

English Activities in Japanese Public Elementary Schools:

An Observational Study

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0.0 Introduction

From 2002, English became a part of the curriculum in elementary schools in Japan. Since the inception of the new Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) curriculum guidelines, elementary schools throughout Japan have been struggling to cope with how to implement this new curriculum. The new curriculum guidelines include class time for “The Period of Integrated Studies,” within which “English Activities” can be conducted. Many schools have opted to use the Period of Integrated Study for English Activities (EA) (MEXT, 2002).

Few studies have presented objective research data collected on what is actually occurring in English Activities classes. Most of the research reported on EA in public elementary schools uses subjective data as reported on questionnaires or through interviews (Higuchi, Kagata, Shinohara, Honda, Yamura, Kanazawa, Fukuchi, Kitamura, & Shinohara, 2001, Hogan, 2004). Other research has looked at the difficulties elementary schools and their teachers face in implementing EA, and suggested solutions (Kelly, 2002, Murphey, Asaoka, and Sekiguchi, 2004, Takagaki, 2003). However, unless we know what teachers are actually doing in the EA classes, it is not enough to ask teachers for their ideas about their classes through interviews or questionnaires, but it is necessary to observe what they actually do in relation to their beliefs about teaching English.

1.0 Purpose

This descriptive study reports on what is actually happening in the English Activity classes in Japanese public elementary schools as the initial stage of a larger scale MEXT grant research (No. 16520359). Through analysis of observational data, we demonstrate how the MEXT curriculum is implemented in Japanese public elementary schools.

2.0 Method

We first collected data from three elementary schools in the central area of Japan. The schools were randomly selected and lessons were audio- and video-recorded. During the lesson, both researchers took observational notes. Before and after the lessons, we conducted interviews with the principals, homeroom teacher, teachers who actually taught the lessons (i.e., visiting native English speakers who don't have a Japanese elementary school teaching license), and curriculum coordinators. Furthermore, materials in the form of yearly curriculum plans and individual lesson plans were collected. The entire lesson of each class was transcribed using the Jefferson transcription conventions (Atkinson & Heritage, 1984). For the analysis of the classroom, data both researchers repeatedly examined the transcripts while viewing the video recordings.

3.0 Results and Discussion

3.1 Analyses of the Ethnographical Data

The English Activity classes in Japanese elementary schools vary in terms of who teaches the class and how often the classes are held. One class we observed was taught only by the Japanese homeroom teacher, while the other two classes were taught by visiting teachers who became the main teacher while the homeroom teacher took on the role of assistant language teacher. The two visiting teachers spoke English as a first language. Some Japanese elementary schools do not hold English Activity classes. Of the three schools we observed, one school held eight classes per year, and the other two held 20 English Activity classes per year.

In all three schools the yearly syllabus was coordinated by one of the full-time Japanese teachers. However, the individual teachers decided on how the syllabus would be carried out in each lesson. In the case of the one Japanese homeroom teacher who actually taught the class, the syllabus was narrowly designed so as to give her greater support in teaching techniques since she did not have specific training in teaching second languages, whereas the two visiting teachers had had such training and therefore had more leeway in their choice of teaching techniques.

3.2 Analyses of the Video and Audio Data

The analyses of the data revealed the active participation of students through the

application of Total Physical Response (TPR) teaching methods, and the extensive use of choral and voluntary repetition. In this presentation, we will show you some examples of each of these from the data.

3.2.1 TPR

The teachers in the data occasionally had students use physical actions while singing songs such as “Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes” and “Where is Thumbkin?” as we found in our video data. In example (1), the class is singing Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes.

(1) Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes

((Everybody sings as they touch the parts of the body referred to in the song.))

All: Head shoulders knees and toes knees and toes

head shoulders knees and toes knees and toes

and eyes and ears and mouth and nose

oh head shoulders knees and toes knees and toes.

((They sang the song three times.))

In example (2), the class is singing “Where is Thumbkin?”

(2) “Where is Thumbkin?”

((Everybody sings as they follow the teacher’s gestures))

ALL: Where is Thumbkin.

Where is Thumbkin.

Here I am. Here I am.

How are you today sir.

Very well I thank you.

Run away, run away.

((They sang for all five fingers))

These songs were introduced after extensive practice of referring to and pointing at parts of the body while repeating the names of the parts of the body.

TPR was also applied in games. In example (3), the class starts doing the “kanji” or Chinese characters game. The teacher said the name of a day of the week in English and three teams of students competed to make the kanji that represents that day of the week with their bodies. In this segment, the teacher introduces the activity and has the students make the kanji that represents “Saturday.”

(3) [Kanto T: 17-18] (AT: Assistant teacher; S: student; JT: Japanese teacher)

1. AT: Today we're going to play, the kanji game,
2. S: kanji game
3. AT: kanji game.
4. AT: Okay, so, for example
5. AT: Okay, for example, if I say, Saturday,... team make *kanji*
6. S: *kanji*
7. JT: *kanji o*
Acc
8. S: *tsukure*
"make."
9. JT: mmm
10. JT: *kanji o*
Acc
11. S: *tsukre*
"make"
12. JT: *nan no kanji*
"What kanji?"
13. S: ???????? *yobi*
"days of the week."
14. AT: Saturday, *sou* (Japanese)
15. AT: Okay
16. ?: *douyobi*
"Saturday."
17. AT: Okay, let's do practice, Saturday,

18. JT: so let's do
19. AT: Saturday
20. Ss: ((STUDENTS MAKE KANJI))

The students and teachers repeated this game 17 times in the class.

3.2.2 Repetition

The other activities frequently observed in the elementary school English Activities were repetition, both choral repetition and what we here tentatively label as voluntary repetition.

3.2.2.1 Choral Repetition

In example (4), the class is studying the names of the months. In having the students repeat the words, as shown in lines 7 to 12, the teacher occasionally changes the pitch of his voice playfully and the students repeat the pitch change.

(4) [Kanto T: 13]

1. AT: September
2. Ss: September
3. AT: September
4. Ss: September
5. AT: September
6. Ss: September
7. AT: September (rising pitch)
8. Ss: September (rising pitch)
9. AT: September (rising pitch, higher)
10. Ss: September (rising pitch)
11. AT: September (rising pitch) higher
12. Ss: September (rising pitch)
13. Ss: Au, Au, August
14. Ss: September
15. Ss: October
16. AT: October
17. Ss: October

18. AT: October
19. Ss: October

In example (5), the class is studying “Where is ~?” and appropriate prepositional responses to the question. In this segment, as shown in lines 6, 11 and 16, the teacher keeps using the adverbial phrase “one more time” to show that the repetition sequence will be repeated. See lines 6, 11, and 16 in the transcript below.

(5) [Kanto S: 4]

1. AT: Okay. Everybody listen ????? good. Where is the cap?
One, two,
2. three.
3. Ss: Where is the cap?
4. AT: It's in, the basket. One, two, three.
5. Ss: It's in the basket.
6. AT: Good. Let's practice one more time. Okay. Where is the cap?
7. One, two, three.
8. Ss: Where is the cap?
9. AT: Good. Answer: It's in the basket. One, two, three.
10. Ss: It's in the basket. (and all repetitions are with H)
11. AT: Good, good. Okay. Alright. I'm going to try this one more time.
12. Where is the ba- where is the cap? One, two, three.
13. Ss: Where is the cap?
14. AT: Good. Answer: It's on the basket. One, two, three.
15. Ss: It's on the basket.
16. AT: Goo::d. Alright. Try one more time. Where is the cap?
One, two,
17. three.
18. Ss: Where is the cap?
19. AT: Answer. It's under the basket. One, two, three.

20. Ss: It's under the basket.
21. AT: Goo::d. Okay, let's practice one more time. It's in the basket.
22. One, two, three.
23. Ss: It's in the basket.
24. AT: Good.

The question "Where is ~?" and the responses to the question were key phrases for the lesson and the phrases were repeated extensively throughout the lesson. Moreover, the phrase "one more time" although not the focus of the lesson, functions as input for the students which, if it becomes uptake, is being learned in an incidental and naturalistic way.

3.2.2.2 Voluntary Repetition

Interestingly, we also observed students voluntarily repeating the target words or phrases by themselves. The repetitions were voluntary in that they occurred outside the main sequence of the classroom discourse and the students were not required to repeat the words or phrases. These voluntary repetitions were often observed between activities when the teachers were preparing for the next activities.

In example (6), four students are voluntarily repeating the names of the week while the teacher is preparing a cassette tape. The class did choral repetition of the names of the week just before this segment. In line 1, as S1 utters Tuesday, the other students continue producing the days of the week with S1 until line 5. Then in line 7, S3 starts producing the names of the week starting from Sunday again and the students keep producing the names of the week until the song starts playing from the cassette recorder.

(6) [Kanto T:1]

((Students are talking while the assistant teacher is preparing a cassette tape for the next activity.))

1. S1: Tuesday
2. S2: Wednesday
3. S3: We:dnsday, (.) Thur:sday,
4. S1: Friday

“Alright.”

The fact that these voluntary repetitions often occurred after the choral repetition suggests that the students actually remembered the linguistic items they verbalized during the choral repetition and that they are actively trying to remember, memorize, internalize, or “learn” the linguistic items.

4.0 Conclusion

In conclusion, the analyses of the data demonstrated that although there has been a lot of criticism of the Japanese Ministry of Education for not providing enough structure in the curriculum or enough teacher-training, the curriculum is being successfully implemented in Japanese public elementary schools in that English Activities are actively engaging the students in the English learning tasks. This was found in the active participation of students, the extensive use of choral and voluntary repetition, and the application of Total Physical Response teaching methods. Although one’s reaction to the extensive choral repetition in the classes might be a call for greater communicative use of English, we should remember that this repetition is an important part of language learning for children as they play with the sounds and patterns of the language in order to break the code.

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Appendix

Transcription Conventions

[]	overlapping talk
=	latched utterances
(0.0)	timed pause (in seconds)
(.)	a short pause
co:lon	extension of the sound or syllable
co::lon	a more prolonged stretch
.	fall in intonation (final)
,	continuing intonation (non-final)
?	rising intonation (final)
;	intonation between a period and a comma
¿	a rise stronger than comma but weaker than a question mark
CAPITAL	loud talk
<u>underline</u>	emphasis
	sharp rise
	sharp fall
◦ ◦	passage of talk that is quieter than surrounding talk
< >	passage of talk that is slower than surrounding talk
> <	passage of talk that is faster than surrounding talk.
hh	audible aspirations
*hh	audible inhalations
(hh)	laughter within a word
(())	comment by the transcriber
()	problematic hearing that the transcriber is not certain about
“ ”	Idiomatic translation of Japanese utterances