

Elementary School English Education in Japan

—Its history and the sound of its teaching materials—

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Abstract

In this symposium, we would like to outline the past and present of elementary school English education in Japan. Its history is briefly described in section 1. We also would like to examine some teaching methodologies and materials for children. What role sound plays in language is shown in section 2. It is important for teachers to select good teaching materials which do no harm on children's second language acquisition. We hope this symposium will be a fruitful opportunity for all the participants to recognize the crucial role of sound in second language education.

1. A short history of elementary school English education in Japan

1.1. 1992-1998

In 1992, after spending a long time discussing on implementation of English to public elementary schools, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sport, Science and Technology (hereafter MEXT) chose two elementary schools and one junior high school in Osaka City to start the experimental English activities in public education. Since then, over 100 schools all over Japan took part in this experiment with various theme such as curriculum design of English lessons for six years in the elementary level or for nine years including junior high level, or if writing should or should not be introduced in elementary level, and so on.

1.2. A new development starting from 1998

The Course of Studies for Elementary Schools (hereafter guideline) revised in 1998 introduced a new field named "The Period for Integrated Studies", or the so-called Sogo Gakushu. It was a new approach brought into elementary school education, and teachers were challenged to design the contents of curriculum by themselves. The guideline only suggested four areas which could be taken up in three lessons per week; international understanding, information and ICT technology, environmental studies, and social welfare/health. If a school go for international understanding, it is able to take up conversation in foreign languages as a part of the class. This is where the pupils could meet English at the elementary school.

Some other points to be mentioned are as follow:

- The Period for Integrated Studies was carried out from the third to sixth grades, three classes per week.
- To accustom and familiarize pupils with the languages was to be given top priority, while language acquisition itself was not considered a main concern.
- The research conducted by the MEXT in 2006 revealed that 97% of elementary schools in Japan had implemented English activities in some way.

The MEXT support was rather limited. It provided a guidebook and some in-service training. Other things are left at each school's discretion.

1.3. The revision of the guideline in 2008: Foreign Language Activities will be taken up as an independent lesson from 2011

The new guideline revised and publicized in 2008 will fully come into force from 2011, and the foreign language activities will become an additional field named "Foreign Language Activities" to elementary school. It is not a school subject such as science or physical education, but it is a compulsory class and all the fifth and sixth graders will take the class once a week, that is, 35 times per year.

The overall objectives of "Foreign Language Activities" are described in the guideline as follow:

To form the foundation of pupils' communication abilities through foreign languages while developing the understanding of languages and cultures through various experiences, fostering a positive attitude toward communication, and familiarizing pupils with the sounds and basic expressions of foreign languages. (MEXT, 2009, http://www.mext.go.jp/component/a_menu/education/micro/_detail/_icsFiles/afieldfile/2009/04/21/1262037_12.pdf)

Here again the aim of the class is not to acquire a language but to enhance pupils' communicative abilities. The school years from 2009 to 2010 has been a transitional period in which schools are to prepare for the up-coming new lessons of English activities.

The MEXT prepared pupils' textbook named "Eigo Nooto (English Note) 1 & 2", their manuals, a CD and a digital teaching material to go with them, a teacher training handbook, a teacher training DVD, picture cards which can be downloaded from the MEXT homepage and distributed them to all the elementary schools in the country in 2009.

2. Who is in charge of the lessons?

Since 1992, nearly 20 years have past, and yet the evaluation of the experiments varies. There have been strong criticisms going on against the implementation of English education to elementary schools. Criticisms say that there is not remarkable achievement of language skills, or rather the graduates of elementary schools are less motivated to study the language when they enter junior high schools.

There may be some reasons for these criticisms, which should be and can be improved if the MEXT take this problem seriously.

2.1. Insufficient programs for teacher training

Most of the homeroom teachers do not have certificate to teach English, for when they received teacher training in their undergraduate courses, English was not a required subject to take for elementary school teacher candidates.

At present, 30 hours of in-service training is underway in each school district, which means teachers are supposed to attend ten times of three hour training conferences or seminars during a school year.

These conferences or seminars with practice teaching support teachers to improve their teaching skills, but are not enough to make them become confident in their teaching. Many teachers think their grammatical knowledge and pronunciation of the target language are not good enough for teaching.

2.2. Recruit of assistant language teachers

The MEXT has explained that the English activity lessons will be supported by native speakers and Japanese volunteer teachers, but when the lessons become compulsory and each school start teaching once a week for each class, it would become rather impossible to recruit an assistant teacher for all the 35 lessons. Homeroom teachers are forced to take charge of the lesson and do the teaching by themselves.

2.3. Audio-visual teaching materials may be needed

To carry on the English activities, audio-visual teaching materials will be a strong support for homeroom teachers to provide authentic language.

3. How children learn the language in EA?

3.1. Children have a big amount of English vocabulary

We have a large amount of borrowed words from English in our daily use of Japanese. As the result, when those borrowed words are pronounced in English, children can easily pick them up and understand the meaning of English spoken to them.

In 1977, I made a little survey of English vocabulary that 9 to 10 year-old children had, and the number of words they gathered went up to 1,200. Suppose they knew about ten words in categories such as names of meals, fruits, vegetables, animals, sports, flowers and plants, clothing, stationery, colors and shapes, numbers, furniture, musical instruments, some technical terms in science and technology, professions, public facilities, some adjectives, and action verbs, as well as some proper nouns like names of countries and towns, the number of words they could understand would go up to more than 2,000. Children may not be able to produce all the words, but they can guess what is taking place when they hear, and the experience of succeeding to communicate will support and encourage them to continue to learn English.

In our English lessons, we can talk to them using these words, so that children can guess what they are supposed to do or to answer to carry on our conversation.

3.2. Children learn some English phrases in natural circumstances

They pick up phrases such as "I'm sorry.", "Excuse me.", "I don't know." "It's wonderful.", "Once more, please.", "Stop.", or even the questions like "Do you know this?" or "Can you do this?" and they become accustomed to the structure of English sentences which is quite different from

that of Japanese. Of course, when they are asked a question, they tend to answer with one word or two, but very soon they realize that some sound is missing, and come to a teacher, asking "What do I have to say first?" in Japanese. They notice that they should say something before they answer. Even though we do not explain the structure of a sentence explicitly, they realize that there has to be a subject and a verb without knowing what their grammatical functions are.

3.3. Children's sensibility to English sounds

About 15 years ago, I tried a simple experiment to check if there was any age difference as to children's ability to imitate model speech sounds in English with a help of Mr. Kazuyuki Amino. The experiment showed that 8 and 9 year-old children were far better than 11 and 12 year-olds in reproducing the sounds they heard.

This result coincided with children's responses observed in our teaching, and made us believe that although there is not so-called clear critical period, it is still effective to give input of English sounds to children in their younger age. These facts suggest us the importance of input.

3.4. How to start input

When we start teaching the language, we do not use written materials, but just start talking and asking simple questions to them in English without any explanation in Japanese. Children become quite willing to answer with Yes/No or a word or two, guessing what their teacher is getting at. They imitate the input they receive from their teacher or any audio-visual materials he or she uses.

While children are responding to the input, they get the image of English sound and the linguistic rules hidden there. Some people claim that in English activities in elementary schools, learning on children's side would not occur, so that pronunciation and grammar are not important and teachers need not worry about them but just be a model of using the language. We feel this claim is not valid but rather dangerous for the children's achievement of language skills.

3.5. What do children learn in so-called "English Activity"?

Some teachers argue that the main purpose of English Activity Lessons is to give them chances to be in the situation where the language is used, so that they will become motivated to use the language. But this claim is rather weak, because the more children become older and matured, the more they notice the difference of their own pronunciation from that of native speakers and become reluctant to use the language, being afraid of making mistakes in their speech.

Having taught children for more than forty years, I have collected quite a few utterances which show that children are deciphering the linguistic rules by themselves to use the language correctly. Sometimes their judgment is wrong, but their effort to find grammatical rules buried in English they hear seems to me the beginning of their learning.

One example which impressed me much was when a 9-year-old boy came up to me and asked if "likes" took a plural form because the elephant might eat lots of bananas. They were just talking "I like bananas. You like bananas. David likes bananas. S/He likes bananas. And a monkey likes bananas. An elephant likes bananas." He might have missed I/ You/ David or S/He sentences, but the elephant might have been more impressive for him. I did not explain the "likes" as the form of a third person singular, for I did not expect him to understand the elephant was the third person, but continued to

show him examples of sentences with “like/ likes” implicitly. He showed me a big smile, when he understood the usage.

3.6. How can we start teaching English in public elementary schools in Japan?

Though the MEXT publicized that the English Activity (EA) lessons be compulsory in the fifth and the sixth grades, it is not considered to be a school subject like math or Japanese and other main subjects. Homeroom teachers are encouraged to take charge of the English Activities lessons even when a native speaker is assisting in class.

The Homeroom teachers are well trained and motivated in teaching other subjects, but have no training in English and very little confidence in it, especially in their pronunciation and grammar. In recent years, teacher training seminars and conferences have been held even in remote places in Japan, and gradually Homeroom teachers are trying to use English in their teaching. But as far as I see it, it is a heavy burden on them, and they need more time to practice and improve the language.

4. Introduction of audio-visual equipment

4.1. What can support Homeroom teachers in EA lessons?

While we wait for the Homeroom teachers to gain confidence in their English, audio-visual materials of various kinds will be a great help. DVD's are taking place of CD's, and many classrooms are now equipped with projectors and screens. Just recently interactive whiteboards of different kinds are becoming popular in elementary schools and teachers have started to use them in various school subjects.

An interactive whiteboard can assist teachers to show authentic scenes and materials, and at the same time, English itself can be embedded alongside of sentences or pictures, or even songs on the board, so that a homeroom teacher and his or her pupils hear and learn models and sing along with it.

4.2. Quality of audio-visual soft wear should be closely examined.

Even though teachers have some difficulties in pronunciation or grammar, resources of the software can give natural and authentic way of speech, and that will be a great help and assurance for both learners and teachers.

The following are the points to be considered when materials are developed.

1. Syllabi must be carefully chosen, according to the children's learning levels and abilities. Sometimes the teaching order is not well arranged, and themes for activities are chosen with little consideration so that do not match well with linguistic items. In this case, it is difficult to draw language awareness from children. When we try to introduce content-based approach to elementary school English activities, we tend to forget how to accumulate linguistic knowledge coinciding children's learning process, and children are only forced to memorize whatever the language is without understanding why the new sentences they are learning are different from the ones they learned before.
2. Contents of materials to cultivate listening ability must be meaningful and familiar to children, so that they can easily build images while listening. Fictitious and unnatural situations will not stimulate children to use English with classmates.

3. Recording of audio materials has to be carefully prepared with natural intonation and rhythm. Younger learners have good sensitivity to imitate the sound. It is not too much of a problem if the material has several foreign accents, because children notice the differences and choose the general dialect of the target language. They distinguish immature pronunciation from natural one and try to imitate the latter.
4. While receiving authentic input, children gradually acquire the correct word order which is quite different from their mother tongue. Instead of forcing them to reproduce English orally, we should allow much time for them to listen to the materials. They pick up content words fairly easily and try to add function words quite soon, if they have enough chances to listen to whole language.
5. Articulation is another important thing for young learners, because they have good ears to notice the different consonant and vowel sounds. They imitate what they hear, but they are not yet good at reproducing the sounds. They invent their own sound system which is similar to that of native speaker children. They start to say *Fursday* for *Thursday*, *free for three*, or *“Wite may name, please”*, instead of *“Write my name, please”*, and so on. One device to let children practice English sounds is using tongue twisters. I have made quite a few tongue twisters for children, not to say them quickly, but fun enough for them to say repeatedly. Here are some examples:
“A lemon is yellow, and a lime is green.”
“Charlie is chewing crunchy chocolate.”
“Bubble, bubble, bubble
Boys are chewing bubble gum,
Bubble, bubble, bubble.”
6. So-called “chants” are very popular in Japan, but in many cases, the chants made in Japan have rhythm that are somehow meddled with rhythm of the Japanese accent. Sometimes, chants are made without verbs, and the reason of skipping them is to make them easy for learners to say. In such a way, learners will not have chances to notice the rules of the target language and rather be prevented from acquiring the language itself.

Methodology of teaching English to children in elementary level is still to be improved. I am grateful for this occasion of exchanging ideas.

5. Conclusion

The importance of “sound” in language is widely recognized. The fact that we encounter our first language through sound, not through letters, and the fact that there are languages which have no letters when no language without sound exists show how deeply language and sound are intertwined.

Sound is a container of vocabulary and grammar of the language. Especially on a usage basis, vocabulary and grammar have to parasitize on sound to realize itself in the world. When we expose our students to the sound of the target language, it inevitably means we are exposing the vocabulary and grammar of the target language to the students. This is one of the reasons teaching materials have to be chosen carefully.

Sound, especially prosody, exhibits the characteristics of the language. To acquire natural intonation and rhythm of the target language is important for one to understand and to be understood in the language. If the teaching material contains

unnatural prosody in it, it would cause a serious influence on teaching and learning.

There are some problems I would like to discuss here for the betterment of English education in elementary level.

6. List of Audio-Visual Materials

CD

Eigo Nooto. 2009. Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology. (『英語ノート』. 2009. 文部科学省.)

Eigorian Myuzikku Korekushon. 2001. Crown. (『えいごリアン ミュージック・コレクション』. 2002. クラウン)
Rizumu de Asobu ABC. 2001. Crown. (『リズムであそぶABC』. 2001. クラウン.)

Hayakuchi-Kotoba Hen. 2002. Borgnan. (『早口言葉編』¹. 2002. ぼーぐなん.)

Jazz Chants for Children. 1979. Oxford University Press.

Jazz Chant Fairy Tales. 1988. Oxford University Press.

Wee Sing Series. 1977～. Price Stern Sloan.

WORD BOOK CD Geemu Hen. 2002. Borgnan. (『WORD BOOK CD ゲーム編』. 2002. ぼーぐなん.)

Yamakan Geemu CD. 2002. Borgnan. (『やまかんゲームCD』². 2002. ぼーぐなん.)

[1] Tongue Twisters

[2] Pronunciation of borrowed words in Japanese

Digital Teaching Material

Eigo Nooto Dejitaru ban. 2009. Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology. (『英語ノートデジタル版』. 2009. 文部科学省.)

English in Action Series. Borgnan. (『English in Action Series』. 出版予定. ぼーぐなん.)

Touch and Learn. 2009. Yasukawa Jyoho Sisutemu Kabushiki Gaisya. (『Touch and Learn』. 2009. 安川情報システム株式会社.)

Others

Eigorian Kaado Geemu. 2002. Izumi Shobou. (『えいごリアン カードゲーム』. 2002. いずみ書房.)

Eigorian Ripiito Kaado. 2003. Izumi Shobou. (『えいごリアン リピートカード』. 2003. いずみ書房.)

7. Bibliography

Kuno, Y., Kasuya, K., & Iwahashi, K. (2008). *Kodomo to tomo ni ayumu eigo kyouiku*, Borgnan. (久埜百合・粕谷恭子・岩橋加代子 (2008). 『子どもと共に歩む英語教育』. ぼーぐなん.)