



Mari Nakamura & Marian Hara

The *Younger Learners* column provides language teachers of children and teenagers with advice and guidance for making the most of their classes. Teachers with an interest in this field are also encouraged to submit articles and ideas to the editor at the address below. We also welcome questions about teaching, and will endeavour to answer them in this column.

Email: younger-learners@jalt-publications.org

A MEXT-Funded App for Japanese Teachers of Young Learners

Rob Hirschel

Jon Rowberry

hirschel@m.sojo-u.ac.jp

jrowberry@m.sojo-u.ac.jp

Rationale

The Japanese government has capitalized on the 2020 Tokyo Olympics to boost business, construction, culture, technology, tourism, and education. Among the most ambitious plans are the new curricula for English language education in elementary schools to be enacted by academic year 2020 (MEXT, 2017). For fifth and sixth graders, the new curricula shifts English from an ungraded *foreign language activity* to a mandatory, assessed subject that pupils study each year for 70 classroom hours--double the previously allotted 35. Third and fourth graders begin studying English as a foreign language activity for 35 hours each year, whereas the previous requirement for fourth grade and below was zero. Ohashi (2018) stated that "some schools do have activity-based English in earlier years though such provision is the exception rather than the norm" (p. 112). One significant implication is that Japanese homeroom teachers are now expected to teach considerably more English language content than ever before.

The problem is that many teachers may lack confidence both in teaching and in speaking very basic English (Kobayashi, 2018; Nakajima & Ozaki, 2013; Yamauchi, 2018). At present, university certification programs for elementary school teaching only require a course in English oral communication, and not all prefectures require demonstration of English ability to pass prefectural licensing exams (Fukushima, 2018). Furthermore, a 2014 MEXT survey of 3,181 teachers in charge of foreign language activ-

ities found that 83.2% did not possess any qualifications in English proficiency or English education (Fukushima, 2018). To prepare current teachers for the new English classes, Yamauchi (2018) explained the MEXT pyramid model whereby trained teacher leaders impart their expert knowledge to subleaders who again pass the same knowledge along to colleagues. However, citing 2014 MEXT data reporting 416,475 full time teachers (and 34,956 part-time teachers) at Japanese elementary schools, Yamauchi expressed concern that "MEXT is appointing only 1,000 teachers as leaders to be ready for the coming 2020" (2018, p. 152). Numbers aside, even very basic English proficiency is not something that can easily be gleaned second-hand or even third-hand.

Website and App Development

Concern over teacher preparedness led our team to consider the development of a website and app that could support teachers in the self-study of very basic English phrases useful for the classroom. Our project began with a needs analysis (reported by Hirschel, 2018). The needs analysis, informed by observations of six English lessons in three local schools and by informal interviews with teachers, found that teachers appeared adept at basic greetings and display questions (e.g., *How is the weather today?*). The 2018 study concluded that teachers might benefit most from studying and practicing language for directions and basic classroom management. For example, though each formal greeting at the lesson's start (e.g., *Hello, everyone*) was expressed by the teacher in English, only one in five instances of "next" was spoken in English, and all three instances of "let's practice" were voiced in Japanese. Very simple language such as these words and phrases can truly benefit teachers.

It is important to note that mere knowledge of useful phrases is not sufficient for teachers to be able to use them in the moment, in the classroom. MEXT instructional materials include *teacher phrases* for most lessons, and it is likely that most teachers do, at least occasionally, review these phrases and expressions. Without practice, however, it can be very difficult to find the language one needs in the moment.

A further issue to consider is that many elementary school English lessons are taught by a Japanese Homeroom Teacher (HRT) in collaboration with an international Assistant Language Teacher (ALT). One concern in such team-teaching situations is that when the ALT makes an English contribution, the HRT, for ease of comprehension (or simply out of habit) may inadvertently sabotage comprehensible input by promptly giving a Japanese translation (Shino, 2019). This situation could possibly be remedied by having a set of go-to classroom phrases which the ALT can be reasonably confident that the HRT will understand.

With the above goals in mind, our team has developed a website and companion app that is free of charge and provides users with language in context that they can practice with several types of exercises. Technological limitations and finite resources have necessarily restricted the types of content that can be offered, but we hope that teachers nevertheless find these resources useful. Some of the key features are described below.

Animated Videos of Language in Context

The lesson modules in the first section of the app present useful classroom language in context via animated videos. “Miho, please come here”; “Please guess”; “Let’s begin”; and “What is *enpitsu* in English?” are some of the many target phrases and patterns covered.



Target Language Cloze Tasks

Users manipulate the target language presented in videos by dragging and dropping the words into the correct positions. Users can return to the video at any point to hear the language again. When checking answers, users are shown green checks for correct answers and red x marks for incorrect answers. Each activity can be attempted multiple times.



Elicitation Activities

Elicitation activities require users to translate the target language from Japanese to English, listen to the model answer, and repeat after the model.

英語で下記の文章を言ってください。

皆さん、立ってください。



Model:

Everyone, please stand up.

英語で下記の文章を言ってください。

並んでください。



Model: *Please make lines.*

Shadowing Activities

Shadowing activities focus on the target language for different classroom contexts. Teachers first practice with a recorded model and text. They subsequently shadow the audio without textual support.

Vocabulary Development

Several sections present useful vocabulary along with audio models. The content includes everyday items, timetables, numbers, school subjects, and dates. In addition to basic practice in memory retrieval and pronunciation, there is content provided in question and answer format, in practice translation exercises for phrases and short sentences, and in listening comprehension quizzes.



Fluency Building

Available for the website (but not for the App) is a fluency building task that prompts users to speak in English, records the user’s answer, and automatically plays a model response. The user then can listen to their answer and self-assess their response.

Limitations

One concern is that the activities may appear to suggest that there is only one correct English expression in a particular context. For example, “Please make lines” could just as easily be conveyed by “line up, let’s make lines” or any number of permutations. The target audience, however, are teachers with minimal English proficiency, and so we have decided to present just one expression for clarity and simplicity.

Another concern is the extent to which the language presented reflects the language individual teachers need to conduct their English classroom activities. Much of the content prepares teachers to facilitate activities presented in previously published resources, which with the introduction of new textbooks and materials, may no longer be fully relevant. Furthermore, it is not possible to cover the classroom language useful for each individual teaching context. For these reasons, we encourage international teachers working with Japanese HRTs to discuss what additional classroom expressions may be useful and to help facilitate the HRT being able to use those expressions.

A final concern is the degree of ease with which users can navigate the app and website. We have done our best to simplify navigation within the confines of the platform and have also attempted to make the site more accessible through short instructional videos.

Future Directions

Despite the limitations noted above, we are hopeful that this app and website may be useful for teachers. Initial feedback has been positive, though we have had some difficulty reaching our intended audience. Teachers and other participants who attended our presentations and workshops were often those who already appeared comfortably proficient in basic classroom English. We encourage teachers working alongside HRTs who might benefit to have a look at these resources and consider introducing them. EIGO can be navigated in either Japanese or English. The app can be found by searching for EIGO in the App store for Apple devices or in the Google Play store for Android. The website version can be accessed through elemenglish.org, preferably using the Chrome browser.

Finally, the authors hope that this article leads to discussion among HRTs and ALTs about what English language is helpful in different classroom contexts and how best to prepare teachers to use this language without hesitation.

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Rob Hirschel teaches at the Sojo International Learning Center (SILC), at Sojo University in Kumamoto. He has experience teaching English at various levels in both Japan and the US. His research interests include CALL, vocabulary acquisition, and affective factors in the classroom.



Jonathan Rowberry is Director of the SILC. He has experience teaching English at secondary and post-secondary level in both Japan and the UK. He has published articles on diverse topics including curriculum development, assessment of listening skills, learner agency, and active learning.

