



Communication, confidence, and achievement in public school English

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From this year, foreign language, in most cases English, instruction has been made compulsory for 5th and 6th graders once a week with the aim of building up the foundation of communication abilities. A debatable point for many asks if instruction at this age level is meaningful (i.e., will it lead to higher English proficiency later at the secondary school?). Also in question is “the foundation of communicative competence,” which is supposedly the goal of elementary school English. Still others include: What is the relationship between nurturing positive attitudes toward English learning and building up basic English communication skills? How can such primitive English be assessed in non-threatening and formative manners? How does the result differ depending on the pedagogical technique? The purpose of this talk is to explore these points and to share how the findings from a recent project show what students can achieve through elementary school English education and what this will mean for Junior High School teachers.

今年から小学校5年生と6年生に対して週1回の外国語(たいていの場合英語)指導が、コミュニケーション能力の素地形成をねらいとして始まっている。多くの人が議論の余地を感じている問いは、このレベルの英語教育は意味があるのかどうか、つまり、この時期の教育のおかげで後の中等教育でより高いレベルの英語力につながっていくのだろうかということである。また、小学校英語の目的であると言われている「コミュニケーション能力の素地」とはそもそも何なのだろうか。また他の問いとしては、英語学習に肯定的な態度を養うことと、基本的な英語コミュニケーションスキルを育てることとはどういう関係にあるのだろうか、こんな初歩的なレベルの英語を恐怖感を感じさせずに形成的な効果のあるやり方でアセスメントをするにはどうすればよいのだろうか、その結果は教え方によってどう変わってくるのだろうか、などがある。本講演の目的は、こうした問いを検討し、近年行ってきたあるプロジェクトの結果をふまえて、小学校英語教育を通して子どもたちができるようになってきたことは何なのか、またそのことが中学校の先生にとって何を意味するのかを公開することにある。

Keywords: elementary school English, assessment, speaking test, listening test, continuity between elementary and secondary schools

What can 6th graders achieve through elementary school English?

The year 2011 marks the start of Japan’s compulsory English instruction (officially called English Activities-*Eigo Katsudo*) at the elementary school level. The new *Course of Study for Foreign Language Activities at the Elementary School* (CS)

states that building up “the foundation of communication abilities (communication *nooryoku no soji*)” is the overall aim (MEXT, 2008). Emphasis continues to be on oral English over written and on having communication experiences over accumulating English language knowledge per se. Although English is compulsory only for 5th and 6th graders, the reality is that former experimental schools and others which had offered English education to other grades are finding ways to squeeze in some hours in their curricula to continue to teach English in those grades as well.

Given the current situation, what do/can 6th graders achieve in terms of English communication abilities and attitude toward English learning, and how is such a “foundation” being sustained and further developed once they move to junior high school (7th grade)? In order to answer these questions, the plenary lecture in November will focus on Japan’s recent situation, drawing primarily on a project I have been working on with two other researchers, Tsuneo Takanashi and Tetsuharu Koyama. I will refer to the project as the YTK project.

The effectiveness of English education at the elementary school level, in terms of enhancing English learning at the secondary school level, was debated for some time. A couple of review articles revealed that studies had yielded contradictory results and that there were possible reasons for such inconsistency (Butler, 2005; Yukawa, 2003) including the variability of sampling and validity of tests, the quality of instruction at the elementary level, and the lack of continuity in terms of curriculum and instruction between elementary and junior high schools. Therefore, the YTK project has been conducting a series of case studies to understand the relationship between assessment results and the characteristics of and types of teaching practice found in each school. The cases vary

in teaching methods, resources, and students' socio-economic backgrounds. We hope that by examining different types of schools we will put together information on some prototypes which represent similar types of schools in other parts of Japan.

Our basic stance

Our basic stance toward elementary school English education is the following. First, instruction at this level is unavoidable and desirable considering the globalization of the world today, and in order to achieve results worth the efforts, more support for teachers and clearer teaching objectives are needed. Second, we think that a focus on oral English (including reading stories aloud to students) is sensible and setting the primary goal as making students experience the joy of communicating in English is feasible, considering the amount of time allotted in the curriculum. Third, where we seem to differ from quite a few EFL specialists in this field in Japan is that we think nurturing desirable motivation toward English and English learning is inseparable from developing minimum language skills (Yashima, 2010), and thus we cannot ignore the importance of the latter to successfully nurture the former.

Findings on listening comprehension abilities, speaking abilities, and affect

We (the YTK team) along with other researchers, school teachers, and graduate students, have been collecting data from both public and private schools. Collaboration with many schools has been possible because the YTK project was conducted in an effort to work jointly on the analysis of the current state in each school and the improvement of the curriculum and pedagogical skills there.

In order to evaluate upper grade (5th and 6th grade) students' listening comprehension abilities, an "achievement" test was constructed based on the knowledge, obtained through lesson observations and interviews, of the variety of English used in schools' curricula (the YTK Listening Test, *Eigo Chikara Dameshi*, a test DVD included in Yukawa, Takanishi, & Koyama, 2009). The test covers "grammatical knowledge"

and "textual knowledge" which are both under the upper level category called "organizational knowledge of language ability" in Bachman and Palmer's model (1996). The test consists of 37 questions. The first 36 are used to evaluate: a) children's understanding of such nouns as days of the week, months, weather, numbers, etc., b) so-called classroom English, English used for classroom management as well as c) questions regarding letter-sound correspondence. The last question (Question 37) investigates students' textual knowledge in English. They watch and listen to a picture book story (16 pages, one sentence per page) on the screen and summarize what the story was about in writing (in Japanese).

Seven public and private elementary schools participated in the study in fall 2006 with an average of 78 % correct answers. (These schools taught English at least once a week in the 3rd grade and above.) In March 2007, three more elementary schools administered the test (67%~82% correct answers), and in April 2008, three private junior high schools administered the test (85% correct answers). Since then, one school has been administering it on a regular basis at the end of the school year, three other schools administered it once, and four junior high schools administered a second version (*Eigo Chikara Dameshi II*, for details, see Yoshida, 2011), a slightly harder test, to 7th graders at the beginning of the year. The general tendency is that these 6th graders as well as 7th graders at the beginning stage of their junior high school life do fairly well (answering roughly 70-85% correctly). These results suggest that even when teaching methods at the elementary schools are not necessarily the most advanced, once students are exposed to some English in the 3rd grade and above, they do develop English vocabulary and simple structural knowledge at the receptive level.

The YTK team also created a speaking test called *Let's Talk*. This is a performance test where students perform the task of carrying on a real conversation, rather than taking an oral discrete-point test, the latter of which covers only a small part of what is required to have a conversation. Considering the students' limited English and experience, it was designed as a paired test with scaffolding: students come into a conversation

site as a pair to have a conversation with a foreign/native English speaker. They can help each other in Japanese, resort to L1 if absolutely necessary, and can also use gestures and whatever other strategies they are able to use to aid their expression and comprehension. In fall 2007, four private schools, and in March 2008, one public school administered this test. Since the test is an enjoyable and new international encounter for most students, especially in public schools, one school which joined this practice in 2008 has been offering this 'elementary school final fun event' to its students every year since then. Another public school has been using the test for three years now for the same reason, and the two other schools in the same school district followed their example this March. In order to make inter-school as well as intra-school comparison easier and also to understand the characteristics of learners' conversational skills in detail, we created a rating system with five criteria (phonology, vocabulary and syntax, attentiveness, expressiveness, and management) with four standards (1 to 4, 4 being the best). We also tested the reliability and validity of the test (Koyama, Yukawa, & Takanashi, 2009).

One important finding is that the students did manage to perform this task of carrying on a conversation with an English speaking foreign adult collaboratively with another student for three to five minutes, and they all said that they had fun. Students' performance levels naturally differ, depending on the quality of English instruction and instructional hours. By comparing performances at the same school over two years, we know that if the students could ask questions rather than just answer the interviewer's questions, they tend to look more confident and proud. Furthermore when they learn how to use simple backchannel phrases like 'Nice' or 'Me, too,' the flow of the conversation becomes smooth, and both the interviewer and students feel that they are actually 'conversing' (Yukawa, Koyama, & Takanashi, 2010).

The YTK team has been carrying out two other projects: one to create a model curriculum and teaching materials (though only for one year so far) and another to investigate 7th graders' change in motivation and its relationship with the initial English abilities (Yoshida, 2011; Yukawa, Koyama, & Sugimoto, 2010). I will

discuss these topics as well as others related to the listening and speaking assessment data in the plenary in November.

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Author bio

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University, College of Letters, where her main responsibility is to train future secondary school English teachers. Her research interests include English education at primary / secondary schools, bilingual education, and language attrition. Recently she has been supporting a number of elementary schools on a regular/irregular basis and their linked junior high school teachers as well, offering in-service teacher training and collecting data to evaluate their teaching practice. The results are published as *Communicative competence expected to be learned in elementary English education* (2009, in Japanese) and journal articles.



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The reflective teacher: Towards self-actualization

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In the act of teaching, we have little time to reflect on the successes or puzzles that occur within our classes and can lose valuable opportunities for gaining insights into our pedagogic practice. There is a need, therefore, for practical ways to help us think back upon our experiences more deeply and to discover what is actually happening in our classrooms. This workshop discusses the process of becoming reflective and the journey towards pedagogic self-actualization. It also provides a number of strategies and frameworks that can be used by teachers to facilitate critical reflection on their teaching and find new discoveries, possibilities, and ideas for research themes there.

指導中、教師は授業内の成功や問題を再考する時間がないので、教育実践の場において、洞察力を得る貴重な機会を失っている。したがって、より深く我々教師の経験を考察し、教室内で実際に起きている事象を理解するための効果的な方法が必要である。本ワークショップでは、深い考察

力を得るための方法と教育上の自己実現に向けた探究を論議する。また、教師が自身の教授法を客観的に考察する上で必要な、多様な方策と枠組みを提示し、研究テーマのための新しい発見、可能性や着想点を探る。

Keywords: action research, cooperative development, inquiry-based approaches, professional development, reflective practice

Imagine that we teachers were able to be the students in our classes for just one day. What would we see? What would we think? How would we feel? Imagine all that we could learn from this unique perspective. Although everyday classroom experiences can provide us with the potential to understand and learn more about our individual pedagogic practice, in the hectic activity of teaching we often have little time to consider the reasons for and implications of the many "instinctive and automatic" (Peck, 1993, p. 83) decisions we make in our classes. Moreover,