

5 - A Three-Year Comparative Study on Anxiety Related to Teaching English Among Pre-Service Elementary School Teachers in Japan

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Abstract

This three-year study investigated whether anxiety associated with teaching English is a phenomenon unique to Japanese university students enrolled in training programs for elementary education. Watanabe and Ohba (2022) found that Japanese university students enrolled in an elementary teacher training program experienced significant anxiety regarding the use of English in classrooms, autonomous teaching, and assessment. To determine if these findings were unique to the students included in the study, a survey was conducted with students taking the same course over the next two years. In 2023, student concerns included their “own English proficiency,” “teaching methods using information and communication technology (ICT) equipment.” In 2024, student concerns included the design and implementation of classes that encourage elementary students to use English in class activities; the implementation of activities that highlight differences in English pronunciation. The results were analyzed and compared with the concerns of in-service teachers. The study revealed that pre-class anxiety among students related to teaching English in elementary schools significantly declined from 2021 to 2024, but the post-class anxiety remained largely unchanged. This finding aligns with the idea that students now have greater access to information regarding teacher education in Japan and may be less anxious about their chosen career path. The study also revealed similar trends in instructors’ English proficiency and their concerns about teaching English classes and instruction. Many teachers in Japan report a lack of time for focusing on their English instruction, which suggests that instructors should focus on improving students’ English instruction while they are in college.

Keywords: anxiety, English language teaching, teacher training, elementary education, self-evaluation

1. Introduction

In Japan, English courses for elementary school students were fully implemented in 2020. Foreign language activities begin in grades 3–4 and foreign language becomes a separate subject in grades 5–6. Grades 3–4 focus on the three areas of “listening,” “speaking [exchange],” and “speaking [presentation],” and the two areas of “reading” and “writing” are added in the senior high school grades. The new curriculum requires teachers to have greater skill in both the English language and teaching, as well as greater skill for teaching English at the elementary level. Therefore, students who aspire to become elementary school teachers must steadily acquire skills not only in the basic English language but also in teaching, as well as the ability to conduct language-focused activities. Therefore, it is essential for future curriculum reviews to examine how student anxiety about teaching English in elementary school is impacted by taking university teacher training courses.

The purpose of this study was to clarify how anxiety about acquiring the knowledge and skills to teach English changed over three years (2021, 2023, and 2024) among students in a training course for elementary teachers. Participants in the course were third-year university students in the required

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training course, “Methods of Teaching English at Elementary School,” which utilized unique content and methods of instruction. The following two research questions were posed:

- (1) Over a three-year period, is there a significant change in the anxiety among university students related to the knowledge and skills necessary for teaching English in elementary schools?
- (2) Are there differences between the concerns of university students learning teaching methods for English instruction in elementary schools and those of pre-service teachers?

2. Overview of Previous Studies

Two previous studies used the Japanese Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages (J-POSTL) Elementary to measure students’ growth after taking a class on elementary school teaching methods. The J-POSTL (JACET SIG on English Language Education, 2021) Elementary is a tool for self-evaluation that allows pre-service elementary school students receiving training in elementary school teaching methods to reflect on their English-language competencies and teaching abilities. In the first study, Kashimoto (2019) examined 94 self-evaluation statements within seven areas (educational environment, teaching methods, sources of teaching materials, lesson planning, lesson practice, independent learning, and evaluation) of the J-POSTL Elementary. Participants were 14 second-year university students majoring in English education who were taking the course entitled “Research on Elementary School English Teaching.” The class content was “Let’s Try!” and “We Can!” songs, chants, picture books, and related material, as well as research on teaching materials; background knowledge for developing teaching materials; and teaching practice in mock classes. The mean scores for many survey items increased from the beginning to the end of the class, suggesting that students’ self-assessment of their teaching ability had increased.

In the second study, Yoneda (2021) used the J-POSTL Elementary to evaluate the growth experienced by 12 students enrolled in a teaching course for 1.5 years. The 150 most frequently occurring words and co-occurrence network indicated that students’ reflections focused on teaching practices. In addition, the use of portfolios was positively related to growth. Similarly, students’ knowledge of teaching skills and instructional methods increased based on in-class discussions, and they gained awareness of the importance of educational practice and learning support for improving their teaching skills.

Shirado (2021) provided 15 lessons from “Elementary English Language Teaching Methods” to 140 second-year students and investigated their self-evaluation of knowledge, skills, and English operational ability. Positive evaluations were responses of “able” or “somewhat able.” The item with the lowest mean self-evaluation at the beginning of the class was “I can prepare lesson plans” (M=1.31), to which 0% of the students responded affirmatively. The item with the next lowest mean was “I understand the main ideas, structure, and characteristics of the main teaching materials” (M=1.52), to which 3.6% of the students responded affirmatively. Regarding English skills, self-evaluations of listening and reading skills were high, whereas self-evaluations of speaking skills were low. In particular, the percentage of reading skill evaluations that were positive was greater than 50% at the CEFR B1 level. In contrast, 16.7% of the students gave a positive self-evaluation of their speaking ability at the CEFR B1 level.

In summary, this overview of previous research suggests that students were anxious about their English-speaking ability and lesson planning before taking classes on methods for teaching English in elementary school such as “Methods of Teaching English at Elementary Schools.” However, the students realized after the class that their knowledge of teaching methods had expanded. Specifically, students had increased their knowledge of teaching techniques and lesson design for English instruction in elementary schools from in-class discussions. They had also learned that mock-class experience and teaching practice are important for their own development as teachers.

Pre-service teachers also demonstrated concerns about teaching English in elementary schools. The following studies included descriptions of specialized teachers; however, we omit them in this paper and refer only to descriptions of homeroom teachers and others. Oikawa (2017) investigated the relationship between teachers’ background factors and their level of anxiety about teaching English using a questionnaire administered to 45 elementary school teachers. The results indicated that elementary teachers had the highest levels of anxiety regarding English proficiency. However,

the level of anxiety decreased with years of teaching experience for both English activities and English class preparation and implementation. Furthermore, the level of anxiety was highest for teachers with fewer years of English teaching experience and those who had not obtained a junior high school teacher's license in a foreign language.

Tateno and Ohba (2022) interviewed five elementary school teachers to examine their levels of anxiety related to foreign languages. Classroom teachers were most anxious about how to deal with children who needed special support. Furthermore, they mentioned that they had little time to spend on English classes or evaluations. Ohba (2022) conducted a survey on the attitudes of foreign language teachers toward foreign language instruction in elementary school using the J-POSTL questionnaire and freewriting. The items were scored on a 5-point scale. In the quantitative survey, the two items with the lowest average scores were "Child Autonomy" (M=2.87) and "Grammar" (M=2.90). The next lowest scores were for "Language in the Classroom" (M=3.06), "Writing Activities" (M=3.10) and "Assessment" (M=3.13). From the qualitative survey, the categories identified were "Instructor's English Proficiency," "Classroom," "Instructional Methods," "Listening and Speaking," "Assessment," and "Japanese Translation."

3. Method

3.1 Survey Participants

The survey participants were third-year students (80 students in 2021, 36 students in 2023, and 137 students in 2024) who took the course "Teaching English in Elementary School" taught by the authors at University A. None of the students had previously received any specialized instruction for teaching English in elementary schools. The participants had one week of observed practice providing elementary education during the seventh week of the 15-week course, and a three-week elementary teaching practicum after the course. Overall, the students had a relatively high level of awareness about the teaching methods of each subject. In addition, students gave their consent for participation in this study after being informed that the data from this survey would be presented in aggregate without individual names at academic conferences or in articles.

3.2 Lesson Content

Table 1 shows the topics for sessions 1–11 and the mock classes for sessions 12–15, which were nearly identical all three years. The first 11 sessions focus on basic knowledge for teaching English in elementary schools using materials prepared by the authors and others. The contents focused on the following aspects of elementary school foreign language activities and courses: (1) their current status, (2) the university's course of study, (3) classroom design, (4) their assessment, (5) information and communication technology (ICT), (6) cooperative learning, (7) facilitation, and (8) classroom practice in grades 3 through 6.

3.3 Survey Items

A total of 63 items within 24 categories, including those related to the teaching of the four skills, were selected from the "Portfolio of Elementary School English Teachers" (JACET SIG on English Language Education, 2021) as survey items for the self-evaluation questionnaire (see Appendix).

3.4 Data Collection and Analytic Methods

Questionnaires for self-assessment were administered in the first class in early April 2021, 2023, and 2024 and in the last class in late July 2021, 2023, and 2024. The respondents were asked to answer each item using a 5-point scale from "yes" to "no." The response time was approximately 10 minutes. For each category, we calculated the mean value at the beginning and end of the class. A *t*-test was used to analyze the differences in the pre- and post-class means for all categories.



4. Results and Discussion

Table 2 shows the confidence levels of the surveyed students within the 24 categories of elementary English language instruction at the beginning and end of 2021, 2023, and 2024. The pre- and post-class results were compared by category and year using a t-test for the means. A significant increase was found in all categories at the $p < .01$ level.

In 2021, all category means were less than 2.40, with a grand mean of 2.00 at the beginning of the class. A total of 13 categories had mean values below 2.00, indicating that survey participants were particularly anxious about these categories. However, the mean value for all categories rose to 3.87 by the end of the class, suggesting that students' confidence levels significantly improved.

In 2023, all category means were less than 2.99, with a grand mean of 2.50 at the beginning of the class. A total of 12 categories had mean values below 2.50, indicating similar initial anxiety levels among survey respondents. By the end of the class, the mean value for all categories had increased to 4.17, reflecting enhanced confidence throughout the course.

In 2024, all category means were less than 3.34, with a grand mean of 2.96 at the beginning of the class. A total of 15 categories had mean values below 3.00, suggesting notable anxiety levels at the outset. By the end of the class, the mean values for all categories had increased to 3.75 or higher. These results show that confidence levels rose consistently across all categories during the course.

The grand mean for the categories at the beginning of the class increased across the three years, from 2.00 in 2021 to 2.96 in 2024, an improvement of approximately 1.00. In contrast, the post-class grand means increased only slightly, from 3.87 in 2021 to 4.03 in 2024. This finding highlights the significance of the changes in pre-class mean values. When foreign language activities and foreign language as a subject were first introduced in elementary schools in 2021, students had limited access to relevant information. This lack of clarity contributed to their initial anxiety about teaching programs in Japan. Four years later, students had ready access to information on elementary school English language instruction via the Internet, which likely explains the nearly 1-point improvement in the pre-class grand means.

Next, an analysis was conducted to identify the categories associated with the course content, as described in Table 1, and the growth in these categories from pre- to post-class. Items with only one component question—"1 Curriculum," "7 Listening Activities," "9 Grammar," "17 Content," "18 Interaction with Children," "21 Children's Autonomy," "23 International Understanding (Culture)," and "24 Analysis of Error Responses"—were excluded from this analysis. The following four categories may have been influenced by the small talk conducted as a group activity at the beginning of each class: "3 Role of the Language Teacher," "4 Talking Activity [Exchange]," "5 Talking Activity [Presentation]," and "20 Language in the Classroom."

For Categories 3, 4, and 5, the average growth rates for 2021, 2023, and 2024 were 1.81, 1.50, and 1.07, respectively, which were slightly lower than or equal to the overall average growth rates across all 24 categories of 1.87, 1.67, and 1.07, respectively. From the instructor's perspective, small talk activities likely raised students' awareness and facilitated reflection and feedback by encouraging them to think of "questions" related to classroom interactions.

The category "20 Language in the Classroom" consisted of three questions: Q56 "Can teach English subject matter and methods of learning in English using visual clues, gestures, demonstrations, etc.," Q57 "Can develop lessons using English, but can effectively use Japanese when necessary," and Q58 "Can design class activities so that students will want to use English." The average growth rates for this category in 2021, 2023, and 2024 were 2.00, 1.80, and 1.17, respectively, which are higher than the overall average growth rates of 1.87, 1.67, and 1.07, respectively. These items likely reflect the development of English language skills through the small talk conducted in class.

Table 1 - Contents of the "Teaching English in Elementary School" course for sessions 1 to 15

Sessions 1 to 11	Content	Faculty Engagement	Student Activities
Before Class	Preliminary Preparations	Distribute the materials to the students via Google Classroom. Ask students to think of a “question.”	Students will read the material and think of a “question” that will be discussed among students.
During Class	Goal Setting	Hand out the reflection sheet and instruct the students to set the goals of the class.	Students set their own achievement goals for the class and complete the reflection sheet.
	Small Talk	Give instructions for paired small talk. Present the topic of the talk.	In pairs, participants have a conversation about the theme presented: (1) 2-minute talk in Japanese, (2) 2-minute talk in English on the same topic in a different pair.
	Explanation	Provide brief explanations of the study contents.	Students listen to the explanations and check that they understand their meaning.
	Discussion	In four-person groups, the instructors directed a discussion on the content of the study based on the “question.” Desk-to-desk guidance was provided and questions from students were addressed.	Based on each student’s “question,” students deepen their thinking by exchanging opinions with each other.
	Reflection	The instructors ask each participant to fill in his/her own reflection sheet, comparing it with the goals described on the reflection sheet.	Students write down what they noticed, felt, learned, etc., through the discussions on the reflection sheet.

Table 2 - Pre- and post-class changes in the self-assessment of 24 categories from the “Portfolio of Elementary School English Teachers” (JACET Kyoiku Mondai Kenkyukai, 2021) in 2021, 2023 and 2024.

Category	2021 Pre	2021 Post	2021 Growth	2023 Pre	2023 Post	2023 Growth	2024 Pre	2024 Post	2024 Growth
1. Educational Goals	2.25	4.04	1.79	2.94	4.50	1.54	3.26	4.23	0.97
2. Goals and Needs	2.29	4.04	1.79	2.99	4.38	1.38	3.34	4.28	0.94
3. Role of the Language Teacher	2.32	4.15	1.82	2.99	4.37	1.38	3.19	4.27	1.08
4. Speaking Activities (Interaction)	2.30	4.03	1.73	2.75	4.32	1.57	3.13	4.22	1.09
5. Speaking (Presentation)	2.07	3.94	1.87	2.53	4.08	1.55	2.99	4.04	1.05
6. Writing	1.98	3.75	1.77	2.29	3.93	1.64	2.74	3.89	1.15
7. Listening Activities	1.99	3.63	1.64	2.28	3.95	1.67	2.73	3.84	1.11
8. Reading Activities	2.01	3.65	1.64	2.53	3.86	1.33	2.95	3.84	0.89
9. Grammar	1.79	3.55	1.76	2.22	3.98	1.76	2.70	3.82	1.12
10. Vocabulary	1.99	3.85	1.86	2.32	4.28	1.96	2.78	4.02	1.24
11. Culture	2.08	3.79	1.71	2.54	4.31	1.76	3.16	4.03	0.87
12. Teaching Resources	1.91	3.87	1.96	2.21	4.00	1.79	2.71	3.94	1.23
13. Setting Classroom Objectives	1.90	3.94	2.04	2.44	4.16	1.72	2.95	4.06	1.11
14. Content	2.14	4.00	1.86	2.67	4.40	1.73	3.16	4.15	0.99
15. Lesson Development	2.10	4.13	2.03	2.69	4.39	1.70	3.18	4.21	1.03

Students were instructed to read the self-made materials distributed to them via Google Classroom and to think of “questions.” This instruction highlights six categories: “12 Teaching Materials,” “13 Setting Class Objectives,” “14 Class Content,” “15 Class Development,” “16 Using Class Proposals,” and “19 Class Management.” For these six categories, we believe that students were able to enhance their knowledge and skills and deepen their thinking by reading materials before class, generating questions, providing explanations in class, and discussing them with classmates. The mean growth rates for 2021, 2023, and 2024 were 1.97, 1.69, and 1.08, respectively, which were slightly higher than the overall mean growth rates of 1.87, 1.67, and 1.07, respectively.



As previously discussed, Oikawa (2017) reported that the level of anxiety for elementary school teachers was highest with respect to English proficiency. Similarly, the results of Ohba's (2022) survey using the J-POSTL showed that "language in the classroom" ($M=3.06$) was the third most significant concern. From the qualitative survey, "instructors' English proficiency," "classes," and "teaching methods" were extracted as the top categories. Together with the results from the current study, these findings suggest that even after becoming in-service teachers, the English proficiency of elementary school teachers and teaching matters remain top concerns among elementary teachers.

Despite their concern regarding English language proficiency, many elementary school teachers lack the time to spend on improving their English teaching. Tateno and Ohba (2022) found that classroom teachers were concerned about dealing with children with special needs; consequently, they had little time to spend on English teaching and evaluation. As noted by Oikawa (2017), although the level of anxiety about English activities and the level of anxiety related to English class preparation and implementation may decrease with years of teaching experience, the level of anxiety was higher for teachers with fewer years of English teaching experience and those had not obtained a junior high school teaching certificate for a foreign language. The results of the Aeon (2019) survey indicate that once they become in-service teachers, teachers lack sufficient time for self-study to improve their English skills: 89% of respondents reported having less than one hour per day, and even per week, 43% reported having 1-3 hours per week, while 14% reported having 4 hours or more per week. These findings highlight the busyness of Japan's educational system and the difficulty of continuing training after entering the teaching profession. If this is the case, it is necessary to improve English language and teaching skills while teachers are in college.

5. Conclusion

Regarding research question (1), the results of the three-year comparison showed that the average growth in four categories—"3 Role of the language teacher," "4 Speaking activity [exchange]," "5 Speaking activity [presentation]," and "20 Language in the classroom"—may have been affected by the small talk activity conducted at the beginning of each class as a group activity. This conclusion was based on the greater than average growth reported in all four categories for the students taking the elementary English teaching method course. Students were also instructed to read the self-made materials distributed to them via Google Classroom and to think of "questions" for the class; therefore, the average growth rate in 6 categories—"12 Teaching materials," "13 Setting class objectives," "14 Class content," "15 Class development," "16 Use of lesson plans," and "19 Class management"—was slightly higher than the overall average growth rate in each of the three years.

Regarding research question (2), whether there are distinctive differences between the concerns of university students and in-service teachers, it was found that there are similar trends in instructors' English proficiency and their concerns about teaching English classes and instruction. Once a teacher enters the field of education, there is insufficient time for self-improvement. Therefore, it is necessary for students to improve their English language and teaching skills in the required course "Teaching English in Elementary Schools" during their school years. Based on the current results, future improvements are warranted in class content.

Finally, the limitations of this paper are presented. Although the paper was able to quantitatively show university students' anxiety about teaching elementary school English, it was not able to look at it qualitatively. Future research should investigate this issue qualitatively and compare it to the concerns held by in-service teachers.

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Appendix

Material: Questionnaires on teaching English in elementary schools (Excerpts from “Portfolio of Elementary School English Teachers (J-POSTL Elementary)”)

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1 Curriculum | Q1. Understand the contents described in the Courses of Study. |
| 2. Goals and Needs | Q2. Consider children’s motivations for learning English.
Q3. Can consider the intellectual interests of the child.
Q4. Understand the significance of learning English.
Q5. Can consider achievement goals based on learning guidelines and children’s needs. |
| 3. Role of the Language Teacher | Q6. The plan-do-check-reflect procedure allows me to recognize issues related to the students and the class.
Q7. Can critically assess my teaching based on student feedback and learning outcomes, and change it to fit the situation.
Q8. Can accept feedback from peers and class observers and reflect it in his/her teaching.
Q9. Can gather information related to teaching and learning.
Q10. Am able to observe colleagues’ classes and provide constructive feedback on points for improvement. |
| 4. Speaking Activities/Interaction | Q11. Can create a cooperative atmosphere and set up specific language use situations in order to actively involve children in speaking activities.
Q12. Can set up activities to exchange greetings with acquaintances and new acquaintances, to give directions and requests to others, and to accept or refuse them.
Q13. Can set up activities to develop the ability to communicate their feelings and opinions about familiar and simple matters related to daily life.
Q14. Can create activities to develop the ability to answer questions about themselves and to ask about others in short exchanges.
Q15. Can set up activities to develop the ability to communicate with others through effective use of non-verbal communication such as facial expressions, gestures, and gestures.
Q16. Can set up activities to develop the ability to confirm what the other person says and to listen back to what the other person says. |
| 5. Speaking Activities/Presentations | Q17. Can set up activities to develop the ability to organize what they want to tell listeners about their likes/dislikes, hobbies, strengths, etc., and then introduce them using basic words, phrases, and expressions.
Q18. Can set up activities to develop the ability to talk about things around them and their daily lives using basic words and expressions.
Q19. Can create activities to develop the ability to use basic words and expressions to talk about their own feelings and thoughts about their community, school life, friends and acquaintances, etc.
Q20. Can set up a variety of activities to make students aware of differences in intensity, rhythm, intonation, etc. |
| 6. Writing Activities | Q21. Can set up a variety of activities to motivate students to transcribe and write letters, words, phrases, and expressions.
Q22. Can provide a variety of activities to encourage students to transcribe and write familiar English words and phrases. |
| 7. Listening Activities | Q23. Before children listen to English, I can teach them to use their experience and relevant knowledge of the topic of the material to predict the content. |
| 8. Reading Activities | Q24. In reading picture books and other reading activities (activities accompanied by audio and using English picture books), can set up activities that will interest children in the content and characters.
Q25. Can set up activities to develop the ability to identify letters of the alphabet and pronounce their readings appropriately. |



9. Grammar	Q26. Can recognize that grammar supports communication, and I am able to present situations in which grammar is used and relate them to language activities to make children aware of them.
10. Vocabulary	Q27. Can set up language activities that enable the use of familiar vocabulary in context. Q28. Can give examples of vocabulary to enable children to express themselves appropriately.
11. Culture	Q29. Create activities that stimulate interest in their own culture and other cultures through the study of English.
12. Teaching Materials	Q30. Can set up activities that encourage and deepen children's cultural awareness. Q31. Can select materials appropriate for children's age, interests, and English ability. Q32. Can select appropriate expressions and language activities from textbooks and other materials appropriate to the student's English ability. Q33. Can select materials from non-textbook sources (picture books, encyclopedias, illustrated books, works of literature, newspapers, websites, etc.) that meet the needs of the students. Q34. Can design appropriate teaching materials and activities for individual students. Q35. Can devise appropriate ICT materials and activities for children.
13. Setting of Class Objectives	Q36. Can set learning objectives in line with the contents of the Courses of Study, taking into consideration children's needs, interests, and concerns. Q37. Can set learning objectives for each unit and class in line with the annual teaching plan. Q38. Can set goals to motivate students Q39. Can devise objectives that enable students to reflect on their own learning.
14. Class Content	Q40. Can set up activities that motivate pupils and arouse their interest and curiosity. Q41. Can set up activities that make use of pupils' knowledge they have learned so far. Q42. Can reflect pupils' reactions and opinions in class.
15. Class Development	Q43. Can select a classroom format (simultaneous, individual, pair, group) and design a class in accordance with learning objectives. Q44. Can plan activities that encourage pupils to interact with each other. Q45. Can plan activities that encourage pupils to give presentations. Q46. Can design lessons that take into consideration the situations, methods, and timing of English use.
16. Use of Lesson Plans	Q47. Can start a lesson in a way that captures the pupils' interest and attention. Q48. Can flexibly adjust the form of learning according to the situation, such as individual, pair, group, and whole class activities. Q49. Can conduct lessons flexibly based on lesson plans, and to respond to pupils' interests as the lesson progresses. Q50. Can allocate appropriate time and types of class activities, taking into consideration the pupils' ability to concentrate.
17. Contents	Q51. Can relate the content of the lesson to the experiences, knowledge, familiar events, culture, etc. that the pupils have.
18. Interaction with Pupils	Q52. Can support the child-centered activities and interactions among pupils.
19. Class Management	Q53. Can devise forms of activities such as individual study, pair activities, group activities, whole class, etc. Q54. Can prepare flashcards, charts, pictures, etc., and to use audiovisual aids. Q55. Can make effective use of educational equipment such as ICT.
20. Language in the Classroom	Q56. Can teach content and methods of learning English subject matter in English using visual clues, gestures, demonstrations, etc. Q57. Can effectively use Japanese when necessary, while using English in the classroom. Q58. Can design and teach in a way that encourages pupils to use English in class activities.
21. Autonomy of Pupils	Q59. Can set up a variety of activities that help the pupils to reflect on their own knowledge and abilities.
22. Assessment	Q60. Can devise in-class activities that allow for observation and assessment of children's participation and activities in class. Q61. Can assess grades in a reliable and transparent manner.
23. International Understanding (Culture)	Q62. Can assess the child's motivation, interest, and attitude regarding different cultures
24. Error Analysis	Q63. Can analyze the pupil's errors and provide appropriate feedback.