



Introducing reading and writing in the lower grades of elementary school: From ABC to writing books about me

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Can children enjoy an English program in which reading and writing are an integral part? Can children actually learn to read, write, and share their own stories in the lower elementary school grades? What steps can we take to help students achieve such goals? The authors introduce their approach to learning the alphabet, starting reading, with a focus on the use of sight word readers, and writing personalized stories in grades one and two of elementary school. Tests, surveys, and observations evaluating their approach are presented.

小学校低学年クラスではどのように楽しく読み書きを取り入れることができるであろうか。ここでは、小学校低学年クラスにおけるリスニング学習、アラファベット学習、sight word に焦点を当てたテキストを使用したリーディング・ライティング学習の段階的な指導法、実践例、成果を紹介する。

The Ministry of Education, Science, Sports, and Culture (MEXT) in its *Practical Handbook for Elementary School English Activities* (MEXT, 2001) claims that introducing written English will cause students to dislike English. However, in our lower elementary school English classes,

children are enjoying their encounter with written English (Byrd, Fujiwara, & Aiba, 2006). Also, we often hear from public school teachers who attend our teacher training courses that their students want to learn written English, and these teachers want to include it in their English programs. Is the introduction of written English in elementary schools a negative thing? We will consider the process in which first and second grade private elementary school students were introduced to written English, and the results achieved.

1. The priority of listening and its connection to speaking

Nunan (2003) suggests that listening is important for beginning English students in Asia. Matsuka (2003) agrees on the importance of listening for children learning English. In our more than 20 years of teaching English to children, we know the importance and effectiveness of providing abundant opportunities for listening. The English program at our (Byrd & Fujiwara) school, where students from the first grade have two 40-minute English classes each week, puts emphasis on training ears through listening. In the first grade, this is done through listening to songs, chants, basic vocabulary, and simple dialogs. We provide each student with the text, *My English Land* (Fujiwara, Byrd & Osame, 1997) and CD (Fujiwara, Byrd, & Aiba, 2006) used in the classroom. Students also receive a listening card, on which they keep a record of their listening at home and submit regularly for a stamp or sticker. As students listen for approximately 15 minutes a few times a week, they greatly increase the time they are exposed to aural English. As they sing and chant with or after the CD at home, students are

also able to practice *speaking*, to become more comfortable with producing the sounds of English. This *home-based* listening program helps students to internalize and produce the rhythm, intonation, natural speed, and vocabulary of English (Byrd, Fujiwara, & Aiba, 2005).

2. Introducing the alphabet

Although we give priority and emphasis to listening and speaking (approximately 70-80% of class), learning the alphabet (reading and writing) is from the start a vital part of our English program. Learning the alphabet is the first step in reading and writing (Murahata, 2005). Learning the alphabet seems to open the door to interest in the English letters and words children encounter. It sharpens their thinking ability, and leads them to be more self-directed in their study (Takagi, 2005).

Ways of teaching the alphabet

The authors feel that it is important for children to take time in learning the alphabet. Japanese children have a much greater challenge in learning the alphabet than children whose native language uses the English alphabet or a similar one (Scott & Ytreberg, 2001). We use a variety of methods in making children familiar with letters in an enjoyable way. Some examples follow.

- Learn the names of the letters through songs, chants, and basic phonics.
- Write letters first with a finger in the air. Learn the proper stroke order. Trace enlarged letters. Do one or two letters at a time.

- Draw imaginative pictures using alphabet letters.
- Copy the letters.
- Do puzzles that require students to find, and then copy letters and words.
- Gradually increase the neatness of writing by writing on a line, then between lines.
- Have a goal of writing the upper and lower case letters neatly and quickly from memory, and give certificates of accomplishment.

Learning the whole alphabet from memory gives students a sense of pride and accomplishment. In our classes, students who took longer than peers to accomplish this task expressed particular pleasure with a smile and “I did it!” on receiving their award certificate. We noted a resultant increase in motivation among these students.

In addition to the above examples, we use a number of games to help children enjoy learning the alphabet. These include snap, bingo, matching games, Old Maid, Go fish, put the cards in order, etc.

3. Sight word readers and personalized stories

As our students enter the second grade, they have a strong listening background and aptitude; a positive attitude towards English; and basic alphabet and writing, and some phonics skills. With this base, we decided to set as a goal familiarity with a series of sight word (high frequency word) readers recorded on CD (Scholastic, 2003). According to Blevins,

13 simple words, *a, and, he, is, in, it, of, that, the, to, was, and, you* make up 25% of all printed English, and only 100 words make up half the words found in books today... These 100 words also make up the majority of words used by children in their writing.... Knowledge (of these sight words) is critical to reading success. (in Beech, 2003, p4)

We chose to introduce 50 sight words using series of 25 mini-books, with each book introducing two new sight words. An example of the simple repeated pattern of one of the books, “Play Time” (Scholastic, 2003) follows.

I play with blocks. I play with boats. I play with dolls...puppets...bubbles...balls...trucks...kittens.

The story uses the 2 new sight words, “play” and “with,” 8 times each, so that as the students listen repeatedly to the CD at home and practice repeating and reading the story, they become familiar with the pronunciation and spelling of “with,” a high frequency word our older students have difficulty saying and reading. The practice of following words with the eyes while listening to the text helps students to gradually sense the relation between word and text (Butler, 2005). After students had practiced writing the sight words and stories in a number of ways (copying, worksheets, etc.), they made their own mini-books. In making mini-books, students personalized patterns from the books they had read, e.g. “*I play with...*” (Students could ask the spelling of words they wanted to use.

Student 1 *I play with dinosaurs. I play with my game boy. I play with my brother.*

Student 2 *I play with Takashi. I play with Keiko. I play with Teacher.*

Student 3 *I play with Mommy. I play with Daddy. I play with Grandma.*

Steps in teaching sight word readers

1. Use appropriate materials, with simple patterned sentences, illustrated clearly and colorfully, and recorded with interesting sound effects and pauses to repeat.
2. Listen and repeat first in class, and then regularly at home. Have students keep a record of their home study on their listening/reading cards.
3. Make time for oral expression, reading as a class, in a group, with a partner, and alone. Have students read for the class.
4. Keep on writing (after they have had a chance to read the stories), first copying in a lined notebook, and then making their own sentences and books. Writing helps them to retain the words they learn (Ito, 2003).
5. Use a variety of materials and approaches to learn the sight words: flashcards with words and sentences, workbooks, puzzles, games, etc. Give certificates for reading the 50 sight words.
6. Have clear goals. In grade two, students should be able to
 - a. Read the 25 books we covered in class.
 - b. Copy sentences well.
 - c. Read the 50 sight words smoothly.
 - d. Make their own sentences using the patterns learned.

e. Approach with confidence other simple reading material.

f. Begin to use the phrases learned from the books in writing and speaking.

g. Begin to use these patterns to write, read, and share about themselves through *personalized mini-books*.

Mastering the sight words can open doors for students to enjoy age-appropriate stories. There are many attractive, illustrated, content-rich storybooks that can be best enjoyed at a younger age and which our students were eager to borrow and try to read as they learned the 50 sight words in our series.

Sight words test results

The following table shows the number of sight words read out of 50 words by 80 grade two students in December 2006, after a year and a half of English, including 6 months of instruction using the sight word readers in row 2, and 3 months later in March 2007 (row 3, 81 students). Students had to read the words within 3 seconds each, and with proper pronunciation.

Table 1. Improvement in reading sight words

| Number of sight words read out of 50 words | 50 | 40-49 | 30-39 | 20-29 | 10-19 | 1-9 |
|---|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|------|
| Number of students (out of 80 students) reading correctly in December 2006 | 19% | 17% | 14% | 22% | 24% | 4% |
| Number of students (out of 81 students) reading correctly in March 2007 | 71.6% | 1.2% | 17.3% | 7.4% | 1.2% | 1.2% |

At the time of the December evaluation, students had had about 32 hours of classroom instruction in grade two, of which under half had been spent on the readers; by March 2007, students had spent another 4 hours of class time on sight words. A marked improvement was shown in the final 3 months of grade 2; over 70% could read all 50 of the sight words, and all students had made significant improvement. The students seemed pleased with the chance to test their ability to read, and many wanted to repeat the test again and again. The test was also useful as a diagnostic tool, revealing the students who needed more specialized and individualized instruction. We gave certificates to the students who could read all 50 words. Even after the above tests, students who had not passed continued to try the test, and get a certificate, to the applause of their classmates.

Whether or not the students were able to read the entire list of sight words, they were able to “read” aloud page by page the stories, as they had had ample opportunity to hear and say the story lines. Repetition of the patterned stories made it possible for even students who had difficulty reading to internalize and reproduce the stories.

Further observations

Compared to classes we had taught without putting much emphasis on reading and writing, the students’ ability to read the sight word readers made other activities possible. They could read what was written on the chalkboard, play games that required reading, follow the lyrics of new songs, and read other books and text. Being able to read allowed them more speaking practice in class, both as a group and in pairs, and raised the level of difficulty of what they could practice

together. Having learned the basics, they were willing, eager to challenge even difficult materials. In the same way, their familiarity with the alphabet and competence in writing neatly and quickly made writing an enjoyable and valuable part of lessons. Learning how to read and write while at this young age seems not to produce, but rather prevent allergy to written English, and dislike of English. This agrees with the findings of others. “Children who have been introduced to written English in elementary school are more motivated to write once in junior high school. Introducing written English may well prevent the dislike of English (Murahata, 2005).

Conclusion

We have used the same basic approach in grades one and two for three years now. Survey results continue to show that a high percentage of students like English. In a survey of the first classes of students at the end of grade one, 99% liked English. 96% of these same students were positive about English at the end of grade two. Of our second classes of students, 95% liked English at the end of grade two. These results show that teaching reading and writing did not make the students dislike English.

Can this approach succeed in other schools? Students in language schools using the same approach and materials were also able to progress from learning the alphabet to writing personalized mini-books. The methods and results described in this paper may be of use in the discussion of how to introduce English in other elementary schools. Whether an English program starts in grade one, as ours does, or in later grades, and even in situations where less time per week is available for English, adapting part the

approach outlined in this paper for other schools—including public schools—may merit consideration.

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