



Does English language instruction at the primary level contribute to speaking training? A case study

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The present qualitative study reports on a series of observations, over seven months, of one fifth-grade elementary class in order to investigate how English language instruction at the primary level can promote general speaking training. The data was analyzed based on language socialization theory, and the unit of analysis was the activity (teacher speech, class discussion, and inter-child disagreement, etc.), through which a class policy, *Do not use language that hurts others*, was developed. How English language instruction contributed to speaking training was explored through the instances in which the English language instruction induced negotiation and observance of this policy. The study suggests that English language education did not contribute to speaking training in any substantial way.

本研究は小学校における英語教育が一般的な話す教育にどのように寄与しているかを質的に調査したものである。データ収集は7か月間実施され、分析はlanguage socialization理論に基づいて行なわれた。分析単位は「人を傷つけるような言葉は使わない」というクラスの決まりの存在を示す活動(教師の話、学級討論、児童間の言い争いなど)であった。本稿では英語教育がどのように話す教育に寄与したかを、「人を傷つけるような言葉は使わない」という決まりの定着や発展にどのように寄与したかに置き換えて検証した。調査の結果、英語教育は話す訓練に実質的な貢献はしていないことが分かった。

As Wilkinson (1965) pointed out, spoken language has been a “shamefully neglected” area of study (quoted in Corden, 2000, p. 4), and the importance that speaking training carries is not high. However, the Japanese Ministry of Education acknowledged the importance of verbal communication in the 1989 *Course of Study*, and speaking training was implemented as the top priority in language arts (*kokugo*) education in 2002. In EFL education also, the emphasis on reading and writing

shifted to speaking and listening in the mid 80's, and verbal communication featured prominently in the "Action Plan to Cultivate 'Japanese with English Abilities'" announced by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology in 2002. Moreover, authorized by the most recent revision of the *Course of Study* in 1998, foreign (English) language education started at public primary schools in 2002. As its main focus is on speaking, how English language education at the primary level influences speaking training in general is of great interest particularly since English is a subject in which speaking training is provided from linguistic, communicative, interpersonal, and strategic perspectives. Based on a belief that English language education at the primary level not only imparts knowledge about the language and culture, but also contributes to education in general, this study examined how English language instruction contributes to speaking training in general at the primary level.

The results of the study suggest, however, that the English language education examined did not contribute to speaking training in any substantial way, and this seems to be due to how the native speaking assistant language teacher was used.

Research on speaking in EFL and in *kokugo* (language arts) in Japan

As a background to the present study, research on speaking in EFL and *kokugo* (language arts) education in Japan will be briefly discussed. Recent studies conducted in Japan concerning speaking in EFL have been based on research models developed in the center countries, i.e. countries where English is the native and first language. That is,

studies conducted in these countries focus on the cognitive aspects of language acquisition processes, whether it is first language (e.g. Barnes, 1975; Wells, 1986) or second language (e.g. Ellis, 1994), and studies carried out in Japan mirror this tendency. A cursory examination of research journals published in Japan such as the *JALT Journal* or *JACET Bulletin* supports such an observation. In *kokugo* (language arts), on the other hand, there exist philosophical discussions of character education through speaking. This is rarely observed in studies published in the center countries. Character education seems to be an important part of the theory and practice of speaking in Japan. Matsumura (2001), for instance, regards speaking ability as "a means through which to recognize and change ourselves as we relate ourselves to others" (p. 44). Researchers at Fukuoka University of Education and at Fukuoka University of Education Fuzoku Junior High School (1997) regard speaking ability as "an ability to co-exist with people with different ideas and points of view" (p. 14). These researchers regard speaking training as a means to change ourselves for the better as learners and people. Furthermore, Morikubo (1989) states that the goal of speaking training is character education and the "deepening of personal relationships" (p. 174). Thus, speaking training is treated differently in EFL and *kokugo*.

Against the backdrop of these two divergent research tracks, the present study attempted to investigate how EFL education at the primary level contributes to speaking training based on a bottom-up, grounded theory model (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Method

Data collection was conducted in a fifth-grade class at Hanaoka Elementary School in Western Japan for seven months. (All the names in this report, including that of the school, are pseudonyms.) The class consisted of 28 children (16 girls and 12 boys). Mrs. Sato, the homeroom teacher, a veteran teacher with 20 years of experience, and Mr. Davis, the assistant language teacher, with two years of teaching experience, started teaching English conversation at Hanaoka Elementary School once every two weeks in 2004. The sources of the data included 24 all-day, non-participant observations, which included 12 observations of the English class, field notes, two interviews with Mrs. Sato, two videotapes representing the typical teaching styles of Mrs. Sato and Mr. Davis, various documents, plus a preliminary report of the study and a follow-up interview about the report.

Data analysis was based on language socialization theory (e.g. Ochs, 1998; Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986). This theory suggests that, with the help of people who are knowledgeable about the culture (such as caregivers, siblings, and teachers), children and newcomers to a society are exposed to and participate in cultural activities through the mediation of language, through which they acquire the cultural norms of the society such as values, ideologies, and beliefs. Language socialization refers to this process. The language socialization process is crucial since those who are not familiar with the society need to be able to deal with situations they are placed in at any given moment and to behave and speak in ways that are culturally relevant to that situation. The unit of analysis in language socialization theory is activity. According to

Duff (1995), activity as a unit of analysis enables “the deconstruction of well-bounded discursive events and facilitates comparisons across contexts” (p. 513), and that is precisely why language socialization theory was used in this study. Children’s classroom life is compartmentalized into smaller segments such as class meetings, classes, lunch, recess, and cleaning. A means that deconstructed “well-bounded discursive events” was required in the current cross-sectional study of this particular class.

In the present study, the activity (Mrs. Sato’s speech, class discussion, and arguments among children) that lead to the establishment of the class policy, *Do not use language that hurts others*, was identified as a unit of analysis based on repeated readings of the data. That was because this activity was observed on a regular basis, involving both the teacher and the children. Moreover, this activity made it clear that the children were learning how to be a member of the class community as they learned how to speak. That is, speaking was as an integral part of the children’s socialization. Furthermore, the class policy occupied an important place in the classroom and in the school at large. Therefore, how EFL instruction contributed to speaking training was explored through the instances in which the EFL instruction induced negotiation and observance of this policy.

Results

As the class policy, *Do not use language that hurts others*, surfaced on a number of occasions, the children started to orient themselves to the policy and to hold each other accountable when it was violated. Thus, the children seemed to be aware of the vital importance of observing the policy

as part of the class culture in which their identity was rooted. The policy was also a hidden curriculum in the school community. In what follows, how the class policy was accepted by the children and how Mrs. Sato sensitized the children to the policy will be delineated. The EFL class will be then discussed in relation to the policy, and how the EFL instruction contributed to the development of the children's speaking ability will be explored.

Children learning from Mrs. Sato

Toward the end of the second term, it became clear to me that the class policy, *Do not use language that hurts others*, was part of the hidden curriculum at the school (Observation #15). One morning, as she usually did, Mrs. Sato came to the classroom after attending the morning staff meeting. She told the class to stop what they were doing, told them that she had something important to discuss, announced that they were going to have a moral lesson period, and related the following two incidents. These incidents had been thoroughly discussed in the morning staff meeting.

The first incident concerned a first-grader whose shoes had been missing every day for a week. Previously, this first-grader was observed happily showing off his or her newly acquired water bottle, and, according to Mrs. Sato's report, some one made the following remark. The connection between the water bottle and the shoes is not clear.

Excerpt 1 (November):

Jibundake katte moratte nanda. Mushi shiyoo.
(What! Only you have a new water bottle. Let's give him/her the cold shoulder.)

When Mrs. Sato asked the class how they should react when they observed someone showing off, they said:

Excerpt 2 (November):

Iinaa. (I envy you.)

Mrs. Sato acknowledged the envious feeling, asked the children how to articulate such a feeling, and agreed that "*Iinaa* (I envy you)" would be an appropriate expression. She then described the shoes and told the class to notify her if they found them.

The second incident concerned a child who had fits. The fits were the type that could be relieved when some one hugged the child for a while, and the classmates gave the child a hug whenever it happened in class. On the previous day, when his or her classmate was hugging the child after a fit, some one in another class said the following:

Excerpt 3 (November):

Waa koitsura kurutteru. (Wow, these guys are crazy.)

Mrs. Sato taught the children that it was not humane to react this way to someone else's pain and explained how to help when they found themselves in such a situation.

One of the educational goals at Hanaoka Elementary School was to bring up children who could show sympathy towards others. The ability to feel for others seemed to be a crucial quality that the children were expected to develop. In line with this educational goal, the staff took the above insensitive remarks seriously, discussed them thoroughly, and decided to send a clear message that this kind of mentality and language will not be tolerated in the school community.

Furthermore, the class policy, *Do not use language that hurts others*, was an important concept for Mrs. Sato who needed to orchestrate a desirable class culture. She made efforts to “establish good personal relationships in class at the beginning of the school year when the children were new to one another” (Interview #1). Mrs. Sato provided the class with speaking training so as to articulate their thoughts and feelings in appropriate manners whenever she had opportunities to do so.

The first time I witnessed Mrs. Sato providing such speaking training was immediately after the EFL class on my first day of observation, the only instance in the EFL class when the policy was violated during this study, and the repercussion of the incident was visible during the lesson. On that day the class learned how to ask for and tell time, which was followed by a game as a wrap-up task. In the game, the children formed groups and each group sat in a circle. They then spread cards with different times written on them. Each child in the group held a fly swatter in turn and swatted a card on which the time Mr. Davis had read out was written as in Excerpt 4. The group that collected the most cards was the winner.

Excerpt 4 (May):

Children: What time is it? ((ask Mr. Davis in chorus))

Mr. Davis: It's 10 o'clock.

Children: ((a child with a fly swatter searches for the card with the time written on it and swats it.))

In the excitement to collect as many cards as possible, a child made an apathetic remark toward a classmate who could not swat cards well.

Excerpt 5 (May):

Nibuine. Toreyo, boke. (You're slow. Swat them, stupid.)

When the class went back to the regular classroom, Mrs. Sato referred to the above incident and instructed the class for five minutes not to use language that hurt others. In one of the interviews Mrs. Sato mentioned that the child who had made the remark in question had similar problems in the previous year. Those who knew the child had already formed preconceived notions about him, and Mrs. Sato “wanted to destroy them if they were negative ones. She wanted to help the child to find a new way of life” (Interview #1).

As the examples above and below demonstrate, the class policy, *Do not use language that hurts others*, manifested itself during class, during recess, in the classroom, and in the playground, and Mrs. Sato and the children recognized the importance of the policy whenever it surfaced. These moments provided the class with chances to improve their communication ability. All the incidents that occur at school are potential sites where speaking training is provided, and the EFL class contributed to speaking training as one of these sites. On the other hand, in the only instance in which the class policy was violated in the EFL class, the problem was addressed not in the EFL classroom by Mr. Davis, but in the regular classroom by Mrs. Sato. Thus, Mr. Davis was not involved with the development or observance of the policy at all; it developed mainly in the regular class.

Children learning from one another

As the academic year progressed, the general class policy appeared in more concrete, student-derived policies *Do not address someone as omae*. *Omae* is a potentially disrespectful version of “you.” For instance, one child, Hayashi-san, was heard saying the following when she was arguing with two other boys, Naito-kun and Aizawa-kun, during a recess. She seemed to be protesting to Aizawa-kun because he had addressed her as *omae*:

Excerpt 6 (June):

Hayashi-san: *Omaette iwaretara donnakimochi?*
(How would you feel if someone called you *omae*?)

Aizawa-kun: *Ijimeda*. (Like you’re bullying me.)

Among the children the term *omae* gradually came to represent an insensitive use of language. Another example was *yatsu* (guys). *Yatsu* carries a pejorative connotation depending on the context. One day in the second term, the class played dodge ball in the playground. During the game a few boys started suggesting that they should pass the ball to those who had not had a chance to touch it yet, and let them throw it. Excerpt 7 is part of the conversation:

Excerpt 7 (October):

Child: () *yatsumo irukara*. (There are guys who ()).

Aizawa-kun: *Yatsutte naniyo*. (What do you mean “*yatsu*?”)

In Excerpt 7, someone used the term *yatsu*, and Aizawa-kun pointed out the pejorative connotation that the term carried.

Mrs. Sato had not told the class not to use the terms *omae* or *yatsu*. However, the class seemed to have brought down the policy, *Do not use language that hurts others*, and the decent communal life it symbolized, to a more concrete level to which they could relate better. The policy, *Do not address someone as omae (or yatsu)* came into existence as the children negotiated personal relationships in a newly formed class, and it seemed to have been firmly established by the third term.

EFL class and the class policy, Do not use language that hurts others

The class policy, *Do not use language that hurts others*, that Mrs. Sato tried to instill in class, and the policy, *Do not address someone as omae (or yatsu)*, that the children established, symbolized the speaking training provided in the class. However, events such as the ones quoted above, that brought friction but which also had the potential to lead to the development of the children’s communication ability, rarely took place in the EFL class, and these policies developed almost exclusively in the regular classes. Why the policy, *Do not use language that hurts others*, did not materialize in the EFL class will be examined below.

Why the policy did not surface

There are three reasons that the policy did not surface in the EFL class. First, Mrs. Sato and Mr. Davis did not have opportunities to discuss their educational ideologies, values,

and beliefs, and therefore Mr. Davis was unaware of the existence of the class policy, which was based on Mrs. Sato's ideologies and the school ethos: the hidden curriculum was also hidden from Mr. Davis. At the staff meeting on each Monday morning Mr. Davis presented expressions that he was planning to teach that week, and practiced them with the staff. That was the only interaction between Mr. Davis and Mrs. Sato regarding the EFL class apart from brief exchanges during lessons with regard to what to teach and how to teach.

Second, there was a division of labor between Mrs. Sato and Mr. Davis. The main tasks for Mr. Davis in his EFL class were, as illustrated below, to greet the class, to review the previous lesson, to present new expressions, and to conduct various tasks to practice them. That is, communication in Mr. Davis' class was largely procedural, and communication that accompanied understanding of who the interlocutor really is rarely occurred. Mrs. Sato, on the other hand, was responsible for assisting Mr. Davis with instructions, translating them into Japanese if necessary, motivating the class, making sure that they are doing what they are supposed to do, and solving any problems. Thus, there was a clear division of labor between the two, and Mr. Davis was responsible for imparting knowledge only.

Third, in the EFL class, the children went through the following tasks in the following order at a rapid speed for 45 minutes. It is, therefore, possible that they did not have time to think or react to the lessons.

1) Greetings (e.g. *How's the weather?—It's cloudy; How are you?—I'm fine.*)

2) TPR (The class listens to fast-paced music in which the instruction in the tape tells the children to “dance,” “play soccer,” and so on.)

3) Review the previous lesson and present new items (For instance, Mr. Davis and the class practice the following exchanges: *What time is it?—10 o'clock; When's Oshogatsu (New Year)?—It's in January.*)

4) Games (The class forms groups and plays games, using expressions studied on that day.)

5) Good-bye (As the class leaves the English Room, Mr. Davis shakes hands with each child, practicing what they studied during the lesson.)

The reasons he taught various tasks at a rapid speed seemed to be to motivate the class, and at the same time to cover the materials within a limited time. However, this way of teaching does not induce the children to connect the English they are studying to the knowledge that they already possess and find new meanings there. Furthermore, the children are so busy completing the tasks that this may preclude possibilities to utter language unrelated to the task at hand and use creative language.

Discussion

Speaking training and character education

This study explored how EFL instruction at one elementary school contributed to speaking training by examining instances in which the EFL instruction induced negotiation and observance of a class policy, *Do not use language that*

hurts others. Everything that takes place in children's school lives shapes their knowledge base. As they relate not only newly acquired knowledge, but also numerous interactions and incidents that occur to their existing knowledge base, children find new meanings and develop intellectually (Corder, 2000; Wells, 1986). Moreover, numerous incidents and interactions provide teachers with opportunities to construct a knowledge base that they share with the children. The EFL class, albeit in a limited way, provided Mrs. Sato and her class with a shared knowledge base regarding how to articulate one's thoughts and feelings without hurting others, and it contributed to the development and establishment of the class policy.

At the same time, as they discussed and observed the class policy, the children were provided with character training such as how to show consideration and respect towards others. The children were trained to understand themselves, others, one another's strengths and weaknesses, and to change if necessary to be a constructive member of the class and school community as they formed their consciousness, identity, and relationships through the educational experience.

Thus, speaking training and character education proceeded concurrently in the class. This seemed due to the fact that children at the primary level are still in the process of developing spiritually, intellectually, emotionally, and physically, and at their developmental stage education can simultaneously be all of these things. That is, education at the primary level tends to be holistic. Moreover, character education seems to go hand in hand with speaking in Japan, as is evident from the literature review.

Turning to EFL instruction, however, while Mr. Davis contributed to speaking training, he was not involved in character education. This was largely because the two teachers' responsibilities were sharply divided with Mrs. Sato responsible for both speaking training and character education and Mr. Davis responsible only for language instruction. If ALTs are engaged more in children's holistic education, they may have chances to communicate with the homeroom teacher and the children with regard to the instructional contents and class management, and authentic communication may occur through the process. Such interaction would be compatible with the original purposes of EFL education at the primary level such as the development of multi-cultural sensitivity through contact with people from overseas and the cultures they introduce (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology, 2001, p. 3). Making ALTs responsible only for procedural communication may preclude the possibility of creative communication.

Team teaching

The present study also points to the difficulty of team-teaching. As in the case of the class observed, in a situation where teachers have very little time for lesson planning with no structural support, clear division of labor may be a viable solution. However, for the reasons stated above, at the primary level it does not seem to be appropriate to sharply divide the tasks of the homeroom teacher and ALTs into character education and subject education. There should be educational space where creative interactions take place between the homeroom teacher, the ALT, and the

children. In order to create and make use of such educational space, the ALTs' peripheral position in the school system needs to be improved. Furthermore, ALTs need to heighten their awareness as agents of change and be more active in all aspects of teaching carried out at the primary level. Homeroom teachers also need to involve ALTs more in all aspects of education. Lastly, support from the national and local governments and the school is indispensable.

Conclusion

The Japanese government has implemented various educational innovations in order to solve social problems such as bullying, withdrawal, and refusal to attend school (Okano & Tsuchiya, 1999). Furthermore, efforts to prevent such problems have also been made at school and class levels, as the current study has demonstrated. The communicative ability to articulate one's thoughts and feelings clearly and appropriately and to understand others' viewpoints featured prominently as a means to construct a democratic and just community in the class where observations took place. As part of such speaking training, English language education that started at public primary schools can make substantial contributions. However, various educational innovations at the national and local levels are required in order to achieve such results.

The present study confirms the importance of examining language in the sociocultural contexts in which it is used, as opposed to examining it in clinical settings (as is often the case in second language acquisition research). As the present study demonstrates, factors that have not been thoroughly investigated in second language acquisition research are

involved in language learning in EFL settings. These factors include values, beliefs, and ideologies. In order to validate such local knowledge and practice, more inclusive conceptual frameworks are called for.

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