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Challenging Assumptions
Looking In, Looking Out

Examining the characteristics of primary school EFL classes

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Most of the primary schools in Japan have already begun to implement an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) program of some form or other. Despite the welter of assertions and claims regarding the advantages and disadvantages of teaching EFL to young learners there has, however, been surprisingly little empirical research examining the events in the classroom. The purpose of the present study is to observe three different classes, in which English is taught by different teachers and to describe what actually occurs in a primary school EFL setting. The classes are recorded on DVD, subsequently coded, analyzed according to the Communicative Orientation of Language Teaching (COLT) observation scheme, and compared with the earlier studies. The results indicate that there are various commonalities as well as differences. Based on these results, proposals are offered for improving EFL teaching in the classroom at primary schools in Japan.

日本のほとんどの小学校が既に何らかの形で英語活動を実施しています。しかしながら長所、短所に関しての主張が入り乱れる中、実際にどのようなことが行われているのかについての実証的研究はほとんどなされていません。本研究の目的は異なる教師が教える3つのクラスについて観察し、EFL環境下でなにがなされているのかを記述するものです。授業はDVDで録画され、COLTを使い、コーディングおよび先行研究と比較しながら分析を行います。結果、相違点だけでなく共通点も確認されています。その結果をふまえ、日本の小学校におけるEFL環境下の英語活動向上に向けて提言をします。

The teaching of English at primary school level in Japan is becoming increasingly common. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT, 2007a) has reported that in the year 2006, 95.8 % of local elementary schools surveyed provide some form of English education. In November 2007, the Kyoiku Bukai, Education Committee, finally concluded their discussion, in which they mentioned the introduction of English into all of the public primary schools (MEXT, 2007b). A number of research studies to date have been conducted about the effectiveness of the instruction and the results have been reported in professional journals. These studies are quite informative, but most of them

are discussions on the current and future programs (e.g., Shimura, 1998), on the teachers' attitudes (e.g., Benesse Corporation, 2006) or on the introduction of English into primary school (e.g., Matsukawa, 2004; Tsukamoto, 1999). With the notable exceptions of Suwa (1994), Yamada (1996), and Yasuno (2004), there are surprisingly few surveys that have investigated what is actually going on in the classroom. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to clarify the teaching of EFL in a primary school classroom environment.

Literature review

Suwa (1994) looked at the methods, materials, and uses of both first language (L1) and second language (L2) in the English language classroom in order to assess the extent to which instruction involves genuine communicative English. Yamada (1996) examined how much learners' comprehension will be affected in relation to the teachers' target language use and to evaluate the extent to which programs would be most desirable for cross-cultural understanding education. Yasuno (2004) observed forty-three English classes at two public elementary schools and carried out a research on how the English classes are conducted.

Based on the claims made by these three researchers, some characteristics of the English activities at the school surveyed emerge as follows.

1. A considerable amount of the interaction where there is one central activity led by the teacher, a student, or students, including choral repetition was observed (Suwa, 1994; Yamada, 1996).
2. As the grade became higher, it was observed that the proportion of activities where the pupils worked on the same task in a group became larger, but that, contrastingly, the proportion of choral utterances became smaller (Yasuno, 2004).
3. Vocabulary and formulae were mainly taught (Suwa, 1994).
4. Topics vary depending on each school; one school highly covered topics other than language in great depth but another school mainly focused on language (Yasuno, 2004).
5. Neither reading nor writing activities were employed (Yamada, 1996).
6. English was primarily used for management in English Immersion classes, as was Japanese in Core English classes (the subject matter instruction was in L2 but L1 was primarily used for procedures and translation of the contents) (Yamada, 1996).
7. Teachers' predominant use of L1 made pupils feel free to use the language (Yamada, 1996).
8. The more the teacher spoke L1, the more the students used L1 (Suwa, 1994).
9. L1 was used for classroom management (Suwa, 1994).
10. Although all the programs observed were typically based on high degree of control by the teachers, more time was controlled by pupils in English Immersion classes than in the other classes (Yamada, 1996).
11. Topics were controlled by the teacher (Suwa, 1994).

Among the schools observed, the ones observed by Yasuno were only public schools. As Yamada, who observed a school attached to a national university, mentioned, the findings may be biased according to the pupils' motivation, their teachers' instruction or their learning circumstances. Such results should be examined to see if they may apply to the schools analyzed in this research.

Research questions

The present research attempts to provide the answers as to what is actually going on in the classroom when English as a foreign language is being taught to primary school pupils. This question is divided into the following subsections:

1. What kind of interaction occurs in the classroom?
2. What kind of content do the activities focus on?
3. Which of the student modalities (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) is the focus placed on?
4. What kind of differences are there in instruction among the teachers?

The study

Predictions

Based on the personal experiences of the researcher, who is also a teacher in one of the explored schools, the following are four proposed predictions:

1. Interaction between pupils would occur as well as interaction between the teacher and the pupils.

As one of the aims of English activities is to foster in pupils an urge to initiate communication (MEXT, 2001), it is not only assumed that the teachers should give a lot of L2 input to the pupils but also assumed that there should be some interaction among pupils.

2. Not only the formal aspects of language such as vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar but also other topics would be covered.

The explored city uses a topic-based syllabus whose topics are familiar to the primary school pupils such as family, shopping, food, and so forth. Although most of the topics introduced would probably be limited, it would be possible for some teachers to deal with broader topics related to social studies or science.

3. A greater focus would be placed on listening and speaking.

The pupils have neither textbooks nor notebooks for the English class. Although they could use a piece of paper if necessary, it would be rare to teach reading and writing under the curriculum given by the local Board of Education.

4. Teaching belief of the Japanese teachers of English would influence the contents of the English activities.

Even though the three schools use a common English curriculum and syllabus, the Japanese teachers of English (JTEs), who actually revise the lesson plans received, are also told that they do not have to follow the plans strictly word by word. The preference of each JTE on methodology should affect the contents or the types of activities.

Research design

Participants

The participants are three homeroom teachers (HRTs), three JTEs and 89 ten-to-twelve-year-old pupils at three primary schools in the city. The city was designated as a Foreign Language Education Special Structural Reform Zone in 2005. The pupils in the first and second grades have sixteen hours of English lessons, and those in the third to sixth grades have thirty-five hours a year at every primary school in the city. There, a JTE and a HRT, sometimes with an assistant language teacher (ALT), work together in accordance with common lesson plans. These lesson plans were designed by a committee consisting of primary and junior high school teachers and JTEs assigned by the local Board of Education. Since the number of pupils per class differs, JTEs flesh out and adjust the plans provided by the Board of Education to make them more suitable for their schools.

School P is a small school with a single class in each grade, located in a rural area. It started giving English lessons in 2006. School Q is the largest school in the city, located in the center of the city, and started giving English lessons in 2002 although the number of classes was very small in the first two years. School R is a middle-sized school with two classes in each grade, located in the center of the city, and started English lessons in 2004. The class sizes of P, Q, and R are 26, 35, and 28 pupils respectively.

Methodology

School R was observed in September, 2006, School Q in March and School P in April, 2007. The lessons were recorded on DVD using a Hard Disc camcorder mounted on a tripod. The camcorder was placed either in the corner at the front or in the rear of the room.

The collected data were transcribed and coded using the Communicative Orientation of Language Teaching (COLT) observation scheme, and then the features such as interaction between the teachers and the students, the kinds of student modalities, and so forth were analyzed.

Observation instrument

Mackey and Gass (2005) introduce several observation schemes such as Nunan's classroom observation tally sheet, the Target Language Observation Scheme (1985) developed by Ullman and Geva, and Communicative Orientation of Language Teaching (COLT) (Spada & Fröhlich, 1995). Mackey and Gass (2005) mention in their book, "If the overall occurrence of a phenomenon is of interest, then a category system like the COLT observation scheme is most appropriate" (p. 200).

The COLT observation scheme was initially developed by Spada, *et al.* in the 1980s, when Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) was widely accepted and implemented. In the 1970s, a number of researchers had made process-oriented research, but in order to verify the effectiveness of CLT, there was a need for research which can quantify the instructional and learner data in ways which permit the researcher to investigate relationships between instructional

input and learning outcomes (Spada & Flöhlich, 1995). The COLT consists of two parts: Part A and Part B. Part A describes classroom events at the level of episode and activity (an activity consists of a few episodes), whereas Part B describes the communicative features of verbal exchange between teachers and students and/or students and students. In this research, only Part A was used to verify the four predictions posed. Part B was not used because this research doesn't touch upon the communicative features of verbal exchanges. As you see in Table 1, a Teacher-to-teacher category was added to the area of "Participant Organization," because the three classes were all team taught. Some combination categories were also added to the area of "Content" so as to see how much the topics were combined (Table 3).

Results and Discussion

The data were obtained by calculating the percentage of classroom time.

Participant Organization

As can be seen in Table 1, most of the time was spent in the activities in which the whole class was involved, where the proportion of the interaction between the pupils was rather larger than in earlier studies. The sum of the percentage numbers in this research is not always 100%, as combinations of T-T and T-S/C, for example, sometimes occurred in a single activity.

Student Modality

In all three classrooms, neither reading nor writing activities were employed (Table 2). MEXT (2001) states that "... elementary school 'English activities' focus on the hearing and speaking of simple English terms that students know from their daily lives" (p. 124). The classes surveyed in this study seemed to practice in accordance with this suggestion as Table 2 shows.

Content

As can be seen in Table 3, the result was similar to that of the research done by Yasuno (2004) a considerable amount of combinations of, for instance, form and narrow topic was observed as well as form alone. Spada (1987, cited in Spada & Fröhlich, 1995) states, "...a combination of form and meaning worked better than an exclusive focus on either meaning or form" (p.7). In this respect, the way of teaching at primary schools could have a positive impact on pupils' learning. In English programs at primary schools, however, where focus on form is strictly banned, it is almost impossible to verify that a varied focus on English works better than an exclusive focus on form or meaning.

Table 1. Participant organization

Class	T<->T	T<->S/C	S<->S/C	Choral	Group	Individual	Group/ Individual
Suwa B	8	35	0	15	5	29	7
Suwa C	0	53	0	29	0	18	0
Suwa D	0	44	0	38	0	18	0
Yamada Immersion	0	84.21	0	9.12	0	1.84	4.83
Yamada Core	0	83.56	0	7.19	0	4.57	4.68
Yamada Extended	0	80.87	0	9.51	0	4.19	5.43
Yasuno G5 & 6K	1.8	22.9	1.2	10.2	46.7	5.3	12
Yasuno G5 & 6S	4.8	24	4.6	20.2	24.5	22	0
P	3.6	26.9	47.9	27.1	0	0	0
Q	16.0	29.3	36.0	25.4	0	0	0
R	0.0	29.9	9.4	31.7	26.8	0	0

Notes. Percentage figures within a total length of lesson time.

T-T=Interaction between the teachers

T-S/C=Interaction between the teacher(s) and the student(s)

S-S/C=Interaction between the pupils

Choral=Pupils' choral utterances such as repetitions after the teacher

Group=Activities in a group

Individual=Individual work such as writing at desk

Yamada Extended= the class where explanations were made in L1 only when the teacher noticed that the pupils did not understand what she said in L2

Yamada Core= the class where the subject matter instruction was in L2 but L1 was primarily used for procedures and translation of the contents

Table 2. Student modality

Class	Listening	Speaking	Reading	Writing	Others
P	67.3	68.8	0.0	0.0	29.1
Q	83.0	77.2	0.0	0.0	26.0
R	95.0	95.0	0.0	0.0	5.0

Table 3. Lesson content taken up in class

class	management		language					other topics		Combination						not noted
	procedure	discipline	form	function	discourse	socialization	narrow	broad	Form/function	Form/narrow	Form/function/narrow	Form & broad	Function/broad	Function/narrow	Function	
P	23	0	34.5	11.4	0	0	2.2	0	0	3.4	25.5	0	0	0	0	0
Q	17	0	27.1	0	0	0	15.8	0	0	40.1	0	0	0	0	0	0
R	5	0	31.7	0	0	0	0	0	0	14.7	48.5	0	0	0	0.1	0
YasunoGS64K	8.9	0	12.9	3.5	0	0	0	42.9	1.4	17.3	5.7	0	3.4	4.9	0	0
YasunoGS64S	12.9	0	25.9	22.1	0	0	8	0	0	22.9	0	0	8.5	0.3	0	0

Notes. The format of this table is based on Yasuno (2004).

Other topics narrow=topics familiar to the pupils such as family, food and shopping.

Other topics broad=topics such as international events or subject-matters

Differences of teaching

As Figure 1 shows, the amount of the interaction between the students in “Whole Class” activities in School R was less than in Schools P and Q, but School R’s group activity had the interaction between the students as can be seen in Figure 2. If this interaction is added to the percentage of student-to-student interaction in “Whole Class” activities, the proportions of the interaction between students, between teacher and students, and Choral work are almost the same even though different teachers taught in each school. There seems to be a common understanding regarding teaching

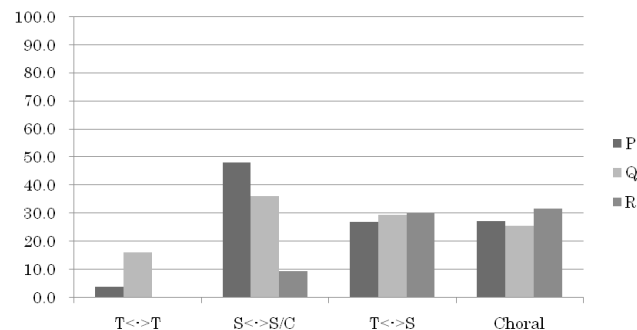


Figure 1. Participant organization in Whole Class activities

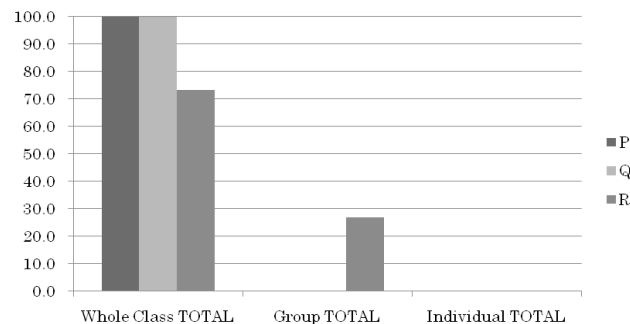


Figure 2. Proportions of participant organization (Whole Class, Group, and Individual totals)

Notes. Whole Class=the activities where all the students in the class work on a single activity such as choral repetitions.

Group=activities in a group such as playing a game of Snakes and Ladders in a small group.

Individual=individual work such as writing at desk

procedures. This may be because the JTEs are sometimes invited to the other JTEs' class and have chances to exchange ideas. It can also be said that even though two of the classes observed were optional ones, that is, lessons which were not specified by the local Board of Education, JTEs, who usually decide what to do in the lessons, followed their specific pattern of teaching.

Limitations and Future Research

Since the classroom observation was conducted in only one city, there is no assertion made that this is a typical English lesson. In addition, since observations were made only once in three schools with three Japanese teachers of English and three homeroom teachers on three different topics, the surveyed classes might not have been a typical lesson, either. In order to get a clearer picture of the English activities at public primary schools, it is necessary to visit more schools and a series of classes should be observed.

Although the outlook of the English lessons could be seen by using COLT, the quality of interaction could not be clearly seen. Further close research using COLT Part B or other observation schemes and matching the results to the curriculum is needed.

Educational implication

The findings of this study have implications for practice at primary schools. First, interaction between pupils is important and should be encouraged even though input is essential not only because of the importance of pupils' output but also because it meets one of the public primary schools' aims:

collaboration among the pupils. Second, it might be about time to take into consideration whether reading and writing are implemented especially in higher grades. At the present time neither of them is employed in the explored schools, and it might not be necessary to employ reading or writing if the 5th grade pupils had learned English at school for only one or two years. If it were the fifth year of learning English, however, would it still be unnecessary to teach them? Kageura (2007) states, "Assessing the pupils' developmental stages and considering sustention of their interest and motivation, it may be necessary to introduce literacy, especially reading, three years after they start learning English" (p. 51). Literacy building should be considered on the basis of a determination that it is the appropriate time to employ it.

Conclusion

The data obtained show the English activities at the explored schools included the interaction not only between teachers and pupils but also pupils and pupils, focusing almost exclusively on listening and speaking. It is also found that those activities consisted of a considerable amount of combination of form and other topics and that, even though only School R practiced a group activity, there were no big differences in the participant organization section and the contents among the different teachers. Although no generalization can be made due to the above stated limitations, this research enables us to see what is going on in primary school English classes and lets us consider what is necessary to improve English lessons. In order to generalize and utilize the results, it is necessary to observe more classes and analyze the data using other schemes.

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