

Approaches to Teaching English in the Elementary School

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According to the new Course of Study for 2002, elementary schools are going to have a “Period for Integrated Study” from the third grade. In this class, as one of the choices, schools can provide English activities. Schools were allowed to choose whatever subject they wished to teach in these multi-purpose classes. Some schools began teaching how to play traditional Japanese musical instruments because they felt that the ability of the new generation to understand and play them had diminished over the years. Other elementary schools began to teach a subject with the heading of ‘internationalization.’ Many elementary schools, however, opted to teach English in the multi-purpose class. In the school year beginning April, 2002, some elementary schools will have regular English classes for the third grade and higher. The Kanazawa Board of Education has been providing English activity classes since 1996.

Children are quick at understanding new concepts when presented in a positive, engaging way. Six or seven-year-old children cannot read English words and cannot, for the most part, read individual letters in the Latin alphabet. Therefore, presenting new words or language in a written form is impractical. Similarly, younger elementary school students cannot process information about grammatical points of English. First, because they have a limited grasp of the grammatical terms in their first language, and second, the grammatical rules of a second language are alien to their experience. Therefore, what is the best way to present English to elementary students?

Two Language Acquisition Theories

Some researchers, notably Stephen Krashen, and James J. Asher, have listed a variety of approaches to teaching English as a foreign or second language. Krashen, for example, promotes the Natural Approach. While he maintains that the primary goal of a language course is to develop the four skills – listening, reading, writing, and speaking – he also mentions other goals. “One goal ... is to develop a greater cultural awareness on the part of the students.” (1. Krashen, Terrell, 1983). For our purposes here, he also says, “What is most important is that the goals of the course be specified.” (2). In discussing learning versus acquisition, Krashen and Terrell state that acquisition is similar to a child acquiring its first language (3), and acquisition is

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“subconscious” and “implicit.” (4). Learning, on the other hand, is more formal and conscious. Adults ‘learn’ a language by studying rules (grammar) and words (vocabulary). Children ‘acquire’ it by listening, internalizing the grammar, and mimicking language models (usually the parents, in first language acquisition).

Asher developed his Total Physical Response approach based on observations of children learning their first language. Children, he noticed, do not ‘study,’ in the formal sense, the target language. They watch, listen, and respond. If their response is correct, they are rewarded, often with a parental smile.

Preparation and Planning

Anyone with children will probably understand the need for a clear goal. Children do not like ambiguity as much as adults do, but the goal of the class should be clear not only to the students but also to the teachers, the Assistant Language Teachers (ALT), and the English Activities Assistants (EAA). Educators need to know what they want the students to learn and how they should approach that goal. Educators should evaluate their goals on a daily, monthly, and yearly basis. Planning the curriculum is as important in elementary schools as in any other academic setting.

Once a plan is decided upon, educators should prepare for individual lessons. Preparation is vital for two reasons: it allows the educators to more concretely visualize their plan and it reduces the amount of Japanese needed in the classroom, except for crowd control. Preparation will also reveal weak spots in a lesson plan. Downtime in a class while the teacher scrambles for the next (unprepared) activity may be acceptable in higher educational settings (such as universities), but it is deadly when the teacher is surrounded by 30 active 6-year-olds.

Another reason for careful preparation is so that those educators less fluent in English can discover what words, phrases, and sentences they will need to practice before class. There is no reason an educated homeroom teacher cannot teach English given proper planning and preparation.

A Traditional Example

Educators should approach learning English one phrase and one sentence at a time.

For example, suppose the final goal is to have students with the ability to say, “My name is Michiko.” What smaller steps are required to get to this goal? First, students should learn to point at themselves (index finger on their breastbone, not their nose) and say their names. Secondly, the students should be shown phrase, ‘My name is...’ Thirdly, these two points should be connected.

How best to teach children these three steps? The most traditional approach would be the following: Since most elementary students cannot read English, the educator must demonstrate

with physical actions while using the target language. The homeroom teacher should point at themselves and say “My name is Takashi.” Then the homeroom teacher should turn to the ALT or EAA and ask, “What’s your name?” The assistant would then respond by pointing at herself and saying, “My name is Saori.” With a few repetitions of this scenario students will soon deduce what is meant. At this point the teacher and assistant can then ask students, “What’s your name?” Children, being for the most part eager learners, will probably jump at the chance to practice their newly learned phrase. Modeling is important but there’s a more exciting way to present the same activity.

A teacher should engage the imaginations of the students. First through third grade students especially love games that engage their imaginations. Modeling the target structure with a game encourages the students to participate and, by participating, learn.

A Less Traditional Example

Target vocabulary: candy, book, eraser

The less traditional teacher has a bag. She looks into the bag. She says, with wonderment in her voice, “What’s this?” She pulls something partially out of the bag. “It’s brown. What is it?” She pulls it out a little bit more. The students begin guessing, usually in Japanese. “What is it?” the teacher asks and pulls it out further. When a child guesses what it is, the teacher says, surprised, “That’s right. It’s a book.” The imaginations of the children are activated. They are engaged not in learning three words, but in a game of guessing. After repeating the guessing game for each target vocabulary word, the teacher has said “What’s this?” and “What is it?” perhaps nine or ten times but probably many more. She then asks, in English (the target language), “Who wants to be the teacher?” Most of the students raise their hand even though they may not understand the question. They are caught up in the game. The teacher must choose one student to be the teacher and then show the student what to do. It often happens that students spontaneously have acquired “What’s this?” and “What is it?” In fact, many students want the chance to be the teacher and try to fool their friends. Again, they are not ‘learning’ in the traditional sense but are playing a game in English. Nakahara has observed this reaction in many first through third grade classes. Also, younger children are more eager to raise their hands to participate or answer questions if the learning environment is exciting or encouraging.

Games

Some teachers may underestimate elementary school students’ language abilities. This is often reflected in giving instructions.

Teacher A explains the rules of a game in Japanese because he thinks that it is too difficult for the students to understand. His students never understand the rules in English because they are never given the chance to understand them. However, the students in class B understand the

rules in English. Are the students in class B special? Teacher B thinks the students can guess what she says in English if she plans and prepares well. Her students get used to guessing what she means. They know she does not translate anything into Japanese. She shows how the game is fun and she shows physically how to play the game. As suggested in 「子供に英語をしゃべらせたい」 by Yoko Matsuka, teaching game rules in English is better because the students are concentrating on the game, not the language, and want to win. Because the students want to play the game and win, they concentrate and listen a lot. Matsuka says “You should not waste the chance to let them listen English.” (日本語でルールを説明する先生がいますが、まったくもったいないことです。) (5)

Additionally, it does not mean that a Japanese explanation is understandable for the first grade students if you rely only on the language. Even adults do not understand game rules explained only in words. You have to show what the game is. Adults often follow the explanation of the rules with, “Let’s play a practice game.” This ‘practice game’ teaches the rules better than most explanations. Younger children (especially first to third graders) learn quicker when shown by example than by language – L1 or L2 – alone.

English Through English

Younger children are open to new experiences. Language for first, second, and third graders is not a barrier to having fun. Children, it seems, instinctively know how to teach. We have observed two children of the same age who do not speak each other’s language communicate quite easily. They used their own language and showed by example. They also acquired the other language quickly when shown by example. The same, we suspect, would be true in a classroom situation. If the teacher teaches English in English and incorporates the appropriate gestures, pictures, and ‘body language’, students will learn English faster.

Adults, too, learn faster by doing than by listening. For an example of this, observe a group of adults listening to a lecture. At first most adults will look at the lecturer. Gradually, they will begin looking away from the lecturer. Their body language indicates they have stopped paying close attention. This is why adults bring paper and pens with them to a lecture, so they can take notes in an attempt to pay attention. Children have no qualms about not listening to a person. They will hurry off to play somewhere else. It is the teacher’s duty to keep the children from wandering off physically or mentally.

Recycling

Recycling language is important because students may not retain a vocabulary item which has been presented only once. If the same vocabulary item is presented a number of times over a long period of time, the chances of students learning it, retaining it, and being able to use it increases. If educators spent the first few minutes of each class reviewing a target vocabulary item or

structure presented in a previous lesson, students may be able to assimilate it into their own acquisition. Once, in language teaching, is not enough. An added advantage is the teacher, who may be less sure of their English ability, can practice as they teach. Over a period time the teacher will become more fluent in the target structure.

Physical Movement and Language

Asher's TPR is especially useful in teaching active students. The activities can be fun and lively and can reinforce or even introduce new vocabulary items. TPR begins with lots of teacher talk so preparation is vital. The students can listen to and learn a wide variety of words using TPR. As the student moves his or her body, they internalize the vocabulary and grammar. They acquire the target language by doing, rather than by memorizing.

A TPR Example

Teachers can teach students vocabulary items easily with TPR. If the new vocabulary to be introduced included, for example, 'door,' 'window,' 'chair,' 'desk,' and 'blackboard,' the teacher can first demonstrate a simple TPR activity. The teacher may want to divide the class into smaller, more manageable groups for this activity.

Teacher: Go to the window. (The assistant goes to the window.)

Teacher: Go to the door. (The assistant goes to the door.)

Teacher: Go to the blackboard. (The assistant goes to the blackboard.)

This sentence can, of course, be varied. ("Stand next to the window." "Run to the window." "Skip to the window." etc.) None of these sentences are particularly complex and any teacher should be able to use them correctly.

If the students are rapid language learners or in the more advanced elementary classes, more complex sentences can be used:

Teacher: If today is Thursday and it's raining, walk slowly to the door and open it.

To arrive at the more complex commands, however, teachers and students must start with smaller steps and advance in the language gradually. For example, the above complex command can be easily broken down into simpler sentences. "Today is Thursday." "It's raining." "I walk slowly." "Walk slowly to the door." "Open the door."

Stenson observed a kindergarten class of four-year-olds that had been taught using TPR for approximately four months. The teacher, a native speaker of English, gave rapid-fire commands at a slightly faster than natural speed. The class was outdoors in the kindergarten's playground

and the students were running in many directions, laughing, and trying to be the first to complete the task given them. Some of the language included:

1. Girls run to the big tree. Boys run to the sandbox.
2. Jump up and down three times and run around the little tree.
3. Do a somersault and run to the swings.

Most of the students could understand all the instructions. (Some of the kindergarten teachers, on the other hand, were linguistically lost. They had only listened to the English teacher but had not moved as they listened.) When the students did not understand or made a mistake, the teacher did not scold them. Usually, he laughed and the students laughed with him. In elementary school, the first to third grades students tend to raise their hands even though they do not know the answer if they are guaranteed not to be scolded for any mistakes.

Loudness and Chanting

In many of the classes observed, loudness was an issue with the teacher. Some teachers demanded the students ‘pay attention.’ Other teachers attempted to out-shout the students. One adult attempting to be louder than 30 6-year-olds seems a waste of effort. However, using the child’s natural need to vocalize (or scream) could lead to constructive learning.

It is not expected that a 6 or 7-year-old can copy a native speaker of a foreign language but it is not surprising that younger children can mimic quite well. Even if the teacher believes the target structure is too difficult for the children, some children will be able to mimic the sounds or the rhythms.

Learning the rhythm of a language is as important as learning the structure and words of that language. Singing or chanting is a good way to use the energy a child brings to a class. Simple songs presented entertainingly will provide students with enough reason to vocalize. There are many chants or songs teachers can use to introduce the rhythm of English. The song:

How’s the weather?	It’s raining.
How’s the weather?	It’s snowing.

is simple yet affords learning of rhythm, vocabulary (especially when combined with pictures or gestures), and grammar. Children who cannot speak English can mimic the sounds and rhythm of this song. If the teacher divides the class into groups and has each group compete with the others, the noise level of the classroom will skyrocket. At the same time, language acquisition will skyrocket. We have observed children singing this song outside of class and using the structure in the correct way. I.e. when leaving a building one child sang “How’s the weather?” and the other child responded by singing, “It’s cloudy.” The day was indeed cloudy. This indicates an

internalization of the grammar and vocabulary. A small step towards fluency.

Encouragement

Students who are not punished for any errors tend to take more risks in their language learning. Students who are encouraged to try to use the language usually make more efforts to use it than students who are discouraged from trying. Teachers should praise any effort and especially praise efforts that lead to understanding while minimizing penalizing errors.

Conclusion

Teachers should have lively and entertaining language classes, especially in the first three grades. They should use English as much as possible to teach English. They can use any number of approaches: use of physical movement, chants and songs, games, competitions (without losers), and encourage positive efforts. The first three grades of elementary school should be an environment where the student can explore English, play with English, and develop a feeling for the rhythm and sounds of the language. It can be an exciting place for both the teacher and the students.

Footnotes

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1 . p. 65

2 . p. 65

3 . p. 27

4 . p. 27

5 . p. 162 , 「子供に英語をしゃべらせたい」松香洋子 ワニの本 , 1993.

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