

The Effects of Communicative Language Teaching on Young Beginner Learners

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Reference Data:

Reid, S. (2016). The effects of communicative language teaching on young beginner learners. In P. Clements, A. Krause, & H. Brown (Eds.), *Focus on the learner*. Tokyo: JALT.

Although the benefits of a communicative language teaching (CLT) approach to students' communicative ability have been well documented, there are few long-term studies examining the effects of such an approach in an EFL context, particularly with young learners. This yearlong study focused on young beginner (1st-year primary school) learners in a student-centred CLT-based classroom that prioritized interactions between learners. Multiple data sources including video recording, periodic speaking tests, and student questionnaires were used to monitor the students' progress and attitudes toward learning English. Although the small number of students in each class (6 to 8) was not representative of a typical primary class in Japan, the study concluded that not only did the students enjoy participating in a CLT-based class, but also they were able to significantly improve their communicative ability.

CLT(コミュニカティブ ランゲージ ティーチング)の効果が生徒のコミュニケーション能力をいかに伸ばすかについては、多く論文も発表されてきた。しかし、特に小学校低学年の子どもたちが第2言語をCLTで効果的に取得するという長期間に渡る調査は少ない。この一年間の実践研究では、小学生1年生の児童に対しCLTに基づいた学習において、児童同士での活動を最優先させることに焦点をおき研究を行った。その授業内容を録画し、内容を分析した。また、定期的なスピーキングテスト、児童へのアンケートを行い、これらの様々なデータで児童たちの上達を観察した。研究対象にした児童たちは、少人数のクラス(6~8人)だったので一般的な小学校のクラスの状況とは異なるが、児童たちがこのCLTの学習を楽しみながら著しくコミュニケーション能力を伸ばしていることが分かった。

Although the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) in Japan has stated that the central purpose for English education in Japan is to develop students' communicative English abilities (Tahira, 2012), studies have shown that the majority of classes in this context do not employ a communicative approach (Butler,

2011; Wu, 2010). Under MEXT's new legislation, effective as of 2011, foreign language instruction is compulsory starting at grade 5 of primary school. At the same time, MEXT determined that homeroom teachers would be responsible for primary school English classes rather than teachers with an English education background. MEXT made that decision with the belief that homeroom teachers "are the teachers most appropriate to remove students' anxiety and elicit their willingness to communicate" (Tahira, 2012, pp. 4-5). Despite the recent lowering of the starting age for compulsory English instruction, a long-term study examining the effects of CLT-based instruction on young beginner learners in EFL settings could not be found. As a result, there are a number of unanswered questions regarding the use of CLT-based instruction for this population. Two of these questions are

1. How does the English communicative ability of Japanese primary school students develop through participating in a CLT-based classroom?
2. What attitudes do such students have towards participating in a CLT-based class?

This study was aimed at answering these questions by exploring the effects that a CLT-based curriculum, which prioritizes student-student interaction, has on young beginner learners.

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

CLT is an approach to language teaching that prioritizes the communication or transmission of meaning over the understanding of grammatical forms (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, p. 196). In other words, CLT is a comprehensive language teaching method that is holistic in nature. This approach encourages students to move beyond the memorization of individual components of a language and empowers them to learn the language through active engagement with interlocutors.

Reid: *The Effects of Communicative Language Teaching on Young Beginner Learners*

Research examining the effects of CLT in EFL settings—especially long-term studies—is relatively scarce. This is likely because CLT has rarely been applied in this context. According to Butler (2011), “Since the late 1980s and early 1990s, a growing number of studies have reported various concerns and difficulties in implementing CLT in Asian language teaching contexts” (p. 39). Studies such as Li (1998) and Sato and Takahashi (2008) reported that among other difficulties with implementing CLT, teachers were hesitant to implement a CLT-based approach in their classes due to concerns about the students’ limited English ability. This perhaps explains why CLT-based approaches appear to be particularly uncommon with young learners. In a study on teacher training in primary schools, Moser, Harris, and Carle (2010) wrote, “For students of primary school age in Japan, pairwork tasks usually constitute a very small part of the lesson, if they happen at all” (p. 81). This was supported by Copeland (2011), who collected survey data from primary school English teachers and found that “in Japan, the most popular activities were playing games, singing songs, repeating after the teacher, memorizing words and phrases, and role-play” (p. 38). These activities, listed in order of popularity, reveal the lack of the genuine communication that is so central to a CLT approach. It is perhaps due to this lack of communicative approach and opportunities for interaction in primary schools that experts in the field have dismissed the teaching of young learners as being not worth the effort. According to Lightbown and Spada (2006),

When learners receive only a few hours of instruction per week, learners who start later (for example, at age ten, eleven, or twelve) often catch up with those who began earlier. Some second or foreign language programs that begin with very young learners but offer only minimal contact with the language do not lead to much progress. (p. 74)

As MEXT has recently modified its requirements, making English instruction compulsory at the primary school level, further research into the feasibility and desirability of a CLT-based approach at this age level in Japan could yield findings that would benefit MEXT in reaching its primary goal of communicative English ability for students in Japan. Although the teaching context for this study was atypical, particularly in regards to class size, the findings could potentially be a good starting point to justify further inquiry into the results that can be achieved with the implementation of a CLT-based class for young beginner learners in Japan.

Methods

Participants and Setting

The study took place in a private primary school located in a small city in central Japan. The course was taught by a native English-speaking teacher who had a total of 10 years of experience teaching in EFL and ESL settings, but only one year of experience teaching at the primary school level prior to the start of the study. The participants in this study were 27 first-grade primary school students, the entire grade 1 population of the school. The school year began in April 2013 with 25 students; two new students joined in September. The 27 students were divided into four classes: two classes of six students each, one class of seven, and a fourth class of eight students. Each class had English instruction twice a week for 45-minute periods. The students’ homeroom teacher or assistant homeroom teacher was usually present during the English classes and, on occasion, was asked to help model dialogues with the English teacher. There was no additional English instruction at the school outside of this English program. Five students were studying English at conversation schools at the time of the study. In order to protect the privacy of the students who participated in this study, all the names used are pseudonyms.

Sequence of Activities in a Typical Lesson

A typical class began with a Total Physical Response exercise. The teacher called out instructions for the students to act out. That was followed by a morning routine of class discussion pertaining to the date and the weather. The teacher began the school year by leading these activities and then turned them over to the students once he believed they were capable. After the morning routine, students participated in a small pair conversation using previously learned structures to obtain information from a partner that they would then share with the class. To keep this activity interesting to the students, partners were changed from one class to the next. The main theme of the lesson was then introduced using some type of input exercise—for example, a song or a story—that would lead to a class discussion in which students had to organize or reach a consensus about their opinions related to the theme’s vocabulary items. The class concluded with an information-exchange activity in which students used structures they learned in the current theme-based unit to find out unknown information from one or more classmates.

Classes proceeded in this fashion before the final lesson of the unit, which was a more involved information-exchange task that often lasted the majority of the period. Students were asked to use only English in all information-exchange activities. The teacher avoided interjecting during communication breakdowns in order to provide students with an

Reid: *The Effects of Communicative Language Teaching on Young Beginner Learners*

opportunity to practice resolving these problems by themselves. Conversation strategies were modelled and subsequently adopted by the students to facilitate student interaction without the aid of a teacher.

Design of the Study

The study was conducted over the course of one school year that ran from April 2013 to March 2014. Prior to the start of the school year, class B was selected at random to have each of their 50-minute English classes videotaped. In addition, all speaking tests for each student were also videotaped and analyzed. Students were also asked to complete questionnaires to report their opinions about various aspects of the class and of their own development. (See Appendix B for the relevant questions from the questionnaire.) These questionnaires were completed three times a year, at the end of each term.

In order to measure changes in students' communicative ability during the year of instruction, it was necessary to identify their starting points—their communicative ability prior to participation in the class. This was accomplished by three data collection methods: parents' descriptions of their children's English ability in the precourse questionnaire, the recording and transcribing of the students' use of English in the first two classes of the course, and qualitative analysis of the students' output during the first ball-toss task. Throughout the school year, changes in students' levels of communicative ability were tracked by (a) analyzing transcribed interactions during final information-exchange tasks, (b) comparing results of the periodically conducted ball-toss task, and (c) collecting questionnaire data on students' perceptions of their own English use and abilities. Table 1 describes the data collection schedule.

Table 1. Schedule for Collection of Data via Video and Surveys

Semester	Time	Video	Questionnaire
1	April	First two 50-minute classes of class B	Parent questionnaire
1	July	Final information-exchange Topic: How Are You? activity	Term 1 questionnaire
1	August	Ball-toss activity	
2	Mid-October	Final information-exchange Topic: I Can activity	

Semester	Time	Video	Questionnaire
2	Late October	Final information-exchange Topic: Black Cat activity	
2	November	Ball-toss activity	
2	December	Final information-exchange Topic: My School activity	Term 2 questionnaire
3	February	Final information-exchange Topic: Food activity	Topic questionnaire
3	March	Ball-toss activity	Term 3 questionnaire

Results

Precourse Questionnaire

Prior to the first class of the year a questionnaire was distributed to the students' parents. In addition to providing information regarding the students' English learning experience, the parents were asked to select the option that represented the highest degree of ability that their child had. The questionnaire was written by Kazuyoshi Sato and was written in Japanese (Kojima & Sato, 2008). The data, presented in Table 2, show that 12 students were reported as being able to introduce themselves, seven students knew some simple vocabulary sets, three students knew the letters of the alphabet, and of particular importance to this study, no students were reported as being capable of having simple conversations.

Table 2. What Is Your Child's Current Level of English Ability? (April 2013, N = 25)

Highest ability	Number of responses
Can have simple conversations	0
Can introduce himself/herself	12
Knows simple vocabulary like fruit	7
Knows ABCs	3
Knows no English at all	3

Note. Source: term 1, parent questionnaire. See Appendix A.

Reid: *The Effects of Communicative Language Teaching on Young Beginner Learners*

Transcription of First Two Classes

In order to triangulate the data supplied by the students' parents, the first two classes of the year for class B were video recorded and all English utterances by students were transcribed. All utterances by the students in the first class are displayed in Table 3. The total original student output (not modelled first by the teacher) consisted of only three utterances: "Red," "Okay," and "Thank you." In addition, only two students were able to repeat, "Here you are" after the teacher when requested to do so.

Table 3. Total Utterances by the Focus Class the First Class of the Year (N = 6)

Name	Input	Output	
		Modelled and elicited by teacher	Spontaneous
Teacher	My name is Sean. What's your name? Hello. Thank you. Here you are. You're welcome. Name. Here.		
Oda		Here you are.	Red.
Shunta			
Natsuko			Okay. (after several instructions) Thank you.
Atsushi		Here you are.	Thank you.
Eriko			
Katsumi			

Note. Source: video recording of class B lesson 1, April 2013.

Student Development Data Collected From Ball-Toss Activity

As a means of tracking the development of the students' communicative ability over the course of the year, the ball-toss task was selected for the students to repeat at the end of each term. The balls were included to provide an element of fun for the students. In this activity, the students had to ask a question to a partner who would catch the ball, answer, and then ask a new question before tossing the ball back. Only previously unasked questions were counted as utterances. In other words, students could ask questions that followed a similar pattern but could not ask exactly the same question that either they or their partner had asked before. Because of student absences and the addition of two new students in September, not all the pairs for the ball-toss exercise were the same throughout the year. Table 4 displays only the student pairs that were the same in each of the three terms.

Table 4. Number of Student Turns in Three End-of-Term Ball-Toss Activities

Pair	August 2013	December 2013	March 2014
Hyougo & Hanae	2	5	*20
Kanta & Sachi	2	10	*20
Shunta & Shunya	5	9	18
Kouhei & Motoe	4	6	14
Kiyoto & Mai	4	3	8
Kosuke & Misaki	3	4	5
Souta & Tomo	3	4	4
Aiji & Yukana	4	4	3
Sayaka & Yuga	2	6	4
Total	29	51	*96
Average of nine pairs	3.2	5.6	10.6

Note. * Indicates that pairs were asked to stop due to time constraints. Sources: video recordings of all grade 1 classes.

Reid: *The Effects of Communicative Language Teaching on Young Beginner Learners*

The students' improvement in the ball-toss activity is clearly visible. The data represent the number of questions a pair was able to produce under pressure and without prompting, not the total number of questions that they had learned or could understand. The average number of utterances the nine pairs were able to produce increased from 3.2 in August 2013 to 5.7 in December 2013 and finally to 10.7* in March 2014. (Two of the pairs were asked to stop after reaching 20 utterances due to time constraints. It is likely that they could have continued.)

In Table 5 the different utterances produced by all of the students combined in December is presented in contrast with the total utterances in August. The table shows a significant increase in the number of different utterances in December 2013 (13 in comparison to 4 in August 2013). All of the utterances produced in December had been practiced in class with the exception of "Do you like Michael Jackson?" which shows a student modifying a structure that he learned in class to make an original question. The data for March 2014 could not be compiled as not all classes were video recorded.

Table 5. Different Questions Used by Students During the Ball-Toss Speaking Test

August	December
How are you?	How are you?
How old are you?	How old are you?
How's the weather today?	What's your favourite season?
What's your name	How's the weather today?
	Do you like PE class?
	What's your name?
	Do you like Japanese class?
	Do you like English class?
	Do you like Math class?
	Do you like winter?
	Do you like Spring?
	Do you like Michael Jackson?
	Can you swim?

Note. Sources: video recordings of all grade 1 classes.

In order to provide qualitative data regarding the increase in students' English ability, two students were selected prior to the course to have each of their final information-exchange activities transcribed. One student, Atsushi, was selected as a representative of the general population of students—this child had received some English education in kindergarten but was no longer studying. The other student, Nana, had received no English instruction whatsoever outside of this class. The increasing complexity of the activities is evident upon examining sample transcriptions of Atsushi participating in the first and last unit final information exchange activities of the year. The first unit-final information-exchange activity was the How are you? information-exchange activity in July 2013. Extract 1 includes an example interaction between Atsushi and another student that consists of each of them asking, "How are you?" and replying with a two-word answer, such as "I'm angry." All of the interactions in this task were essentially the same, as each student asked the same question to each classmate, with the only variation being the answers.

Extract 1: How Are You? Information-Exchange Activity Between Atsushi and Eriko

Both partners: rock, scissors, paper, 1, 2, and 3

Eriko: How are you?
 Atsushi: I'm angry.
 Atsushi: How are you?
 Eriko: Hungry.
 Atsushi: Finished.

Note. Source: video recording of class B, October 2013.

In February, the most complex final information-exchange task of the year was performed. In this task, students were placed back-to-back with their partners, simulating a telephone conversation (they could not see their interlocutor). Each student interacted with only one person and requested 10 different pieces of information (i.e., whether the partner like five foods and why). This added to the complexity as students had to also indicate when they had successfully received information and encourage their partners to ask the next question without being able to see them. Extract 2 is 14 lines of the 84-line interaction between Atsushi and another student. No Japanese was used in any of the exchanges with the exception of Atsushi muttering the equivalent of "umm" to himself. This is a considerable increase of output and complexity over the July task.

Reid: *The Effects of Communicative Language Teaching on Young Beginner Learners*

Extract 2: Food Information-Exchange Activity Between Atsushi and Haruaki

Atsushi: Do you like chocolate?
 Haruaki: Yes I do.
 Atsushi: Why?
 Haruaki: Because it tastes good . . . Because it tastes good.
 Atsushi: Okay.
 Haruaki: Do you like sandwich?
 Atsushi: No I don't.
 Haruaki: Why?
 Atsushi: It tastes bad.
 Haruaki: Because it tastes bad...
 Atsushi: (No response)
 Haruaki: Because it tastes bad?
 Atsushi: Yes.
 Haruaki: Okay.

Note. Source: video recording of class B, February 2013.

**Students' Reporting of Their Own Progress
 Self-Reported Capabilities**

In each of the three terms, students were asked to report on the amount of English they believed themselves to be capable of speaking. Table 6 shows that the number of students reporting that they could speak *a lot* of English began at 13 students, dropped to 10 students in December, then increased to 22 students in March. It is possible that the reduction in students believing they could speak a lot in December could be attributed to students completing this survey at the beginning of a new unit. This point in the unit focused on vocabulary input, whereas the students completed the other surveys after unit-final information-exchange tasks had been completed. In March 2014, at the end of the school year, no students reported that they could speak *not very much* or *none at all*. This, combined with the increase in the mean from 4.0 to 4.7, reflects a large increase in the amount of English that the students believed they could speak over the course of the year.

Table 6. How Much English Are You Capable of Speaking?

Response	July 2013 (n = 24)	December 2013 (n = 25)	March 2014 (n = 27)
5. A lot	13	10	22
4. Quite a bit*	4	8	1
3. A fair amount	3	4	4
2. Not very much*	2	2	0
1. None at all	2	1	0
Likert scale mean	4.0	3.9	4.7

Note. * not in questionnaire but extrapolated. Sources: student questionnaires, Question 1. See Appendix B.

To summarize, quantitative analysis of the final information-exchange tasks showed students participating in increasingly complex and lengthy conversations completely in English, without any assistance from their teacher. These conversations ranged from interactions with one question and one answer uttered by each student in July to interactions that had as many as 84 lines in the final-information-exchange task in February.

Attitudes Towards a CLT-Based English Class

Data regarding students' attitudes about the CLT-based class were collected by way of questionnaires distributed after unit-final information-exchange activities. The first information-exchange activity in July 2013 was conducted on the last day of the term before summer vacation and it ran overtime, so no questionnaire data could be collected. In late October 2013—the middle of the second term—the questionnaire was administered after the Black Cat activity, in which one student was blindfolded and received instructions from a peer that directed him or her toward a target. In the middle of the third term, mid-February 2014, data was collected after the previously mentioned food information-exchange activity.

Table 7 displays the results of these three questionnaires. A high number of students selected the highest possible score to rate the amount of fun on both occasions. The means were also close to the highest possible score of 5. This is particularly interesting as (a) students were told that both activities were tests that contributed to their term scores and (b) there was a certain degree of pressure to perform under adverse circumstances (not being able to see their partner or use Japanese).

Reid: *The Effects of Communicative Language Teaching on Young Beginner Learners*

Table 7. How Much Fun Was the Activity?

Response	October 2013 (n = 27)	February 2014 (n = 24)
5. A lot	26	20
4. Quite a bit*	1	2
3. A fair amount	0	2
2. Not very much*	0	0
1. None at all	0	0
Likert scale mean	4.9	4.7

Note. * not in questionnaire but extrapolated. Sources: student questionnaires, Question 2. See Appendix B.

In March, students were asked how much they liked their English class (see Table 8). Twenty-two of 27 students reported that they liked English class “a lot”. No students reported that they did not like it. The mean was 4.7, indicating that most of the students enjoyed their classes.

Table 8. How Much Do You Like English Class?

Response	March 2014 (n = 27)
5. A lot	22
4. Quite a bit*	1
3. A fair amount	4
2. Not very much*	0
1. Not at all	0
Likert scale mean	4.7

Note. * not in questionnaire but extrapolated. Source: student questionnaires, Question 3. See Appendix B.

Discussion

The results of this study support the effectiveness of a CLT-based course in increasing the communicative ability of young beginner learners. The results also call into question

a common belief among some teachers regarding the practicality of implementing a CLT-based course. According to Li (1998) and Sato and Takahashi (2008), teachers reported that their students’ low English proficiency discouraged them from implementing a CLT-based class. These concerns may be erroneous, as beginner learners in this study were able to participate in the CLT-based course with positive results. In addition, Lightbown and Spada (2006) stated that EFL instruction of young learners with minimal class hours per week did not lead to significant progress. This study has shown, however, that with only 90 minutes of English instruction per week, students were able to considerably improve their communicative English ability over a 1-year period. This suggests that there are potential benefits to be derived from starting EFL instruction at an early age in primary school and using a CLT-based curriculum.

Conclusions

This study showed that CLT-based instruction used with young students is both effective in increasing the students’ communicative ability and enjoyable to the students. This means that hiring teachers or curriculum designers trained in this approach could be an effective alternative to the current policy of having homeroom teachers without a background in EFL teach English to students at primary schools. In addition, the results suggest that EFL instruction can be started earlier than the current norm of grade 5 for Japanese public schools, with potentially positive effects on the learners.

Although this study has shown the potential for considerable benefits from the implementation of CLT-based classes with beginner level learners, it does leave one question unanswered. Would this study have been as successful with larger class sizes? As the classes in this study ranged from six to eight students, they represent an atypical sample of primary school class sizes in Japan. Despite this limitation, however, the overall positive effects of a CLT-based course with young beginner learners make a strong argument that these implementations are certainly possible. If MEXT’s goal is to increase students’ communicative ability, the students have to learn to communicate. Implementing a CLT-based course may be the answer.

Bio Data

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Reid: *The Effects of Communicative Language Teaching on Young Beginner Learners*

research interests include communicative language teaching, curriculum development, and alternative assessment.

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Appendix A

Survey Question From Parent Questionnaire

現在のお子さんの英語の力はどのくらいだと思いますか?当てはまるものに○をつけてください。

- A.) ABCを知ってる
- B.) 果物、動物、スポーツなどのいくつかの単語を知っている
- C.) あいさつと自己紹介を含む、簡単な短文を話すことができる
- D.) 身近な話題に関して話すことができる
- E.) 全くわからない

Appendix B

Survey Questions From Student Questionnaires

1. どのくらいえいごをはなせますか?

たくさん----- > まあまあ----- > ぜんぜん
5 4 3 2 1

2. きょうのペアワークは、どのくらいたのしかったですか?

たくさん----- > まあまあ----- > ぜんぜん
5 4 3 2 1

3. えいごのじゅぎょうはどのくらいすきですか?

たくさん----- > まあまあ----- > ぜんぜん
5 4 3 2 1