

Observing Japanese Public Elementary School English Activities

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From 2002, English became part of the Japanese elementary school curriculum. Although some research has appeared on the new curriculum, many of the papers published use subjective data in the form of surveys and interviews. This descriptive study reports on what is actually happening in English Activity classes in Japanese public elementary schools (MEXT grant research No. 16520359). The data for this study were gathered from three randomly selected public elementary schools in central Japan. The researchers took observational notes and filled out an observation form while audio- and video-recording each lesson. The Jefferson transcription conventions (Atkinson & Heritage, 1984) were used to prepare close transcriptions of each observed lesson. Analysis of the video-recorded data revealed that the MEXT curriculum is being successfully implemented. English Activities are actively engaging the students in the English learning tasks. As an added benefit, the students are voluntarily participating in the language learning process.

2002年度より、日本全国の公立学校にて英語活動がカリキュラムの一部に加わった。現在までにこの新カリキュラムについての研究論文が徐々に発表されてきているが、それらの研究論文は主にアンケートやインタビューに基づく「主観的」なものである。本研究では、全国の公立小学校で実際にどんな英語活動が行われているのかを観察研究を通して客観的に検証する(文部科学省科学研究No. 16520359)。本論文におけるデータは関東地方の無作為抽出で選択した3校における英語活動をビデオ録画したものである。録画された授業はジェファソン表記システム(Atkinson & Heritage, 1984)を用いて詳細にわたって文字化された。分析の結果、文部科学省の新カリキュラムは今回観察した3校の公立小学校においてはたいへんうまく遂行されていることがわかった。英語活動において児童はたいへん活動的かつ自主的に英語学習タスクに関わっていた。

The introduction of English to the Japanese elementary school curriculum by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) in the year 2002 brought panic to teachers and administrators as they attempted to apply the new curriculum guidelines to their specific educational situations. The new curriculum calls for a “Period of Integrated Studies” which can be used for a variety of educational purposes such as international understanding, information technology, social welfare, etcetera, depending on the needs and abilities of each particular school. For a large number of schools the choice has been to introduce what are termed “English Activities” (EA) classes (MEXT, 2002) under the heading of international understanding. As stated in the MEXT English Activities handbook (MEXT, 2003), English Activities’ “primary purpose is to foster interest and desire—not to teach a language” (p. 123). The lack of mandatory English classes for all schools with a nationwide set curriculum has led to criticism of the new curriculum for being too vague and for not providing enough teacher-training. However, how all elementary schools would have been able to find and or train enough teachers for all of these classes is not clear. It seems that the Ministry’s

incremental movement toward changing the curriculum to include English classes is more realistic in terms of the current situation for many elementary schools in Japan that do not have teachers trained or knowledgeable in English or second language education.

Although some research has begun to appear on the new curriculum, many of the papers published to date use subjective data as in the form of surveys and interviews (Higuchi, Kagata, Shinohara, Honda, Yamura, Kanazawa, Fukuchi, Kitamura, & Shinohara, 2001; Hogan, 2004). Researchers have also taken the approach of assisting teachers to cope with teaching the English Activities classes through suggestions such as setting up Internet web sites as resources for teachers (Kelly, 2002) or using students in English teacher training courses as assistant language teachers (Murphey, Asaoka, and Sekiguchi, 2004, Takagaki, 2003). While these approaches are necessary for the further development of English Activities classes, a more objective, observational approach is essential for illuminating what actually occurs within the English Activities classroom.

This paper presents data from our observational study of English Activities classes in Japanese public elementary schools. The analysis of the data in this paper is an initial examination of a larger data set collected as part of a MEXT research grant (No. 16520359). For further information on the demographics of each school and more in depth explanation of the activities observed in each class see Hosoda and Aline (2005).

Data Collection Methods

The data for this study were gathered from three randomly selected public elementary schools in central Japan. The schools were selected from the 10 general geographic regions of Japan by using a computer-generated table of random numbers. The random selection helps to ensure objective scientific reliability in research. As part of our larger grant, we will be visiting two schools per region. We present in this paper only an initial analysis of the first three schools we visited.

The researchers took observational notes and filled out an observation form while audio- and video-recording each lesson. Prior to and following each observation the principals, homeroom teachers, English Activities teachers, and curriculum coordinators were interviewed. Copies of the yearly curriculum plans and individual lesson plans were collected. The Jefferson transcription conventions (Atkinson & Heritage, 1984) were used to prepare close transcriptions of each observed lesson (See Appendix). Both researchers repeatedly examined the transcripts while viewing the video recordings for the analysis of the classroom data. The research techniques of Conversation Analysis (CA) were applied to the analysis of the data. CA requires presentation of the original data so that the reader can judge for themselves the conclusions reached through analyses. This ensures greater reliability than anecdotal evidence. The examples given in this paper are just part of the results of our overall analysis. We found many examples of the same phenomena in each of the classes. We present in this paper only the examples that best exemplify the phenomena.

Analyses of the Ethnographical Data

The new curriculum allows Japanese public elementary schools to make decisions concerning how often English Activities classes are held and who teaches the classes.

We observed two classes taught by visiting native English speaking teachers, who acted as the main teachers while the homeroom teacher became an assistant language teacher, and one class taught only by the Japanese homeroom teacher. Some of the randomly selected schools contacted did not offer English Activities classes. Of the three schools where we conducted observation, two of the schools held 20 English Activities classes each year, and the other one had only 8 classes in the academic year. The yearly syllabus was coordinated by one of the full-time Japanese teachers in each of the three schools, but each individual teacher determined how that syllabus would be taught for each lesson. For the Japanese homeroom teacher who taught the class without the assistance of a native English speaker, the lesson syllabus was designed specifically to give her greater support in teaching techniques as she had not received training in teaching a second language, while the two visiting teachers were allowed to decide for themselves what activities would be used in the classes.

Analyses of the Video and Audio Data

Analysis of the data revealed the active participation of students through the application of Total Physical Response (TPR) teaching methods, and the extensive use of choral and voluntary repetition. The analyses also showed that the teachers' extensive use of TPR and repetition had some

important effects on the students' behavior. In this paper, we will show what teachers actually do in the English Activities classes, and provide evidence of the observable effects of their instruction.

What Teachers Do in Classes

TPR

The teachers in the classes we observed occasionally had students use physical actions while singing songs such as "Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes" and "Where is Thumbkin?," as shown in the data. In one lesson we observed, the class was singing "Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes." And in another lesson the class was singing "Where is Thumbkin?" These songs were introduced after extensive practice of referring to and pointing to parts of the body while repeating the names of the parts of the body.

TPR was also applied in games. In example (1), the class started doing the "kanji" or Chinese characters game. The teacher said the name of a day of the week in English and three teams of students competed to make the kanji that represents that day of the week with their bodies. In this segment, the teacher introduces the activity and has the students make the kanji that represents Saturday (see Appendix for transcription conventions).

(1) [Kanto T: 17-18]

1. AT: Today we're going to play, the kanji game,
2. S: kanji game
3. AT: kanji game.

4. AT: Okay, so, for example
5. AT: Okay, for example, if I say, Saturday,(.) team make
6. kanji
7. S: kanji
8. JT: kanji o
9. S: tsukure
“make.”
10. JT: mmm
11. JT: kanji o
12. S: tsukre
“make”
13. JT: nan no kanji
“What kanji?”
14. S: () yobi
“days of the week.”
15. AT: Saturday, sou (Japanese)
16. AT: Okay
17. ?: douyobi
“Saturday.”
18. AT: Okay, let’s do practice, Saturday,
19. JT: so let’s do
20. AT: Saturday

21. Ss: ((STUDENTS MAKE KANJI))

The students repeated this game for 17 times in the class.

Repetition

Another activity frequently observed in the elementary school English Activities classes was choral repetition. In example (2), the class is studying the names of the months. In having the students repeat the words, as shown in lines 7 to 12, the teacher occasionally changed the pitch of his voice playfully and the students repeated the pitch change.

(2) [Kanto T: 13]

1. T: September

2. Ss: September

3. T: September

4. Ss: September

5. T: September

6. Ss: September

7. T: September ((rising pitch))

8. Ss: September ((rising pitch))

9. T: September ((rising pitch, higher))

10. Ss: September ((rising pitch))

11. T: September ((rising pitch, higher))

12. Ss: September ((rising pitch))

13. Ss: Au- Au- August

14. Ss: September
15. Ss: October
16. T: October
17. Ss: October
18. T: October
19. Ss: October

In example (3), the class was studying “Where is ~?” and appropriate prepositional responses to the question. In this segment, as shown in lines 6, 11, and 17, the teacher repeatedly uses the adverbial phrase “one more time” to show that the repetition sequence will be repeated.

(3) [Kanto S: 4]

1. T: Okay. Everybody listen () good. Where is the cap?
2. One, two, three.
3. Ss: Where is the cap?
4. T: It's in, the basket. One, two, three.
5. Ss: It's in the basket.
6. T: Good. Let's practice one more time. Okay. Where is the cap? One, two, three.
7. the cap? One, two, three.
8. Ss: Where is the cap?
9. T: Good. Answer: It's in the basket. One, two, three.
10. Ss: It's in the basket. ((and all repetitions are with H))
11. T: Good, good. Okay. Alright. I'm going to try this one
12. more time. Where is the ba- where is the cap? ,
13. One two, three.
14. Ss: Where is the cap?
15. T: Good. Answer: It's on the basket. One, two, three.
16. Ss: It's on the basket.
17. T: Goo::d. Alright. Try one more time. Where is the cap?
18. One, two, three.
19. Ss: Where is the cap?
20. T: Answer. It's under the basket. One, two, three.
21. Ss: It's under the basket.
22. T: Goo::d. Okay, let's practice one more time. It's in the
23. basket. One, two, three.
24. Ss: It's in the basket.
25. T: Good.

The question “Where is ~?” and the responses to the question were key phrases for the lesson and the phrases were repeated extensively throughout the lesson. Moreover, the phrase “one more time” although not the focus of the lesson, functions as input for the students which, if it becomes uptake, is being learned in an incidental and naturalistic way.

Effects of Instruction

As discussed above, the teachers in the data frequently had students participate in TPR and choral repetition in the classes. The teachers' use of these activities had significant and observable effects on the students. We observed the students doing what we have tentatively labeled as voluntary TPR and voluntary repetition.

Voluntary TPR

The students in the data did TPR not only when they were instructed to do it by the teachers but also did it when some kind of stimulus was given as shown in transcript example (4).

(4) [Kanto: A12:18-13:9]

((The class finished singing the "Hello Song."))

1. T: hai na::nka yatta yo ne, mou ikkyoku:
"Yes, we sang another song last time, didn't we."
2. ((Students chatting with their friends.))
3. T: atama ga dou toka karada ga dou tte. hai kiri::tsu.
"Something that has to do with heads and bodies. Ok, stand up."
4. ((While standing up, some of the students whisper "head, shoulders, knees, and toes" and do gestures of touching their heads, shoulders, knees, and toes.))
5. T: hai dewa mou ikkyoku. (1.3) hai konna no mo yatta ne.

"Okay, one more song. Okay, we sang this one, too."

6. ((T plays a cassette player and the "Hello song" is played.))
7. T: kore ja nai yo.
"Not this one."
8. ((T forwards the tape and plays the cassette player. Karaoke version of the "Hello song" is played.))
9. T: arah karaoke baaon.
"Oh, karaoke version."
10. ((T again forwards the tape and plays the cassette player. "Head, shoulders, knees, and toes" begins and T stops the tape.))
11. T: saa nanka kiitakoto aru no detekimashita ne. kore wa
12. yatta yo ne.
"Well, the song we have heard before began. We sang this one before, didn't we."
13. ((One of the boys touches his head and shoulders.))
14. T: hai (.) yatta yo ne. hai dewa dekiru ka na?
"Okay, we sang it before. Can you sing it?"
15. ((T plays the tape and everybody sings "head, shoulders, knees, and toes and touches the appropriate body parts.))

In the previous lesson, they had practiced singing and performing the physical actions of the "Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes" song. In line 3, the teacher says, "We sang a song, something that has to do with heads and bodies." This utterance by the teacher works as a stimulus and in line 4,

some students start whispering “head, shoulders, knees, and toes” and touching those parts of the body. While the teacher is forwarding and adjusting the cassette tape (lines 5 to 9), the students stand still and wait. In line 10, the teacher finally finds the target song in the cassette tape and the song is played momentarily. Then, following the teacher’s utterance that asks the students if they remember the song, one of the boys touches his head and shoulders in line 13. In other words, this time, the song momentarily played had reminded him of the song and the physical movements they had done in the previous lesson. Thus, extensive practice of singing the song and doing the physical actions resulted in students’ voluntary TPR. Some stimuli reminded them of the song and the physical actions they had performed in the previous lesson and they voluntarily sang and/or performed the actions.

Voluntary Repetition

Interestingly, we also found that extensive choral repetitions resulted in students’ voluntary repetition. We observed students voluntarily repeating the target words or phrases by themselves. The repetitions were voluntary in that they occurred outside the main sequence of the classroom discourse and the students were not required to repeat the words or phrases. Moreover, the repetitions we refer to as voluntary repetitions were not private speech as they were spoken with other students. These voluntary repetitions were often observed between activities when the teachers were preparing for the next activities.

In example (4), four students are voluntarily repeating the names of the days of the week while the teacher is preparing a cassette tape. The class did choral repetition of the names of the days of the week just before this segment. Consider

the repetition in example (5). In line 1, as S1 utters Tuesday, the other students continue producing the names of the days of the week with S1 until line 5. Then in line 7, S3 starts producing the names of the days of the week starting from Sunday again, and the students keep producing the names of the days of the week until the song starts playing from the cassette recorder.

(5) [Kanto T:1]

((Students are talking while the American teacher is preparing a cassette tape for the next activity.))

1.S1: Tuesday

2.S2: Wednesday

3.S3: We:dn:sd:ay, (.) Thur:sday,

4.S1: Friday

5.S2: Satur(.):day

6.S4: (?)

7.S3: Sunday Monday Tu:esday,

8.S4: [Wednesday Thursday

9.S2: [() Thursday Friday

10.S3: Friday

Similarly, in example (6), the students are reviewing the prepositions that the class had just studied through choral repetition. While the students are reviewing the prepositions voluntarily, the visiting English teacher is preparing for the game the class is going to do next. In line 1, S1 asks the Japanese homeroom teacher assisting in the lesson which

preposition should be used to express *naka* (in). As the Japanese teacher tells the student “in”, S1 practices “in” twice. While S1 is repeating “in”, the Japanese teacher changes her attention to S3, who asks her a question. Therefore, S1’s utterances thereafter are produced privately. They were private in that the utterances were not addressed to anybody but produced by and for herself. In line 5, S1 repeats “in” again with “under” and in line 8, after repeating “in” and “under” again, she repeats “in”, “under” and “on” twice. Finally, at the end of the turn, she produces *yosshi*, which shows that she now remembers the prepositions.

(6) [Kanto S: 7]

1. S1: naka ireru no tte nan da kke.

“What do you say when you put something in?”

2. JT: naka wa IN [IN IN

“Inside is in, in.”

3. S1: [IN IN

4. S2: [in

5. S1: [IN UNDER

6. S3: [()

7. JT: ue ue.

“on, on.”

8. S1: IN UNDER (.) IN UNDER ON. IN UNDER ON.

9. yosshi.

“Alright.”

The fact that these voluntary repetitions often occurred after the choral repetition suggests that the students actually remembered the linguistic items they had verbalized during the choral repetition and that they are actively trying to remember, memorize, internalize, or learn the linguistic items.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the analyses of the data provide observed evidence that although there has been a lot of criticism of the Japanese Ministry of Education for not providing enough structure in the curriculum or enough teacher-training, the curriculum is being successfully implemented in Japanese public elementary schools in that English Activities are actively fostering the students’ interest and desires through the English learning tasks. This was found in the active participation of students, the extensive use of choral and voluntary repetition, and the application of Total Physical Response teaching methods. The positive effects of this instruction are observable in both the voluntary TPR and the voluntary repetition. Although one’s reaction to the extensive choral repetition in the classes might be a call for greater communicative use of English, we should remember that this repetition is an important part of language learning for children as they play with the sounds and patterns of the language in order to break the code. While these results are only from three schools and, therefore, not generalizable to all elementary schools in Japan, our research project is only just beginning as we are in the process of conducting more observations at schools throughout Japan.

Since the first steps of introducing English activity classes to Japanese public elementary schools appear to be successful, MEXT may wish to ask schools to increase the number of English classes or may make English a required subject. However, further research is needed into the quality of current teaching and the effects on second language acquisition of the teaching techniques currently in use. More qualitative and quantitative research is needed in this rapidly changing area of English language teaching as so much of the views on English classes for elementary schools is based on opinion not supported with observed data.

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Appendix 1

Transcription Conventions

- [] overlapping talk
- = latched utterances
- (0.0) timed pause (in seconds)
- (.) a short pause
- co:lon extension of the sound or syllable
- co::lon a more prolonged stretch
- . fall in intonation (final)
- , continuing intonation (non-final)
- ? rising intonation (final)
- ; intonation between a period and a comma
- ¿ a rise stronger than comma but weaker than a question mark
- CAPITAL loud talk
- underline emphasis
- ↑ sharp rise
- ↓ sharp fall
- ° ° passage of talk that is quieter than surrounding talk
- < > passage of talk that is slower than surrounding talk
- > < passage of talk that is faster than surrounding talk.
- hh audible aspirations
- *hh audible inhalations
- (hh) laughter within a word
- (()) comment by the transcriber
- () problematic hearing that the transcriber is not

certain about

“ “ Idiomatic translation of Japanese utterances