among those with strong English skills, they still demonstrate difficulty.” As I mentioned above, students at HIS have ample opportunity to hold informal conferences and discussions with their peers. They practice and acquire a knowledge of public speaking in these informal discussions which take place in a relatively relaxed setting, and therefore become confident when speaking in front of the whole class. In the public Japanese elementary school, teachers try to create opportunities for the students to practice public speaking, for example, through presentations and drama/role plays. However, students are not used to such situations, i.e., standing in front of a lot of people (over thirty students), drawing everyone’s attention, and expressing their opinions in a formal manner. There is little wonder that students are frightened and have a negative image of public speaking. Junior high students have fewer chances than elementary school students, especially in the upper grades. In a study that compared high school students’ language ability with their educational background in an international school, Wakabayashi (2002) found that “Japanese oral scores negatively correlated with years of schooling received in Japanese.” She also explains, “while international school students are consistently encouraged to speak up in class, present materials in class, and participate in school-wide and interscholastic speech contests, this is not the case in Japanese schools.” This may serve as an answer to an HIS third grade teacher who wondered why students from Japanese schools have difficulty in

public speaking.

A Japanese fifth grade elementary teacher, however, had another perspective on this issue, "I agree that Japanese people are not good at expressing their opinions in public. I, however, regard this as a virtue of the Japanese people. We always sense others' feelings and appreciate the situations before expressing our opinions. In other words, we are conscious of ourselves as being a member of a whole group or society." This is certainly true in Japan; Japanese also have the proverb "Silence is golden."

Nevertheless, public speaking skills are indispensable in today's society; people cannot understand others if they do not say anything. Accordingly, it appears useful to move towards the approach to public speaking taken by the international school so that students develop the suitable skills, confidence and understanding of speaking in front of others.

#### *Computer Use*

It is essential to cultivate children's ability to use information so as to respond independently to a networked society, and as such, the new Courses of Study aims to further enhance information education. On the basis of the "e-Japan Priority Policy Program Plan," all classrooms today will be using computers and the Internet by 2005. Under the project, there is now a systematic effort to install computers for educational purposes, to build or expand school LANs, to have broadband Internet connections and so on. Simultaneously, efforts are being made to promote teachers' instruction abilities, develop educational content that can be used in classrooms and other learning activities, and enhance the functions of the National Information Center for Education Resources (MEXT, 2004). Computer use at schools in Japan is now in its infancy. MEXT, the board of education and schools are now making every effort to desperately catch up with other developed countries in this field. The results of the survey clearly reflect this situation.

HIS students start using computers in the third grade and master touch-typing before they are in the fourth grade. Using computers is crucial in HIS; if not, they cannot even hand in their essays. According to survey answers, third graders use computers daily and they even learn how to make graphs, while fifth graders use them every other day for word processing and researching. When they are at the secondary level, computer use is more frequent and students are willing to use computers since rewriting and submitting essays with computers are much easier than writing them by hand. At HIS, the computer lab is usually open to students, so they can use the computers as an everyday tool for mailing, chatting, listening to music and so on. Of course, there are some rules of computer use, and if they violate them, they are banned from using computers for a fixed time and are not allowed to use them even in class. Such students have a hard time to work and to keep their friendships with peers. Therefore, it is clear to see that computers are indispensable to at HIS.

In Japanese schools, elementary students can learn and use computers, but only eighteen times in a year for third graders and even less frequently in fifth grade. In junior high school, they rarely use computers except in Technical Arts classes; computer labs are empty in other periods of time. Even though forty computers are allotted per school and the LAN system represents a huge amount of the national budget, it is a total waste of money if the labs are sitting empty. Teachers are groping for methods of computer use at school and are at a loss for their lack of experience; meanwhile, most of their students have computers at home and are familiar with using them. Without doubt, this problem is an area for concern and Japanese teachers should seek an appropriate solution immediately, perhaps by looking at how computer resources are used in the international school.

## **Conclusion**

Although this pilot survey has queried a small number of teachers at an even smaller

number of schools and cannot be generalized to all schools, several of the findings from this study are noteworthy when considering the differences of instruction between HIS and Japanese schools, and specific professional development needs. One aspect of this is the way in which teachers in both schools share similar values with respect to reading and writing. Elementary teachers believe reading enhances students' ability to think and set reading time daily. It is regrettable that there has been a sharp decline in reading at both HIS and the Japanese junior high school.

The other aspect discussed is that both institutions have different circumstances and perspectives toward public speaking and computer use. Scarcity of public speaking, such as informal relaxed peer conferences and discussion, leads students to develop a fear of speaking in front of a large body of people. Even though being silent and *hara-gei* (expressing oneself in nonverbal or physical ways) are virtues in Japan, public speaking skills are essential in today's international society. Needless to say, computer use at school is an urgent issue in Japan, which needs to catch up with other developed countries, including the U.S.

The sample size of the teachers interviewed in this study was limited and of course, the findings do not represent the opinions of all of the international school teachers and Japanese public school teachers. Thus, further research is needed. However, this could be a first step for us to reflect upon our methods of teaching. It is not my intention to decide which system is better or worse. My two-year plus experience at HIS is as valuable and beneficial as my four-year experience in a Japanese public junior high school and without the teachers' support at HIS and the Japanese schools I would not have been able to accomplish this study. I hope that this study will be of use to teachers and students in both educational settings.

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Appendix Answer in the survey

Questions (Reading)	HIS Gr.3	Japanese school Gr.3	HIS Gr.5	Japanese school Gr.5
Class Size (ESL)	13(5)	36	14(2)	36
1. How many books (stories) in a trimester do you read in your class?	7 as group reading 10-20 as read alouds 6-7 D.E.A.R. time	4	2-4 grade leveled. 10-30 lower leveled.	Stories – 5-6 Others – about 15 (Poetry, critical works, scientific works, and so on)
2. How many books in a trimester do you recommend your students to read at home?	10-20 depending on picture book or chapter book (& chap., bk size)	I recommend they do so, but I do not give a number	As many! + 2-3 chapter books appropriate to grade level.	I recommend they do so, but I do not set the number.
3. What do you use to facilitate students' reading habits, and ability?	Class reading log Home reading log Daily homework to read 15-20 min. Read alouds Conferencing D.E.A.R.(Drop Everything & Read) Time-daily Response journal Book talks (students sharing, reporting & recommending books)- 2 students weekly	Creation of: Reading logs Book intro. Cards Giving stickers. Reading time before school starts.	-homework expectation -book projects (monthly) -D.E.A.R. (drop everything and read) daily silent sustained reading	Reading time before school starts.
4. Do you assign book reports/analyses? And how often?	One written book report & oral presentation per trimester On a weekly basis, 2 students are assigned to share a good book (orally). This starts from trimester 2.	Reading diary (reading log)  Book reviews are given as assignments for summer and winter vacation.	Yes, monthly.	Rarely, but a few students write autonomous book reviews and hand in them.
5. What do you think is important to foster students' critical thinking?	Developing reading strategies- making connections, questioning, visualizing, making inferences, synthesizing info, determining imp. of text. Discussion/Debate (learning to support thinking with text) Creative activities	Students have to... -compare -relate -visualize using their own experience and what they learned. For that, the materials (content) should fascinate students.	Critical questioning by teachers, family, peers, and self.	To let them plan their studying. To let them organize their studying. To let them dictate their studying. To let them have responsibility for their studying.  To provide interesting materials for students.

Questions (Listening)	HIS Gr.3	Japanese school Gr.3	HIS Gr.5	Japanese school Gr.5
1. Do you use audio tapes/videos in your class? And how often?	Not usually, mostly for content area like science.	Language Arts – Listening comprehension Social studies and science- Depends on the topics.	Yes. 2-4 times a trimester.	Not all the time. For science and social studies, if needed.
2. If you know good audio tapes/videos, or methods to facilitate students' ability in listening, please give me some examples.	I use reading aloud to encourage listening. Retelling can be used to facilitate listening.	The materials (contents) should be interesting and solicit students' attention, so that they consider the material.  Making poses sometimes and asking students how they feel is another good idea.		Let them take notes when they listen to their peers or teachers.

Questions(Speaking)	HIS Gr.3	Japanese school Gr.3	HIS Gr.5	Japanese school Gr.5
1. What do you use to foster students' ability of speaking?	Presentation Drama/Role play Discussion Debate  Authors' chair-sharing writing "Teaching"-pairs/sm group "teach" a section or problem solving area Reciting poetry Interviewing	Presentation Drama/Role play	Presentation Drama/Role play Discussion Debate	Presentation Drama/Role play Discussion Debate
2. Please give some ideas to foster students' ability in speaking.	NA	Let them have awareness of an audience; to make them try to use their vocabulary, paraphrasing it to express themselves exactly	(Same as writing)	Give them opportunities to speak during class time.

Questions(writing)	HIS Gr.3	Japanese school Gr.3	HIS Gr.5	Japanese school Gr.5
1. What do you do to help students build up their vocabulary?	Word Choice-study in Writing Workshop Vocabulary notebook (own word, not tested) Student/teacher conferencing	Synthesize (integrate) reading, listening, writing and speaking into a single unit.	-dictionary -personal dictionary -applying new vocabulary in writing.	We do not do special things for that.
2. If you give students vocabulary tests, how often do you give them? How many words do you assign a test?	NA	10 questions daily. Choose 10 of them and give them a weekly quiz.	No, I don't.	Kanji test – daily The number of the questions differs according to students' ability (5-20)
3. How many words should students be able to write at the grade you teach?	I don't look at word level. They should be able to write coherent paragraphs-personal narratives, persuasive writing	250 kanji for 1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> graders. +200 for 3 <sup>rd</sup> graders.	.	They have to learn 1006 kanji until graduation from elementary school.
4. How often and on what occasions do you let students write essays?	Elem. Level-Writing workshop 40-60min. free writing daily.	Curriculum determined 6 times a year, I add some for annual events. (e.g. sporting day, study fair, etc)	Informal writing – everyday.  Formal writing – almost every week	Every week.
5. Please give some ideas to foster students' ability in writing.	Important to allow/encourage own choice writing, Students given three teacher/student. Conferencing, peer conferencing & mini-lessons focused on an area of need. Write for real audience (ex. School newspaper) Quick writes	1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> graders- Let them focus on the person they want to write to. 3 <sup>rd</sup> and 4 <sup>th</sup> graders- Let them be aware of the paragraph order. (e.g. intro, body, ending) 5 <sup>th</sup> and 6 <sup>th</sup> graders- Let them express and assert their opinions systematically.	① Writing for variety of purposes . ② Write everyday .	I proofread their drafts and give them advice. To continue is kind of correspondence with their teachers fosters their writing ability.

Questions(Others)	HIS Gr.3	Japanese school Gr.3	HIS Gr.5	Japanese school Gr.5
1. How often do you give your students homework assignments?	4 days a week Mon. – Thurs.	Every day 30-minute-last homework	Every day	Every day (durable for 30 min.) Every weekend – a task sheet
2. How often do you let students use computers?	Daily Typing practice Own writing As needed Graphing As needed for research Internet/Twice a month to do our world communication project	6 times in a trimester; 18 times a year. For internet, drawing, and word proc.	Every other day – mostly for word proc. or typing or researching.	When needed. Internet, a word proc. We have a curriculum for typing.
3. How often do you let students do individual and cooperative learning?	Almost daily in one subject or another. Some are short experience, others longer and more complicated.	Sometimes mostly for math, social studies, and science.	Everyday	Often for social studies and science. They sometimes conduct small projects.
4. Do you use ideas from teaching plans on web sites?	Sometimes for holiday ideas. I have also gotten a few moth ideas at different times.	NA	No	Not really.

Questions (Reading)	HIS 7, 8, 9 grade History, Literature, Writing	Japanese junior high school Gr.7, 8, 9 English
Class Size (ESL)	24 (7)	40 for each class
1. How many books (stories) in a trimester do you read in your class?	1 novel, several short stories	2-3 short stories
2. How many books in a trimester do you recommend your students to read at home?	None	Once in a trimester is ideal, but... not realistic.
3. What do you use to facilitate students' reading habits, and ability?	Activities to break down reading into manageable parts	Nothing especially

4. Do you assign book reports/analyses? And how often?	With all reading students must do some type of analysis either questions, essays, or projects	None.
5. What do you think is important to foster students' critical thinking?	First to insure understanding of material. Second any activity where they must teach or present in their own words shows mastering and understanding	To experience many things by themselves. Sometimes they learn a lot through their failures.

Questions(Listening)	HIS 7, 8, 9 grade History, Literature, Writing	Japanese junior high school Gr.7, 8, 9 English
1. Do you use audio tapes/videos in your class? And how often?	Yes, rarely. I use them as a fun enhancement to content.	Yes, once a trimester, when students' morale is down.
2. If you know good audio tapes/videos, or methods to facilitate students' ability in listening, please give me some examples.	I use them to take notes while listening to me and to each other.	NA

Questions(Speaking)	HIS 7, 8, 9 grade History, Literature, Writing	Japanese junior high school Gr.7, 8, 9 English
1. What do you use to foster students' ability of speaking?	Presentation Discussion  Lots of mini presentations – almost every day – also reading out loud, reading answers.	Presentation (Once or twice a year)  Small presentations: Show and Tell, Experience of school breaks and so on.
2. Please give some ideas to foster students' ability in speaking.	If I give nervous students some advance notice that they will be called, this helps them answer better.	Listen to the same material many times.

Questions(writing)	HIS 7, 8, 9 grade History, Literature, Writing	Japanese junior high school Gr.7, 8, 9 English
1. What do you do to help students build up their vocabulary?	We discuss any words they don't know while reading and certain words they are required to memorize for quizzes.	When I teach new words, I relate them with other words which are common among students and also introduce synonyms and antonyms.
2. If you give students vocabulary tests, how often do you give them? How many words do you assign a test?	Less than 10 words per test every 2-3 weeks.	20-30 words for a unit.
3. How many words should students be able to write at the grade you teach?	NA (I don't understand this question.)	NA
4. How often and on what occasions do you let students write essays?	Very often – we do many rewrites after peer editing...	Writing essays is too difficult for students, so I sometimes assign composition in class.
5. Please give some ideas to foster students' ability in writing.	Constant rewrites and samples of correct writing to embed the right forms in their heads!	To give as many opportunities to write in English as possible.

Questions(Others)	HIS 7, 8, 9 grade History, Literature, Writing	Japanese junior high school Gr.7, 8, 9 English
1. How often do you give your students homework assignments?	2-3 times a week	I rarely assign homework, however, students may bring some work that may have not been completed within class time.
2. How often do you let students use computers?	At least once a week for rewrite of essays or sometimes to check at websites	I have not tried yet, maybe this year...
3. How often do you let students do individual and cooperative learning?	Every day – I find this works better – especially with ESL students.	(Group Work) About once a month, when the material is appropriate for group work.  (Individual Work) When there is some class time left-over.
4. Do you use ideas from teaching plans on web sites?	Yes – NY times learning network is my favorite. www.nytimes.com	NA