

The Challenges of English Education in Japanese Elementary Schools

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日本の小学校における英語教育の課題

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1. Introduction

English became a required part of the Japanese elementary school curriculum in 2011, the outcome of a long period of experimentation that began in the early 1990s. The final decision to include English in elementary school (EES) (a term borrowed from Butler, 2007) came much later in Japan than in neighboring countries in East Asia due to a number of factors, in particular the controversy over the value of foreign language activities in the elementary school curriculum. This paper will look at some of the objections to EES and the goals of EES as they have evolved since 2002, but the major focus will be on the role that has been given to the homeroom teacher (HRT).

2. Background

Until 2002, English wasn't taught until the first year of public junior high school. There had been discussion of implementing EES as early as the 1980s, but it wasn't until 1992 that the first tentative experimental steps were taken by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Science and Technology (MEXT). Two elementary schools in Osaka were designated as pilot schools for EES. This came "...as a response to repeated criticisms by business and political groups of English education for not helping Japan respond to the needs of a globalising world." (Butler, 2007:133) The number of pilot schools increased, and in 2002 English was actually added to the curriculum under the rubric of "foreign language activities." MEXT employed the term "foreign language activities," but the vast majority of elementary schools opted for English, so the terms "foreign language activities" and "English activities" have come to mean the same thing in much of the research.

The new Course of Study in 2002 included foreign language activities in the "Period of Integrated Study." In this part of the curriculum which covered information processing, environmental studies, health and welfare, and international understanding, foreign language activities came under "international understanding" (Kusumoto, 2008). Although foreign language activities were not compulsory, 56.1% of elementary schools introduced some kind of English activities in 2002, and the percentage increased to more than 97% by 2009 (Nishizaki, 2009).

At this same time, ambitious plans for EES in other countries around East Asia were being implemented. In 2000, Korea introduced English into the elementary school curriculum beginning at the 3rd grade. Taiwan introduced English in the 5th and 6th grades in 2001 and then followed in Korea's footsteps, shifting the start of English education from the 1st to the 3rd grade in 2005. In China, English was first introduced at primary schools in 2001. Since 2005, EES has been implemented nationwide, and it is taught as a formal subject from the 1st grade in large urban areas such as Beijing and Shanghai.

There was considerable public support, and even pressure, for the inclusion of English in Japanese elementary schools at this time, but the policy of "yutori kyoiku," the more relaxed education policy begun in the early 1980s, had reduced school hours and the study loads. According to critics, this policy caused a decline in academic standards, and more time and resources would be needed to support core subjects such as Japanese and math. The introduction of foreign language activities was seen as diverting time and resources from the solution to the problem of academic decline. While much of the continuing opposition to EES is due to factors beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to note objections directed at the goals and implementation of EES. Otsu Yukio, a cognitive scientist and one of the most vocal critics of EES, has made the following three points which are translated and summarized below:

- (1) While there is evidence of a critical period for learning a first language, there is none for learning a second language. Therefore there is no pressing need to introduce a foreign language earlier than junior high school. Adding English activities at the expense of other core subjects cannot be justified.
- (2) The choice of English over other foreign languages promotes the idea that English is somehow linguistically superior to other languages. No language is inherently superior to another, and children should not be forced to study English rather than another language.
- (3) If the goal of EES is to get students used to the pronunciation and intonation of English, and there are a number of people who give conditional support to the idea of EES with this caveat, students need input from speakers of natural varieties of English. English from the inner circle (traditionally English-speaking countries such as Britain and the U.S.) and from the outer circle (countries where English is used as an official language and in everyday life such as Singapore and India) are acceptable models. English with a Japanese accent is unacceptable because it is a pidgin rather than a natural language. According to the 2002 and the 2011 Courses of Study, most students will be taught by HRTs, many of whom have never received training in English education and have poor English skills. There is a danger that children will not only not learn the English sound system under the present system; they will pick up heavily accented Japanese English. It takes longer to unlearn bad habits than to pick up the good ones, so this type of EES will actually be more harmful than helpful.

(Otsu, 2007, translated and summarized by the author)

Karasu (2007) provides a response to the first objection, pointing out that while there may not be a critical period for learning a foreign language, there seems to be a “sensitive period” for learning one. Children who learn a foreign language before the age of puberty are able to develop native-like accents and use particularly difficult grammar like natives. Adult learners, on the other hand, seldom can get rid of their foreign accent, nor do they learn to use articles well enough to write a paper without having it corrected by native speakers.

Karasu goes on to respond to the second objection by comparing the spread of American English in the 20th century to the spread of standard Japanese in the Meiji Period. Just as there are historical and economic reasons for the dominance of Tokyo Japanese, there are similar reasons for the dominance of English which should not be ignored. Whatever the reasons, English is now the de facto global language and a necessary tool in international affairs and business.

The third objection, however, cannot be easily dismissed. In the new curriculum, HRTs are the teachers responsible for the planning and implementation of English activities. While every HRT has studied English for more than 6 years in their secondary and tertiary education, they have not been trained to teach it. Are they capable of carrying out this new responsibility? In order to get a better picture of the situation of the HRTs, we need to look carefully at the stated goals for English activities. What are the expectations for EES, and can the HRTs live up to these expectations?

3. The Evolution of EES Goals

In 2000, two years before the official start of foreign language activities, MEXT compiled a report on practical ideas for English elementary school activities stating that the activities should be experience-based, consisting of songs, games, quizzes, and make-believe activities that allow children to communicate in easy English (Matsukawa, 2007:22-23). At the same time, as Butler (2007) points out in her study on EES in Japan, MEXT was relaxing its traditionally top-down approach. “In 2002, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Science and Technology (MEXT) allowed local governments and individual elementary schools to conduct foreign language activities of their own choosing so long as these promote international understanding.” (p. 129) The keywords here are “experience-based” and “international understanding” making it clear that the goals for these activities were quite unlike the strict grammatical syllabus and vocabulary lists set for students in the approved junior high and high school textbooks.

By the time the next Course of Study was published in 2008 and implemented in 2011, more explicit goals had been set out. Although there was still the caveat that the planning and implementation of foreign language activities depended on the children and their local area, the guidelines were much firmer. Below is a translation of Section 1 of Chapter 4, “Foreign Language Activities,” of the new Course of Study:

Section 1: Goals:

To build the foundations of communicative ability while deepening understanding of language and culture experientially through foreign language, developing behavior that tries to actively communicate, and familiarizing children with the sounds and basic phrases of the foreign language.

(MEXT, translated by the author)

We can find words similar to those from the previous Course of Study, e.g., “experientially” and “understanding of language and culture,” but now there is a stronger emphasis on communication.

Section 2 deals with the content of EES. It states that “children should become familiarized with the sounds and rhythms of English and discover the differences between English and Japanese.” This section emphasizes the secondary place of reading and writing vis a vis aural/oral activities and the importance of nonverbal communication, and it recommends making connections with the content of other subjects in the elementary school curriculum.

Section 3 deals with the planning and implementation of activities. It states that foreign language activities should be in English. While it is responsibility of the HRT, or another teacher specifically put in charge of English activities, to plan and teach the classes, they should try to employ native speakers or people in the community with good foreign language ability. Activities should be experientially-based without unnecessary attention to detail or form. Finally, it includes a list of communicative activities that should be covered. These include greetings and shopping, situations directly related to the lives of the children such as family life and local events, and communicative acts such as expressing their feelings and ideas.

4. The Merits of HRTs

According to Matsukawa (2007), MEXT used the term “foreign language activities” precisely because they did not intend for elementary school to be the beginning of studying English as an academic subject. She maintains that as part of the “Period of Integrated Studies,” foreign language activities can and should be directed by the HRT, someone who is an expert in classroom management. The HRT’s role should not be that of a teacher but rather a model of a “Japanese who can speak a foreign language.” HRTs have enough English background that they can attain a sufficient level of competency in it. Besides, familiarizing children with the foreign language and teaching them how to enjoy using the language are the main goals. This is an area where the HRT has more expertise than other teachers.

The role of the HRT is often defined in terms of team-teaching based on the experimentation that took place during the decade before implementation of the latest Course of Study. The HRT is supposed to plan the class and work together with an assistant language teacher (ALT) or other guest teacher in its implementation. Setsuko Toyama, a well-known children’s material author and teacher trainer, points to certain strengths of the

HRT in that role. HRTs can be invaluable partners because of their experience: they know the children's first names, they can model activities with the ALT, and they know what materials will appeal to the children in their class (Toyama, 2009).

Yanagi, quoted in Yano (2011), claims that learning a foreign language can be compared to playing softball. According to his thesis, people never lose their enjoyment of softball because they never studied it as a child; they just played it. If they had to practice their swings all through their 5th year and then spend their 6th year practicing their catch, he doubts that they would still like it. Yano goes on to suggest that what is needed in EES is not a professional English teacher but someone who knows the children well, who can share the failures as well as the successes, and who knows how to liven up the communication activities, in other words, the HRT.

Izumi (2007) points to the HRT's understanding of the special characteristics of the class. The HRT knows how to manage the classes and can introduce English activities in a natural way by considering what the children have been taught in other subjects. Matsukawa, quoted in the same Izumi article (2007), states that HRTs are appropriate because they like children, they are lively and have expressive faces, they know many games and songs, they have curiosity and a willingness to try anything, and they will do their best in English classes without expecting any reward or compensation.

As can be seen by the research above, the HRT is valued mainly because of his or her familiarity with the children and because of class management skills. As a member of a team-teaching group, the HRT is also seen as having a valuable role to play in modeling the language and setting an example of someone who can speak a foreign language.

5. The Problems with HRTs

While HRTs seem to have appropriate management skills for team-teaching, there are a number of other skills that go wanting. Izumi (2007), in a detailed assessment of the role of the HRT and other teachers in EES, proposes the following list of necessary qualities and abilities for HRTs in a team-teaching situation. According to her, HRTs need...

- 1) ...to understand the reasons for EES, its role, and its goals. This requires background knowledge of second language acquisition and an understanding of appropriate EFL teaching methods for EFL.
- 2) ...to understand the basics of international understanding and be able to create materials that move children from noticing, through empathy and understanding, to action.
- 3) ...to be able to put together a one-year syllabus and lesson plans, and evaluate the children.
- 4) ...to understand the special characteristics of English and use them in class, employing visual aids, simplification, gestures, and repetition.
- 5) ...to show creativity, empathy, and the energy to plan a class as well as to create opportunities to meet foreigners.
- 6) ...to have sufficient English communication skills to meet with the ALT and plan the

class.

- 7) ...to be able to understand students' whispers and address problems promptly.
- 8) ...to praise students and bring out their willingness to participate,
- 9) ...to develop and improve interesting materials such as games, songs, chants, and picture books appropriate to the children's ages.

As can be seen from earlier comments, HRTs are perhaps the best at showing empathy, understanding the children, and motivating them. In other areas, the skills demanded are beyond their present level of competence. Without any special training in English or EFL pedagogy, HRTs cannot fulfil the roles of syllabus designer, materials creator, or active participant in discussions about lessons with an ALT. In fact, studies of HRTs have indicated that many have not studied English since university, and that some chose to become elementary school teachers so that they wouldn't have to study English. HRTs may have heavily accented English, making them unsuitable as a source of comprehensible English for the children.

Another problem that arises is the lack of consultation in team-teaching. There have been a number of reports indicating that HRTs often leave the lesson planning entirely up to ALTs due to a lack of time while other HRTs avoid the ALTs because they don't feel confident in their English ability. In either situation, if there is no consultation or cooperation, there are few advantages to having the HRT involved, and team-teaching may end up as a one-man show.

The final question is whether MEXT's reliance on local solutions is compatible with the idea of equal resources. The fact that MEXT never actually commits itself to team-teaching suggests that they realize that there are insufficient funds to hire a sufficient number of ALTs for all the elementary schools in Japan. Some areas have ALTs in all their schools, while other cannot afford to hire ALTs for every English activity.

6. Conclusion

Foreign language activities became part of the elementary school curriculum in the 5th and 6th grades, but there remains a lot of uncertainty about the HRT's role in EES. The arguments in favor of HRTs as teachers of foreign language activities lack credibility because of the HRTs' lack of English abilities and teaching background. On the other hand, English activities hold the promise of motivating children and helping them to continue their studies of English. The solution to successful EES most likely lies in future training for HRTs that will boost their confidence and give them the skills necessary to work hand in hand with the ALTs.

7. References

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