

Keywords

elementary school, tasks, purposes, communication, framework, experiential learning

Abstract

Early in 2008, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) revised its course of study with the introduction of a period of Foreign Language Activities in the 5th and 6th grades of elementary school (MEXT, 2008). Although the widespread implementation of these classes will gradually be effected through 2011, predating this, research suggests that around 94 percent of elementary schools had already been undertaking English activities as part of International Understanding studies (Benesse, 2007). Despite these figures, there has, to date, been a relative lack of concrete direction from MEXT, leading to a diversity of programs developed by individual district boards of education or schools, with a variety of conceptions of International Understanding studies by Japanese homeroom teachers and assistant language teachers (Watanabe, 2006b). This paper will review the proposed purposes of English classes at the elementary school level and provide an outline of a range of concepts teachers should bear in mind when selecting activities or tasks for these classes.

2008年の初頭、文部科学省は新学習指導要領を発表し、小学校5、6年生に外国語活動を導入するとした。外国語活動は2011年までに広範囲で実施されるであろうが、これに先駆け、約94%の小学校では既に国際理解教育の一環として英語活動を導入しているとの調査結果が出ている。この数値にもかかわらず、現時点では外国語活動に関する文部科学省からの具体的な指示が欠けている。これにより、日本人担任教師やALTは国際理解教育に対して多様な考えを持ち、各地域の教育委員会や各学校の裁量で様々なプログラムが開発されているのである。本論では、小学校での英語教育に対して提案された目標を検討し、教師が指導内容を選択する際に意識すべきことを概観する。

Considerations for activity and task selection in Japanese elementary school English communication lessons

小学校英語活動においてアクティビティを選択する際に意識すべきこと

Richard J. Sampson

Gunma Prefectural Women's University
Foreign Language Research Institute

Purposes of elementary school English lessons

In general, Japanese education focuses on cultivating a zest for living that should link all areas of the elementary school curriculum, including English studies (Wada, 2007). To accomplish this, the International Understanding curriculum was created to fulfill these purposes (MEXT, 2001):

1. Open-mindedness and understanding regarding other cultures

2. Establishment of a strong sense of self and sense of being Japanese
3. Development of the ability for self-expression and other communication skills for the purpose of expressing one's own thoughts and intentions whilst respecting the positions of others. (p.121)

Concurrently, the course of study for 5th and 6th grade students (MEXT, 2008) states the purpose of Foreign Language Activities as:

To lay the groundwork for students' communicative abilities, to foster a positive attitude toward communication, and to deepen their understanding of languages and cultures by familiarizing them with sounds and basic expressions of foreign languages.

According to these documents, fostering aptitude for communicative ability is the main goal, not English acquisition in a linguistic sense.

Indeed, in discussing the role of elementary school English classes, Watanabe (2006b) argues there is little to be gained by expecting Japanese elementary school children to become fluent in English when there is extremely little chance for local use of the language. However, Japanese children are seen to be lacking in the ability to positively and assertively convey their thoughts and intentions to others. English lessons at the elementary school level are thus intended to develop the conviviality, identity, and initiative of learners (Watanabe, 2006b) whilst cultivating a general communication ability *through* the use of English. This cultivation of general communicative ability and the enjoyment of interaction feeds the students' zest for living. Akashi (2005), in referring to the elementary school context, notes that:

To foster communication ability does not mean speaking English fluently. It means learning to listen to and understand the ideas of others whilst concurrently becoming able to convey one's own ideas to others, that is to say, the way of interacting with others. (p. 9: author's translation)

The focus of elementary school English lessons in Japan is therefore not the acquisition of a second language. If we draw upon the idea of communicative competence, whilst there

are elements of each of the four competencies (linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic) that are language-specific, the only purely language-specific competency is linguistic competency (Canale, 1983). The remaining three competencies have elements which are universal to communication, and it is the development of these competencies *through* the use of English that are the desired purpose of Japanese English lessons at the elementary school level.

Defining aims and objectives

Given the stated goals of elementary school English education, the development of aims and objectives for lessons needs to be addressed. An *aim* can be defined as a statement of general change a program seeks to implement, while an *objective* is the result of splitting up an aim into its constituent elements (Richards, 2001). For Japanese elementary schools, these need to be non-linguistic in nature and ought to focus upon the explicit development of sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competencies with no overt expectation for the development of linguistic competence. Here are some possible aims:

Through this unit / lesson, students will:

- Develop confidence in their ability to express their thoughts, ideas, and choices
- Develop their abilities to cooperate and interact with others
- Develop their interest in the thoughts and feelings of others

Objectives such as the following might be designed:

Through this unit / lesson, students will experience:

- The success and enjoyment of actively communicating their thoughts and ideas about (a travel plan) through English
- Discussing and negotiating with their peers to arrive at a mutual outcome
- Turn-taking in a communicative situation through experience in an English (shopping) activity

- Communicating about thoughts and ideas with peers and learning how to actively listen to, remember, and recall the ideas of others

Whilst these are general statements of what will be developed over the course of the unit (or lesson), more specific outcomes, process objectives, and evaluative items need to be defined for individual lessons and activities. A unit ought to provide learners with successful experiences in conveying their thoughts and ideas as well as listening to and understanding the ideas of classmates. In such a way, enjoyment of communication with others can be more effectively fostered (Kanamori & Oka, 2007; Nihon Kyozai Bunka Kenkyuu Zaidan, 2005; Watanabe, 2003, 2006a). Furthermore, clearly detailed aims and objectives can result in the creation of more appropriate tasks and activities.

Considerations for selecting tasks and activities

Consideration 1: Experiential learning

Japanese elementary school English classes ought to view interaction and actual language use as a vital component of learning. The conviviality, identity, and initiative of learners and their general communicative ability must be constructed through group interaction. As such, lessons ought to draw upon an experiential approach to learning and provide a framework where all class members have some role in creating the experience through which learning takes place.

Consideration 2: Centrality of tasks and activities

A task-based syllabus, with units built around topics appropriate to the developmental level of students, is most suitable for developing communicative ability. Tasks and activities should be selected to meet the aims of the unit, with linguistic content subsequently selected that allows students to move towards these aims. Learners learn best when they are *involved* in learning experientially, rather than learning *about* the language (Oxford, 2006), an idea in harmony

with the conception of communication classes in the Japanese elementary school context (Nihon Kyozai Bunka Kenkyuu Zaidan, 2005; Wada, 2007). Features of effective tasks and activities for elementary school English classes involve a variety of groupings, interaction types, and strong emphasis on student-centered learning (Kanamori & Oka, 2007; Watanabe, 2003).

Consideration 3: Tasks for development of general communication ability

Tasks at the elementary school level may be a little different from those in a traditional task-based syllabus. In a traditional task-based syllabus, activities are chosen which allow students to make use of the second language to reach a task-intrinsic outcome or result. Purposeful use of the second language creates an environment facilitating language acquisition. However, in the Japanese elementary school context, tasks and activities, whilst asking students to make use of the second language, ought not to have language acquisition as their primary educational objective. Instead, they must guide students towards development of their overall communication ability. This is a subtle but important difference that also relates back to unit or lesson aims and objectives.

Due to the very limited second language ability of the elementary school students, lesson steps ought to provide the relative phrases necessary to conduct activities and tasks. Learners can then move towards the non-language-focused aims or learning objectives more efficiently. Since the focus is *communication* rather than *English*, students should also be provided with examples and encouragement for using a variety of verbal and non-verbal communication strategies. This would raise awareness of communication repair methods and facilitate genuine self-expression. By using communication strategies, students are able to enjoy communicating their own personal messages through a variety of means without large amounts of repetitive vocabulary or pattern practice before task commencement. Indeed, some lessons or units may have communication strategy employment as their overriding aims or desired outcomes.

Since the development of general communication ability through English is paramount, it is

important to ensure that activities involve real and purposeful exchanges of information. Activities that require students to merely convey facts that both parties already know will not adequately assist students in realizing the full power of communication (Kanamori, 2005). Similarly, presentations, where students memorize English phrases and present about some topic to classmates, in many cases do not lead to actual communication because most listeners do not understand what the presenter is saying.

Consideration 4: Variety of tasks and activities

A variety of tasks and activities need to be employed, both to help maintain student interest, and to give a range of learning experiences which allow for the development of general communicative ability. As part of the pre-task phase, models of language use, activation of schemata, and vocabulary building are seen as positive for the development of learners' capacity to complete tasks (Ellis, 2006). Consequently, ample development of basic vocabulary and patterns (upon which students can build their own messages) and practice activities involving movement (seen by Watanabe (2003) as beneficial in the Japanese context) ought to play an important role in lesson steps. Additionally, demonstration of successful task processes by teachers and volunteer students, as well as the activation of schemata and previous learning would further enable students towards task completion.

If we wish to develop the conviviality, identity, and initiative of learners, different kinds of activities should be used to address these various areas (Watanabe, 2006b). Activities which involve interaction and cooperation, such as group and pair work, can be seen as promoting conviviality. Students can learn the enjoyment of interacting with friends and communicating with classmates they might not ordinarily have much contact with. Activities such as interview-mingling to find out about classmates' interests, dreams, feelings, and so forth, can promote a sense of identity and help students focus upon their own ideas and thoughts with reference to those of others. Finally, initiative might be promoted through mingling activities, class or school research, or interactive information-gap tasks in

which students need to solve some problem by interacting with others.

Consideration 5: Team-teacher consultation for personalization

Student motivation plays a vital role in any learning experience. For example, involvement of students' interests and personalization of learning increases motivation (Dornyei, 1998). Homeroom teachers are well positioned to know what sorts of activities would be best suited for their students (MEXT, 2001). As a result, consultation between the homeroom teacher and assistant language teacher about appropriate topics and activities is vital. Such direct discussion and planning can also maintain focus upon the processes and learning environments teachers want students to experience.

Consideration 6: Progression between lessons

When considering the sequencing across the span of a unit, it is important to include activities that build upon each other. This gives meaning to the language learners are using and provides experience in communicative interaction. Furthermore, if students can realize for themselves a feeling of progress, this will ultimately lead to increased motivation and hopefully a more positive outlook on communication itself.

Conclusion

This paper has provided a brief overview of current thinking on the role of English activities at the elementary school level in Japan and has followed up with a discussion of concepts teachers need to consider when trying to create or select activities and tasks. An experiential approach that matches the detailed purposes of elementary school English lessons is advocated. Although the primary emphasis was on background issues regarding task or activity selection, it is hoped teachers can realize the importance of well-founded collaborative decision making. Many of the considerations detailed herein may take time to implement. Moving from a curriculum placing memorization of English linguistic elements at the center to one focusing upon the development

of general communication ability is an involved process. This has arguably been hindered by a lack of clarity regarding the purposes of elementary school English classes. This article has therefore attempted to provide Japanese and foreign elementary school teachers a basis for refocusing English education upon general communication ability. An exchange of ideas and opinions amongst educators in how to support the continued development of English communication activities at the elementary school level is highly encouraged.

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Richard J. Sampson has been teaching English and communication studies at a variety of levels in Japan for the past 10 years. From 2008 he has been working at the Foreign Language (Education) Research Institute at Gunma Prefectural Women's University, teaching undergraduate classes and conducting research on language and communication education. He has a strong interest in theories of learning and development, and is currently researching effects of classroom methodology socialization and motivation.

Overheard at JALT2009 in Shizuoka . . .

“One presenter was using black text on a blue background in his PowerPoint slides. He kept saying, ‘As you can see...’ and I kept saying, ‘No, I can’t.’”