Encouraging Language Development in Young Learners Through Craft Activities

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In many second language learning classes for elementary school students, craft projects have become an integral part of the syllabus. When set up well and implemented effectively, these can involve numerous language learning opportunities. Unfortunately, in some cases craft projects do not have a language learning outcome. Learners may create beautiful artwork, but very little language acquisition occurs while craft time takes place. In this paper, we will explain the benefits of incorporating craft projects within a second language learning curriculum and how these activities can be adapted to maximize language acquisition. The theoretical background to incorporating craft projects in English classes will be explained and the types of projects, which are likely to promote language acquisition in a variety of ways, will be shown. A few of the craft activities, which were used in this research project are also outlined. These projects include craft activities based on content learning such as marine life and science and craft activities based on picture books. The main goal of this project was to motivate young learners to increase their English-speaking capabilities and expand their vocabulary in a meaningful way through fun craft projects.

小学生の第二言語学習の場において、工作を利用した授業には言語習得の効果があまり期待されないと言われることがあるが、適切に設定し実践された工作プロジェクトは、特に若い学習者の学習成果に大いに貢献する。本稿は、工作プロジェクトを言語学習の場に組み込む利点とその有効な教授方法を、動機付け等の様々な観点から述べる。はじめに若い学習者の言語学習過程において工作プロジェクトがいかに適切で効果的であるかということを説明し、次にプロジェクトを三つの学習ステージに分け、それぞれの場でどのような言語活動が可能であり、さらには言語習得過程においてそれぞれのステージが個々に、あるいは包括的にどのような役割を担っているかを説明する。最後に言語学習の一環としての工作プロジェクトの運営方法を、授業で実際に行った例を挙げながら、一年を通じて授業内で見られた学習者の変化と共に紹介する。

Craft and project work are an integral part of many English as a second language (ESL) classes. These activities are very valuable in increasing the motivation of young learners and often introduce other skills, such as fine motor skills, which are useful for writing. However, there is sometimes not a clear language acquisition goal in these activities. As the time most young learners spend on second language learning is limited, maximizing the opportunities for language acquisition is essential.

In view of this, the authors sought to identify ways in which language learning could occur in craft and project work. The classroom activities and management were then adapted to encourage second language acquisition. The results were observed and noted by the authors. This paper is a description of this process and the results gained over a year.

Literature Review

The main focus of many ESL classes for elementary school students is often repetition and imitation. Although providing beginners with models of good language is obviously necessary (Kersten, 2015), limiting students to certain language structures does not allow them to experiment with language and make errors on their way to communicative competence. According to Becker and Roos (2016), learners need to be able to use language spontaneously and creatively in order to develop fluency in a second language. Tomlinson (2015) found that elementary school students who had engaged in creative activities, such as writing plays, writing stories, and choosing their own reading texts, developed the ability to communicate authentically far more than those who had only memorized a text. Through experimenting with language, students discover ways in

which language can and cannot be used. Although this is important at all levels of language acquisition and all ages, it may be most important in the early stage of language learning with very young learners.

Many language teachers and researchers have noted that Japanese English language learners appear to develop oral fluency more slowly than language learners from other countries. Some researchers have claimed that Japanese language learners are inherently shy (Doyon, 2000), while others have blamed the lack of oral fluency on an over-emphasis on test-taking and avoidance of mistakes (Haveron, 2013). Whatever the reason, it would seem beneficial for young language learners to be encouraged to speak English spontaneously in the earliest stages of language learning. This belief is supported by Becker and Roos (2016), who encouraged task-based learning (TBL) and roleplay to promote the creative use of language by young language learners. Bolt et al. (2019) stated that students benefit from engaging in meaningful discussions about authentic experiences and materials. In order to engage in meaningful discussions, students need to receive copious amounts of comprehensible input (Krashen, 1981). However, even when they have received a large amount of input, it can still be very challenging for young learners to express their opinions, which means that teachers often dominate discussions (Bolt et al., 2019). In order to encourage output, young learners need to be supported through steps leading to confident communication.

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) has sometimes been used as an alternative to grammar-based learning in ESL classrooms. Coyle et al. (2009) described CLIL as "any learning activity where language is used as a tool to develop new learning from a subject area or theme" (p. 6). Craftwork can be described as a type of CLIL. Language is acquired through focusing on the craftwork, as long as English input is incorporated. CLIL is also an effective way for learners to use language meaningfully rather than in artificial situations created to encourage language output (Coyle et al., 2009).

Task-based learning has been proposed as another alternative to form-focused learning (Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 2004), giving students an opportunity to gain communicative competence whilst providing scaffolding that allows learners to engage in the type of authentic activities they need to develop knowledge in context (Herrington, et al., 2010). Task-based learning has been effectively researched and demonstrated for adult learners, but setting up tasks for young learners can be difficult due to low literacy levels (Pinter, 2015). It can be challenging to find contexts to introduce language which young learners have the schema to understand, which is why craftwork can be an ideal task.

Another challenge for teachers of young learners is motivation. Very few young learners are extrinsically motivated to learn English (Tomlinson, 2015). They do not see the need to learn English for travel, to get a good job, or even to make friends unless they are in an ESL environment. Especially when it comes to students with lower fluency, engaging them in the lesson as well as motivating them to use English actively can be challenging when they do not understand clearly what is going on. Without a necessity or desire to learn English it is unlikely that students will learn, so it is vital that the materials and activities are engaging in themselves (Pinter, 2015; Tomlinson, 2015). Therefore, craft projects are ideal because they provide a lot of visual aids to help students to follow the lesson, and at the same time, gain a sense of achievement by following the guidance to complete the task. Besides, many students enjoy craft activities (Bastianoni, n.d.). Craftwork involves multiple learning styles (Gardner, 1993). Craft and project work can incorporate kinesthetic, physical, visual, musical, naturalistic, and interpersonal learning styles. Having a variety of materials and activities allows for personalization and differentiation of learning (Shiobara, 2021). In addition, young learners also have the schema of craft activities in their first language, which assists with language acquisition. Craft projects reinforce language learning through repetition and maintain motivation through a variety of activities. In order to create craft projects, students need to listen to instructions, ask for materials, and ask for help. In some cases, they need to read instructions and write their own content and descriptions of the craft project.

In this research, craft projects were viewed as a type of task-based learning, but activities were adapted to be more suitable for young learners. There was a minimal amount of reading, and it was always supported and scaffolded by the teacher, taking account of student literacy levels. In addition, although there were opportunities for collaboration, it was not essential to complete the task, so that learners who had not yet developed interpersonal skills could still succeed. All activities were adapted to maximize oral output. To do this, the researchers attempted to flip the craft classroom, forcing students to request materials and engage with the teachers to ask for assistance.

Three Stages in Craft Project Lessons

According to Pinter (2015) task-based sessions are usually categorized into three stages: pre-task, during-task, and post-task stages. Each stage provides meaningful and authentic input and many chances for learners to practice their output. Through these stages, learners gain knowledge and perspectives, deepen newly acquired knowledge, and express it in craft work as the culmination of a lesson. Bolt et al. (2019) stated that playful learning helps children develop their knowledge. Since craftwork is an activity that allows learners to be free and creative, it should be considered a fun and playful learning

activity. At the same time, learners will be exposed to authentic everyday English which they rarely learn in English classrooms in a Japanese context.

The Pre-task Phase

The pre-task is where teachers introduce a topic to learners with videos and written materials. Asking about something that children are familiar with promotes child-centered learning as well as eliciting personal comments, including their opinions, experience, and knowledge. It provides children a great opportunity to interact in a communicative and natural way. In order to encourage learners to express themselves, Becker and Roos (2016) believed that teachers need to be careful with giving feedback. Overcorrection can demotivate language learners. Therefore, the teacher's tolerance for English mistakes should be high in this stage, considering errors as evidence of learners' progress.

The Main-task Phase

The main-task phase might be listening to or reading instructions. It might also include learning content, such as how many arms an octopus has, in order to create an anatomically accurate octopus craft. Various materials and resources such as videos and worksheets can be used to encourage the children's engagement on the topic that they are going to focus on in the lesson. Becker and Roos (2016) stated that opportunities for an young learners to experiment with the target language and to go beyond fixed dialogue is not often seen in a foreign language classroom. At the same time, they emphasize the importance of spontaneous and creative language use in lessons for young learners to improve their language output. Meaningful language use is often seen in the main-task phase. For example, when children learn about whales, the teacher could show a video of whales and have students retell the story in their own words. This can increase students' opportunities of using the target language more creatively and spontaneously. Engagement is key, since children need to apply what they have learned in the main-task stage to their post-task activity.

The Post-task Phase

Doing craftwork at the end of the lesson is a good way to deepen students' newly acquired knowledge. Students pay more attention to activities in the pre- and main-task stages with the aim of getting the details right. For example, when making an octopus craft, children need to remember that octopuses have eight tentacles. When it comes to jellyfish, they need to know that jellyfish don't have eyes like other animals. The teacher should remind learners of the importance of making creatures anatomically accurate with the facts that are taught in the lesson. Having said that, it is also important to let them have fun and be as creative as possible in exploring various craft materials. Children could use glitter strings for tentacles and make octopus suckers with ring-shaped cereal. As previously mentioned, playful learning helps children to develop and retain new knowledge.

Method

A class of 2nd grade elementary school students was observed to see if their spoken output and comprehension could be increased through a new style of craft project class in which students had to use English in order to get the materials they needed for the craft and ask for assistance. As recordings and interviews are unsuitable for young learners, and introducing an independent observer was also thought to change the classroom dynamic, the activities and student utterances were observed by both teachers. The teachers were both confident that the majority of utterances were noted, even though they were not counted for statistical analysis.

Participants and Setting

All observations were carried out over a year in a class of 23 7- and 8-year-olds in an English Saturday school program for elementary school students. Most of the students studied in Japanese elementary schools Monday to Friday and attended the English Saturday school program from 9am to 3pm for 34 weeks a year. The teachers were a native English speaker with more than 30 years' experience teaching English to Japanese children, and a Japanese native speaker, who had extensive experience teaching young learners as well as studying and living abroad.

Students had three skills-based classes comprising reading, writing, speaking, and listening, plus one class focusing on hands-on activities, which was observed for this research. They also took physical education and computer classes taught in English. The students' English ability ranged from intermediate to advanced for their age. Based on student application forms, some students had lived in English-speaking countries (n=5), some had attended full-time English medium schools for kindergarten (n=15), and a few of the students were growing up in multilingual families (n=4). This research investigated ways in which language acquisition could be increased in a project class through increasing comprehensible input and pushed output. The students were not tested

formally and results are based on the authors' observations. Permission was granted by the coordinator of the program for classes to be observed. All students' parents or guardians involved in this activity gave written consent. Total anonymity of participants was observed at all times.

Increasing Opportunities for Comprehensible Input and Pushed Output

It is possible for craft and project classes to involve mainly visual demonstration with very little language acquisition. To avoid this, all craft project classes incorporated a variety of input such as extensive listening, extensive viewing, teacher talk, and written instructions.

Instructional Videos

Various online videos were used to demonstrate craft projects with the teacher pausing and explaining the project, and in some cases paraphrasing the language used. As most of the videos were made for native English-speaking children, this type of scaffolding was necessary to make the input comprehensible.

Teacher Explanation

When videos were not available, the teacher explained the activity to students at a level just above the learners' current language level (i+1) (Krashen, 1981). For lower-level students, visual demonstration also acted as a form of scaffolding to understand the language. An effort was made to explain the steps of the craft before demonstrating, to encourage students to listen rather than just watch the demonstration.

Written Instructions

Some craft projects could be explained with written instructions in English. In these cases, the teacher read the instructions step by step with the students to ensure comprehension and demonstrated the activity for extra scaffolding. Students were shown the finished craft completed by the teacher and told that they must listen carefully to make it themselves.

Individual Support

The final way in which comprehensible input was provided was through one-on-one support for students by the teachers during the activity. This provided opportunities for repetition and recycling of language. Students often asked teachers to explain one step again or more commonly, "Can you help me please?" It was also observed that help was occasionally given by other students, which Pinter (2015) observed could increase both students' ability to pay attention to the task.

Pushed Output

As noted at the start of this article, for students to become fluent English speakers they need opportunities to use language spontaneously and creatively. Initially students were taught a few formulaic phrases for making requests in English. If they wanted to get materials or help from the teacher, they were required to ask for them in English. By week 20, students were using these formulaic phases spontaneously for a variety of classroom requests. Students were also encouraged to tell teachers, parents, and peers about their craft and how they made it.

Craft Projects

The following is a small selection of the tasks that were used in this research project.

Jellyfish

This activity started with the teacher eliciting from the students what they knew about jellyfish, for example: "Have you ever seen a jellyfish?", "What color are jellyfish?", followed by the teacher telling students a story about when she was stung by a jellyfish. This created a great amount of interest. Even students who did not have high levels of English fluency were helped by the assistant to ask questions. The teacher then showed a video about jellyfish, pausing at various points to explain important vocabulary. The students then completed a cloze activity about jellyfish as a class. All the missing words were vocabulary from the video. Finally, the students made a jellyfish craft using a plastic cup, tissue paper and glitter string. The teacher showed the students an example of a completed jellyfish craft and explained how to make it. Students then had to request materials from the teacher and assistant. The teacher and assistant asked students follow up questions such as, "What color paper do you want?", "How many stickers do you want?" In this way students were engaged in meaningful and authentic communication

in English. Some students also asked for extra assistance in English. As an additional benefit, after the craft was taken home, a number of parents wrote to us to say how much they enjoyed learning about jellyfish from their child. Young learners are often unwilling to share what they learn at school with parents, but it is highly motivating for children to become the givers of knowledge to their parents.

Penguin

In this activity, the teacher initially asked the students what they knew about penguins. For example, "Where do penguins live?", "How are their babies born?" After this, students were shown a video of Emperor Penguins in Antarctica. The teacher paused the video to discuss why the penguins need to keep the egg on their feet and why the mother and father take turns looking after the egg and the chick. The students then completed a worksheet about the Emperor Penguin's life cycle as a class. This recycled all the information from the video such as the egg being laid and the chick hatching. Finally, the students watched a video on how to make a papercraft penguin. The teacher paused the video at various points to repeat and explain each step. Then the students requested materials from the teacher and the assistant. Some students, who finished quickly, requested extra materials to make a brown penguin chick, egg, or fish, demonstrating a deeper understanding of the life cycle of an Emperor Penguin.

Flat Stanley

This activity used the popular story Flat Stanley by Jeff Brown (1964) as a springboard to create craft projects. In addition, the figures were exchanged with university education students, which increased the motivation by providing a real audience. The teacher first read the story to the students, eliciting what they thought Flat Stanley could and could not do. They then created their own self-introduction and Flat Me craft. In the story Stanley is posted to California, so the students decorated an envelope, and their Flat Me craft was sent to the university students. The university students each made Flat Me figures and sent them to the elementary school students. The students then took their Flat Friend into the playground. A photograph was taken of every Flat Friend playing in the playground. These were made into postcards, which the students wrote and sent to the university students telling them what they had been doing. After the final stage of the project, the Flat Friends were returned. This activity incorporated reading, writing, listening, and collaboration.

Butterfly Chromatography

In this activity, students started by looking at pictures of chromatography butterflies. They tried to guess what color pen was used to make the rainbow colors on filter paper. The answer of black and brown was surprising for them. After that, they read instructions on how to make a chromatography butterfly and requested materials from the teachers. Although the activity is relatively easy, doing each step correctly is essential. Students were encouraged to try many times with different pens and patterns. This led to simple discussions of the colors they made, for example, "Look at this! It's red, green, and blue!"

This is a small sample of craft projects, but it demonstrates how reading, writing, speaking, and listening can be encouraged through craft projects. Students were motivated by craftwork, but at the same time they were able to acquire language through a variety of comprehensible input and pushed output in meaningful and authentic situations. Through focusing on the craft, recycling and scaffolding of language was possible.

Findings

Through these activities, three main improvements were observed: verbal skills, risk-taking, and motivation. First, the verbal skills improved directly through memorization of formulaic phrases and repetition in a variety of situations. Prior to this research project, students were instructed to choose paper or other items that they wanted to use for their craft. The teachers tried to engage students in dialog, but the students were able to participate passively without speaking. In this research, all craft materials were controlled by the teacher or assistant. If students wanted something, they had to ask for it verbally. To help the lower language level students, some formulaic language was taught, such as "Can I have a piece of paper please?" The teacher would then engage with them asking what color they would like and what size. The variety of questions was gradually increased over the 34 weeks. By the end of the second term students were naturally and freely making a variety of classroom requests not related to craft projects, for example requesting a new notebook or having their pencil sharpened and even going to the bathroom.

Second, risk-taking was observed with students using request phrases outside the craft class as well as trying to formulate sentences to share results or show their craft. As students were focused on doing the craftwork, their affective filters were lowered and many students who were usually quiet offered opinions and asked questions. Students

were also motivated to ask for help when they had a problem because they wanted to complete the activity.

Finally, students were observed to be focused on the craft, asking questions in English, and requesting to watch videos again, indicating intrinsic motivation. When they became excited about the content, their English language output increased greatly. In addition, sharing the craft with parents at home showed their increased motivation, which was evidenced through parents' communication with the teachers.

Conclusion

The most important finding from this project was that, by requiring students to ask for materials rather than allowing them to help themselves, their English output increased significantly over the course of the year of observations. Although there is no clear quantitative record of the number of words spoken by each child, it was noted by both researchers that the amount of speaking by children in the craft class had increased greatly compared to previous years. In addition, students engaged with the language in a very natural way, focusing on meaning and communication, which Becker and Roos (2016) stated is necessary to develop second language fluency. Students were observed to be motivated by having a wide variety of materials and being able to use them creatively, and being forced to ask for materials greatly increased the speaking time, particularly for some students with lower English skills. With teachers providing correct models at the time of speaking, students were also able to develop accuracy in grammar and vocabulary.

In addition, it was observed that students with limited English skills were able to experiment with language by using the formulaic language in other situations, such as asking for erasers or tissues and requesting permission to go to the bathroom. On the other hand, students who had a high-level of spoken English at the start of the research remained verbally confident. They were motivated to discuss what they had made and how they had made it with the teachers. Given the freedom to adapt the project in alternative ways, students felt they had created something original. As Pinter (2015) noted, motivation increases when learners have ownership and control over a task. It was observed that young learners were constantly pushing the boundaries, but they were also eager to share. Although students with lower language skills were not able to describe in detail what they had made, they were still eager to show the teachers and through discussion could explain what they had tried to achieve.

In conclusion, craft activities are excellent, not only in introducing comprehensible input and vocabulary building, but also encouraging verbal output. The craft projects fitted into the curriculum as the final stage of task-based learning activities, reinforcing the vocabulary learned and allowing learners to experiment with the language. Students were also motivated to help each other, increasing collaboration and depth of learning. Pinter (2015) stated that very little research has been done on task-based learning with young learners. Using craft activities as tasks could be an ideal way to introduce task-based learning for young learners. This research was carried out with 7- and 8-year-old students, but it could be expanded with older age groups to incorporate presentations and written instructions on how to do craftwork. If resources were available, it would also be possible to incorporate ICT through students creating and editing their own short videos of how to carry out the craft project with spoken explanations.

Bio Data

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