Needs Analyses in the Japanese EFL Classroom: A Study of Teacher Content Control

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Needs analyses seek to determine objective needs, subjective wants, obstacles to learning, and other information that is crucial to learner-centered approaches. In Japan, however, they are underutilized. The author maintains the benefits of utilizing needs analyses would include greater interaction between institutions, teachers, and learners; increased program reliability; more effectual teaching; and greater success in learning. The author discusses the what, why, and how behind needs analyses then introduces a survey of 85 university EFL teachers in Japan regarding their self-reported use of needs analyses and perception of whether they can alter course content at the classroom level. The data indicate that only 9% of teachers consistently used a formal pre-course needs assessment tool for "every" class while only another 25% used them for "most" classes. However, many made informal mid-course observations feeling relatively free to adjust course content. Teachers reported "knowing" the needs of their students, which might have accounted for mid-course adjustments to course content without the empirical data of a formal needs analysis.

ニーズの分析は学生達が本当は何を学ぶべきなのか、何が学びたいのか、また学生を学びから遠ざける要因とは何か、そして「学習者中心」の教育に必要な情報とは何かという問題を明らかにすることを目的としている。しかし、日本ではこの作業が十分に行われてい

ない。著者はさらなるニーズの分析によって、組織と教師、学習者間のよりよいコミュニケーションや、学習計画の信頼性、より効果的な教授法、また学習上での大きな進歩を得られると述べている。はじめに、著者はニーズの分析の重要性に言及する上で、日本の英語教育に携わる教師８５人に対して行われた調査を取り上げている。この調査は彼ら教師がどれほどニーズの分析を行っているか、また学習者の到達レベルに応じて講義の内容を変えることは可能だと思うかどうかを尋ねたものである。調査結果から、「全て」の授業について授業前に正式なニーズ分析を行ったのは9％のみ、「ほとんど」の授業についてニーズ分析行ったのは25％のみということが明らかになった。しかし、多くの教師は講義を進めていく中で、必要に応じて非公式に授業計画の改変を行うことに抵抗を感じていない。しかも調査に参加した教師達は、自分たちは生徒のニーズを「把握している」のだと報告した。これは教師が正式なデータなしに学習計画や内容を修正している証である。

Curriculum design process, according to Richards (1984), has five basic steps. Starting with a needs analysis from which goals are set, a syllabus is designed, teaching is conducted, and learning is evaluated. Stenhouse (1975) argued that teachers are the principle agents in this process and that effective curricula and effective teaching are interrelated. Vella (1994), however, complained of a separation of teachers from the materials-development stages of this process. In Japan this separation is aggravated, as Hadley (1999) suggested, by an overreliance on part-time teachers at the university level that Venema (2008) argued leaves little opportunity for dialogue between the administrators who set the curricula and teachers who know the learners better.

While university English classes in Japan have a fairly homogenous profile regarding age and previous English-educational experience, each learner brings with him or her a unique mix of learning styles, inhibitions, attitudes, proficiencies, and deficiencies. Except for a small number of students admitted through a recommendation process, it can be assumed that most others have had the government-

mandated six years of English education and have mastered a certain level of proficiency in order to have passed their university entrance examination. Placement testing may further group students into relatively similar proficiency levels. Such a seemingly uniform student body may lull curriculum designers into a false understanding of learner needs. Indeed, Brindley (1984) reported a widespread mismatch of teacher-student learning expectations, specifically views on what language is, how it is best learned, and what learners need versus what they may prefer. Utilizing needs analyses would relieve this disparity. Richards (1985) and Nunan (1985) recommend needs analysis as an essential element of curriculum design, yet Burden (2005) stated that in Japanese universities "learners are rarely asked in any overt systematic way about their learning experiences" (p. 3).

Needs analyses can serve a number of functions and influence all design components at all stages of curriculum development. The empirical data gathered enables goals to be identified rather than assumed. In turn, course content selection can be simplified, teaching methodology can be improved, and data on which to base evaluations can be provided. Institutions can become more accurate in their perceptions about the population they serve and thereby more accountable. Teachers can become more attuned to students' needs and therefore become potentially more effective in the classroom. Finally, students can become active participants in their own learning, thereby possibly increasing motivation. With all its potential benefits, English program curriculum designers in Japanese universities may want to reconsider their use of needs analyses and employ them to a greater degree.

Definition of Needs Analysis

Needs analysis (NA), also termed needs assessment, is the process of determining and prioritizing the needs for an individual or a set of learners. NAs come in a variety of forms including interviews, questionnaires, can-do checklists, or journalistic entries. Practically, more time and effort are required to become proficient in a foreign language than can be afforded in any individual college class. This is exacerbated in Japan by the limited number of class hours allowed for English study (Hato, 2005). NAs aim to answer the question, formed by Vella (1984) as, "who needs what defined by whom" (p.48). The resulting data can then be used by teachers and coordinators to design a syllabus or curriculum and to establish criteria to test the effectiveness of a course later in the curriculum development process.

Maslow (1943), a pioneer of needs theory, initially proposed a five-tiered needs hierarchy to show that the fulfillment of human potential is not mechanical, but instead that it is based on interdependent motivators such as safety, belonging, and esteem. Modern needs theory presents another aspect to the equation, that of satisfiers, and looks to how needs are satisfied, the degree of satisfaction perceived in relation to the fulfillment, and the repercussions of needs not getting met (Max-Neef, 1992; Douglas, Gasper, Ney, & Thompson, 1998). The satisfiers are the ways of doing, being, having, or interacting that actualize the satisfaction of the need(s). In this framework, motivation is created by the potential for satisfying an individual's needs. Oxford and Shearin (1994) contend learning is directly connected to motivation, and only by understanding the attitudes, goals, and beliefs of students can educators understand what motivates learners. The competency-based linguistic assessments commonly used in Japan, written in-house or by a testing service like the ETS TOEIC© or Cambridge English KET or PET tests, may be useful for student placement, but learners have additional non-linguistic needs that necessitate scrutiny in order to optimize their learning.

Researchers have advanced several types of NAs which give insight into how to approach or understand various student needs. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) distinguished between target needs, which comprise learner's necessities, wants, and deficiencies, and learning needs, which consist of how learners fulfill those needs. In describing objective and subjective NAs, Richterich (1972) claimed that objective needs can be identified by examining the target language and the situational uses the learner may encounter, whereas subjective needs can be identified purely by the learner and may include priorities seemingly unrelated to study such as social, cultural, or domestic obligations. Sysoyev (2000) promoted a learner-centered instrument, known as the student analysis, intended to gather psychosocial information about the learner such as preferred learning style or motivation. Teachers and institutions cannot effectively teach without addressing this surfeit of need from which the motivation to learn can be understood.

Needs analysis research is found mainly in the fields of English for Special Purposes (ESP) and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) with little consideration given to General English (GE). Hamp-Lyons (2001) explains this limitation is because ESP and EAP are generally assumed to begin with a learner's particular situation, whereas GE begins with the language as a whole. However, Hutchinson and Waters (1987) question the difference between ESP and GE in regards to NA. They take issue with the common argument that GE learner needs are too broad to specify. They further argue that the distinction between ESP and GE "is not the existence of a need but rather an awareness of the need" (p. 53). Therefore, even in a GE class, a study of learners' beliefs is vital to inform curriculum policy, heighten teaching effectiveness, motivate learning, and aid in program evaluation in order to improve future courses.

The Purpose of Needs Analyses at Program, Teacher, and Student Levels

Richards (1984) pointed out curriculum design methodology in language teaching did not have a reputation for being systematic. One of the first documented authors to focus on the learner was Stenhouse (1975), who created a process-oriented curriculum in the belief that a product-oriented curriculum is based on the assumption that all learners have the same goals. Any approach with fixed objectives is arguably unsound, as some skills (often receptive skills like vocabulary development or reading) may be easier or faster to operationalize, while other more creative skills (usually productive skills like pronunciation or face-to-face communication) may not be. An additional concern in the Japanese university EFL context is that syllabi, especially those written by and for native English teachers, may be founded on curricula frameworks or textbooks written by westerners for westerners. These might not correspond to Japan-specific cultural or social influences. Long (1997) lamented such one-size-fits-all syllabi calling them "synthetic" (para. 1). He cites six problems, the first of which is a lack of NAs. Competency-based pre-course assessment may be useful in placing students at an appropriate level, or on a course pathway, or into a fundamental skills course; however, a learner-centered curriculum can never be static. A method in the design that accounts for learner needs and satisfiers throughout the learning process is integral to such a curriculum.

For peak effectiveness, NAs should be multipurpose as well as utilized at every stage of teaching. Pre-course NAs serve not only to place students and determine content but also to involve coordinators, who may serve more of an administrative function than an academic one, in a stage of the process usually reserved for the teachers who have more direct contact with learners. If used in conjunction with other linguistic assessments, NAs can mold future achievement testing

within a program as well as provide a check against curricular goals. Recurrent mid-course observation and renegotiation of goals is also necessary to adjust for student progress, shifting needs, continuing inhibitors to learning, and the awareness that comes from a foreign-language learning experience. Though university courses are generally short and thorough NAs may be time consuming, an end-of-course check further serves to refine goals, content, and methodology on the program level.

All levels of the educational system should be included. While program coordinators commonly are responsible for choosing content and structuring curricular goals, they may not be well-informed about individual learner needs. The immediacy of content in the classroom, which requires constant renegotiation between teachers and learners, makes teachers pivotal in the wider role of curriculum development. That teachers are well-positioned to dialogue with learners is, according to Prichard (2006), one of the main benefits of teacher autonomy. Incorporating regular assessment of needs and empowering teachers in the assessment process can be useful in diagnosing linguistic deficiencies and identifying learning obstacles at the student level.

It is not just institutions and teachers that can improve learning through awareness of need, but also students. Critical self-reflection is cited as useful throughout research regarding learning, need, and education (Kolb, 1984; Mezirow, 1990; Harrison, Head, Haugh & Sanderson, 2005). Head felt that Japanese students have abdicated evaluation of their learning to external sources (as cited in Harrison et al., 2005). She argued that self-evaluation is beneficial in expanding learning outside the classroom (p. 43). By recording and referring back to NAs' results, both teachers and students can monitor progress. Nunan (1988) contended learners appreciate the learning experience if they are taught to set their own goals. Blanche (1998) argued learner autonomy stems from an accurate self-appraisal that is not based on external opinions, and which can further make teachers aware of

learners needs.

However, one concern with this type of survey instrument is that learners may not be able to accurately identify their own needs. Hoge and McCarthy (1983) found large discrepancies between self-reported need and real need that had been tested separately, while Cameron (1988) maintained NAs could mistake interest for need. Once trained (Nunan, 1988), learners can use the process of NA to clarify and monitor their own goals for life-long learning.

Teaching is most effective when learner needs are regularly monitored and course content reflecting needs is redefined. Though teachers are rarely part of the formal decision-making process in Japan with regard to curriculum design, they are the direct extension of the curriculum by their application of it in the classroom. They are close to students and in a strong position to develop, maintain, and utilize NAs. But do teachers in Japan have an understanding of their students' needs, and if so, do they feel as if they can control content?

Research Questions

Do teachers in Japanese university EFL classes use a needs analysis at the beginning of a course?

Do these teachers make mid-course adjustments based on a perceived changing of students' needs?

If these teachers are not using a needs analysis tool, are they basing any adjustment in course on a perception of "knowing" their students or on keeping up with current research?

Do these teachers feel they have a chance to affect course content in the classroom, presuming a need were to arise?

Method and Participants

A voluntary six-question survey about how class content is determined was sent to 115 English as a Foreign Language (EFL)

teachers in the Kansai region of Japan. Responses were received from 85 (73.9%) people teaching at more than 20 universities. All but two had master's degrees or higher, and among the respondents there was an average of 20.4 years of teaching experience. The survey was administered in English only, as all respondents were expected to be proficient in English based on the number of years teaching, higher education degrees and extensive training. Of the respondents, 68 (80%) were male and 17 (20%) were female. Part-time teachers accounted for 53 (62%) of the total 85 respondents. Of the remaining 32 full-time teachers, 17 (20%) had duties as program coordinators and curriculum developers, whereas 15 (18%) did not. A total of 88% of the respondents were native-English speakers with nearly half being American (Table 1). The number of female respondents was low, though fairly representative of the low numbers of female native English teachers at the university level. Only nine Japanese responded to the survey after two attempts to administer it.

Table 1
Participant by Nationality

Nationality	(N=85)	%
American	38	45
Australian	12	14
British	10	12
Canadian	9	11
Japanese	9	11
New Zealander	3	4
Scottish	2	2
Irish	1	1
Swedish	1	1

Results and Discussion

After demographic information was ascertained, four questions were asked concerning student needs. The first asked: "On average, for all types of classes, how often do you directly ask your students

what they want to learn or give a formal NA at the beginning of your courses?" Only 9% of respondents administered a NA in "every" class (Table 2). The majority (53%) answered that they do an analysis in "most" or at least "many" of their classes (25% and 28%, respectively), however; the portion with answers from "rarely" to "never" totaled a substantial 38%.

Table 2
Beginning of Course Needs Analysis (NA) Administered

NA Administered at Beginning of Course?	(*N*=85)	%
1 Every class, regardless	8	9
2 Most, but not always	21	25
3 Many, maybe about half my classes	24	28
4 Rarely, though ask occasionally	25	29
5 Only once or twice before	4	5
6 Never ask	3	4
	SD	1.20
	Mean	3.1

A second needs-related question asked teachers: "How often do you make mid-course adjustments based on changing students' wants/needs?" Presuming that most formal NAs are given at the beginning of a course, this question was worded to allow for casual modifications to original content at any time throughout the term, as exact numbers of changes would be difficult to quantify without a longitudinal study. Twenty-two percent, more than twice the number of those who gave a NA at the beginning of "every" class, reported that they always made mid-course adjustments (Table 3). The percentage of "once or twice" and "never" respondents was recorded at a low 4% each. By using a Pearson product-moment coefficient (Appendix), a strong correlation of .56 was found between pre- and mid-course assessment, which showed that the same teachers who made initial inquiries about their students' needs were also more prone to adjust for any shifts in those needs throughout the course.

Table 3
Mid-course Content Adjustments

Mid-course Adjustments Made?	(*N*=85)	%
1 Every class, regardless	19	22
2 Usually, but not always	24	28
3 Often, maybe about half the time	19	22
4 Occasionally adjust	17	20
5 Once or twice before	3	4
6 Never adjust mid-course	3	4
	SD	1.32
	Mean	2.6

It is possible that some teachers felt they had sufficient empathy or experience to understand what students required as well or better than the students themselves; so the question was posed: "Do you feel that you 'know' your students' needs?" A modest 7% of respondents believed they knew their students' needs "absolutely" (Table 4). With a standard deviation of .53, most respondents, 69% reported they "mostly" knew their students.

Table 4
Presumed Understanding of Student Needs

Degree of "Knowing" Needs	(*N*=85)	%
1 Absolutely	6	7
2 Mostly	59	69
3 Somewhat	20	24
4 Not really	0	0
5 Not at all	0	0
	SD	0.53
	Mean	2.2

This survey did not address whether teachers based their course designs on a perceived understanding of their students' needs. However, no negative correlation was found between knowing one's students and giving a formal pre-course NA that might indicate teachers having a tendency to do so. The data showed almost no correlation (.10) for those who "know" their students to make mid-course adjustments. A

strong correlation might indicate that the more teachers feel they know their students, the more flexible they might be toward satisfying their needs in a student-centered approach.

Whether or not teachers can presume to know what students need may be based in part on their own knowledge and experience in their profession. While not requisite to being a good teacher, an awareness of new trends, approaches, or methodologies may help a teacher to understand and develop ways of addressing the needs of his or her students better. Though all those surveyed had advanced degrees and/ or extensive teaching backgrounds, it was asked: "Do you keep up on current educational research by reading journals, going to conferences, or doing your own research?" Almost half of the respondents stated they "regularly" do research (Table 5). One-fourth reported doing research "constantly" and another quarter "rarely", while few reported "once or twice," or "never." Some full-time teachers commented that their institution required them to do research for promotion or earning concerns; however, no correlation was found to indicate they stayed more current in their fields than part-time teachers. The answer choices to this item were vague; stating more specific times or periods would doubtfully have influenced the very weak correlations found. Only a slight tendency was seen in the data indicating that teachers who did research also made mid-course adjustments.

Table 5
Educational Research Frequency

Frequency of Research	(*N*=85)	%
1 Constantly	20	24
2 Regularly	41	48
3 Rarely	21	25
4 Only once or twice before	1	1
5 Never	2	2
	SD	0.86
	Mean	2.1

Regardless of whether or not student needs are assessed, it may make no difference in a course if teachers feel they cannot personally use the assessment results to influence course content, so the issue of perceived control was surveyed. Respondents were asked the following:

"Indicate the percentage of classes you teach that fall into each category, totaling 100%.

    a. The school decides ALL texts, materials, syllabus, methods, etc.

    b. The school decides the text, but I can supplement.

    c. I choose my text from an approved list, but I can supplement.

    d. I choose my text freely, and I can supplement.

    e. I decide everything, often writing my own materials."

Summed data in each category for all 85 respondents are shown in Table 6. A hypothetical respondent might report that out of all their classes taught, forty percent fall into category "a" (meaning zero control for some classes), while sixty percent might fall into category "b" (indicating a slight control in other classes). Answering in more than one category would indicate that the respondent works in different programs or different schools, or both. Not every respondent reported for every category. A more complex and longitudinal instrument would have been necessary to establish exact percentages or course content, but that was beyond the scope of this attitudinal survey.

An average of 2.4% of all classes was perceived as being solely under the school's control (category "a"). At the opposite end of the spectrum of control, category "e" respondents reported more than ten times that level of curriculum control (25.4% of courses) to be that only of the teacher. The remaining three categories "b", "c", and "d" reflected various levels of control between teacher and school; each category of answers comprised more respondents and most of the time a higher average percentage of perceived control by teachers than categories "a" and "e". Overall, categories c-e showed fairly equal values for percent control (25.4%-30.3%), suggesting that teachers

perceived they generally have some ability to adjust course content mid-course in most of their classes, thus some flexibility in the majority of classes to meet student needs should they see fit to do so.

Table 6
Degree of Control Perceived by Category

Answer Category	Perceived Control by Teacher	Average Percent* of Courses Controlled
a	Zero chance to deviate from curriculum	2.4%
b	Limited chance to deviate from curriculum	14.9%
c	Freedom to choose materials from a prescribed list	27.1%
d	Freedom to choose any materials related to prescribed curriculum	30.3%
e	Total control of course content and methods	25.4%

*N=85 respondents for each category.

The low percentage of complete control by schools is explained by the number of responses in category "a" and the low percentages that were reported. From category "a" responses, where teachers felt the school had total control over curriculum, fewer teachers (23) responded than in any other category (45-54), and the vast majority of respondents in category "a" reported values <50% (range=5-80%), whereas the data was spread more evenly for the other four categories (range=1-100% for category "b", and range=5-100% for the other categories; data not shown).

One might expect that full-time teachers or Japanese teachers have more power to control course content (Miyazato, 2009). However, only two full-time respondents (both native speakers) claimed total control in all their classes, and all other responses in category "e" were well below 80%, so the data did not support the supposition that full-time teachers have more control. Neither did it support the impression

that Japanese teachers have more control than native English teachers, although only 9 out of the 85 respondents were Japanese, so the data has too small a population to be statistically significant.

To assess individual teachers' overall feeling of curriculum control, a special ranking formula was created. Categories "a" through "e" were assigned a numerical value (C) of 1 to 5, respectively. That value was then multiplied by the percentages (P) each respondent reported for category of curriculum control. The product (C x P) for each respondent was summed in all five categories, and then divided by 100 to obtain what will be called an Individual Control Factor (IF) for each respondent:

$$[(C1 \times P1) + (C2 \times P2) + (C3 \times P3) + (C4 \times P4) + (C5 \times P5)] / 100 = IF$$

In effect, the IF represents a Likert-scale-like value of curriculum control that each respondent felt overall for all courses in all of their teaching situations. An IF of 1 indicates that the teacher felt the school had all the control, whereas a higher value such as 5 means the teacher felt in complete control.

Using this IF determination, native teachers, on average, perceived their level of control at a median IF of 3.2, while Japanese teachers perceived a lesser degree of control (2.5), keeping in mind the limited number of Japanese respondents. Average IF values for full-time teachers (3.17, $n=15$), program coordinators (3.45, $n=15$), and part-time teachers (3.05, $n=65$) were nearly identical, as were the median values (3.0, 3.4, and 3.1, respectively). A statistical analysis was not performed to determine any significant differences, but it is unlikely that any would be found.

Obviously, there is a problem when trying to quantify any individual's perceptions, as the reader will see in the following examples. The lowest average IF (1.5) was reported by a part-time teacher who was teaching in a highly coordinated program; however, the full-time native English coordinator of the same program also perceived his own level of control at a low 2.1. Even the Japanese full-time coordinator

of that program perceived her level of control only slightly higher at 2.4. The next lowest value, 1.6, came from a full-time Japanese teacher in a different program, but another full-time Japanese colleague with similar classes and level of responsibility yielded an IF of 3.5.

Besides general personality factors, emotional response to the survey, or a lack of care when answering a complex question such this, many factors can account for a wide range of positive and negative responses. Teacher motivation, burnout, stress in the workplace, disparity between perceived competence and actual position, and for any non-Japanese, the trials of being in a foreign country all take their toll (Falout, 2010).

A last question was asked only of the full-time teachers and program coordinators, perceived to have a greater degree of determining how individual student needs might be assessed at the program level. The question was, "How often is diagnostic placement utilized to determine program content?" Three respondents answered "constantly" (Table 7), and four responded "regularly". The remaining 24 (67%) reported having "rarely," "once or twice," or "never" having done diagnostic testing. In the final open-ended comment box some of these full-time teachers remarked that classes were too large and there was not enough class time to accommodate individual feedback or content.

Table 7
Frequency of Diagnostic-style Testing for Placement

Frequency of Diagnostic Placement Testing	(n=31)	%
1 Constantly	3	10
2 Regularly	4	13
3 Rarely	4	13
4 Only once or twice before	10	32
5 Never	10	32
	SD	1.33
	Mean	4

Clearly, for a test to be diagnostic, individual deficiencies must be

identified and reported with the intent of influencing course content. Some respondents noted that they use a placement exam for streaming learners into classes but gave no indication of how the specific contents of the instrument might be used to individualize courses. It was assumed that these teachers would distinguish between placement and diagnostic testing; however, there seemed to be some confusion as to what "diagnostic" meant. Placement exams cannot be considered diagnostic if they do not affect curriculum or if results of the exam are not released to teachers.

Conclusion

NAs are a primary component of a learner-centered approach at every stage of curriculum development. In Japan, where proficiency criteria often guide course design, teachers regularly administer pre-course NAs less than a third of the time, and institutions tend not to mandate formal NAs that would allow for the discovery of the more subjective needs, hopes, and interests of learners. Optimally, NAs should continue throughout and beyond a course to maximize a student-centered approach. Formal NAs involving program administrators, teachers, and students may be helpful especially if administered on a wide scale, but time constraints and inflexible curricular requirements make less formal means of adjusting course content acceptable for many teachers throughout a course. It is the teacher, directly negotiating with the learner, who is in the best position to both adjust course content and guide students to take control of their own learning.

Indeed, it was found that the university teachers from this study reported they have a fair possibility of adjusting course content. However, data indicated that perception might be based on their own perceived knowledge of students more than empirically ascertained information. In a best-case scenario, a formal transparent NA with results disseminated to both teachers and students should be

incorporated in pre-course assessment at the program level, and if not, teachers and program designers must be open to course material that provides consistent curricular content and yet is flexible enough to allow for individual student proficiencies and deficiencies. Following through with training students to question their own broader needs and strategies to satisfactorily deal with them, completes the full curricular design process designed around a learner-centered approach.

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Appendix

Pearson Product-moment Correlation of Demographic, Survey and Individual Control Factors

Survey Question (N=85)	A	B	C	D	1	2	3	4	5	6
1 Pre-course needs analysis	-.15	-.13	-.05	-.12	–					
2 Midterm adjustments	-.22	-.14	-.02	-.19	.56	–				
3 'Knowledge' of students	.07	.02	.03	.03	.15	.10	–			
4 Current research	-.13	-.17	-.23	-.17	.18	.24	.25	–		
5 Individual control factor	-.17	-.22	.01	.12	.02	-.09	.04	.15	–	
6 Diagnostic placement (n=31)	-.37	.04	.01	-.10	.23	.20	.13	.09	.27	–

A: Gender   B: Nationality   C: Position   D: Years of Teaching