

A Discussion of the Relevant Research on
Early English Language Education and Its Application
for *Gaikokugo* and *Gaikokugo Katsudo* Classes

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子供を対象とした第二言語習得研究から得られる
小学校外国語・外国語活動への示唆

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大分大学教育学部研究紀要 第44巻第1号

2022年9月 別刷

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A Discussion of the Relevant Research on Early English Language Education and Its Application for *Gaikokugo* and *Gaikokugo Katsudo* Classes

OTANI, Yuko*

Abstract

The 2017 revision of the Course of Study for elementary schools in Japan implemented *Gaikokugo* (Foreign Language Education) in the upper grades and moved *Gaikokugo Katsudo* (Foreign Language Activities) from the upper grades to the middle grades. Lowering the age at which *Gaikokugo Katsudo* is to be taught does not mean the accumulated practice and teachers' knowledge from the previous version of the Course of Study can be simply transferred to the middle grades. But how can we successfully meet this challenge? To answer this question, this paper examines the relevant research on early language education and discusses its application to English language classrooms in Japan, hoping to help elementary school teachers plan *Gaikokugo Katsudo* and *Gaikokugo* lessons in their daily classrooms.

【Key words】 Foreign Language Activities, Foreign Language Education, English at Elementary Schools, Teacher Training, Teacher Education

Introduction

Japanese EES (English at elementary schools), as a result of the criticism of the traditional grammar based English language education in secondary schools, was initially developed in response to globalization which requires international communication and cooperation. The fundamental goal of EES was training Japanese students to have a good command of communicative English. In this spirit, *Gaikokugo Katsudo* for the fifth and sixth graders was first introduced in 2011. These activities, according to Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), “nurtured positive attitudes

Received April 28, 2022.

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towards English language learning among elementary students” (2018: 7) but the listening / speaking only policy did not capitalize on the students’ age-related characteristics. Furthermore, “the transition from elementary to secondary school English language education was not well established” (2018: 7), according to MEXT. Reflecting these considerations, the revised Course of Study for elementary schools introduced *Gaikokugo Katsudo* in the third and fourth grades and *Gaikokugo* in the fifth and sixth grades as a formal academic subject. This revision was a part of an English language education reform from primary to secondary school that started students learning English at a younger age and connected junior and senior high school English curriculums by adopting a coherent framework for students’ overall proficiency and progress. In general, an earlier start can confer considerable advantages on children by not only affording them more time overall, but also enabling children to make use of different developmental stages. To further access these possibilities, this paper considers the current, relevant research on child second language acquisition (SLA) and applies the discussion to the formal, instructional context in Japan.

Discussion

English language reform in Japan, was not an easy process. As Butler (2007) pointed out complicated social and political factors underlying Japan made the country take careful and slow steps. In the meantime, countries and areas that had a head start in early language education accumulated practice and knowledge on this subject. This section examines those practices and considers their language education principles and the teacher qualification / education policies needed to implement them. The subsequent discussion focuses on the goals and activities suitable for students in different developmental stages and discusses the approaches that can help children to achieve greater success in light of these goals.

Edelenbos and Kubanek (2009) proposed that it is important for the child second language learner to be exposed to good teaching, a supportive environment and to have continuity in instruction from one year to the next, taking children smoothly from primary into secondary education. Curriculum consistency is, therefore, an indispensable first step. Taiwan that introduced EES 20 years before Japan, revised its curriculum in 2015. The new Taiwanese curriculum bridges the 12 years of English language education from elementary to high school (Honda et al., 2019). While in Japan, where a uniform curriculum is not in place nationwide, efforts are being made at the local level. In 2016, the Saitama Board of Education introduced a course titled “Global Studies” which teaches English from the first grade to the ninth, using original textbooks and materials based on its nine-year uniform curriculum (Izawa, 2020). As a result, according to the Saitama Board of Education, the 2019 nationwide survey of English proficiency in Japan revealed that the ninth graders in Saitama city achieved the best results (2021, para. 2). MEXT

(2019) has suggested that an integrated elementary and middle school curriculum is the key to improving English proficiency. Regardless of the debate about what attributes to its success in improving English language proficiency, a coherent curriculum remains important.

Once curricular coherence has been established, the next challenge is to consider how to teach EES. As Nicholas and Lightbown (2008) suggested, the distinctive nature of young child second language acquisition requires a distinctive child second language pedagogy. While Edelenbos and Kubanek (2009) proposed English language teaching principles based on their thorough survey of early language education programs across European Union states where SLA education and training systems are regarded as the best in the world. However, their principles are not totally new to educators in Japan. For example, the importance of considering learner characteristics, learning strategies, and learning styles when teaching is already currently emphasized by experienced Japanese elementary school teachers. In addition, the principles for language learning, psycholinguistic issues and methodologies proposed by Edelenbos and Kubanek (2009) are already widely used by Japanese teachers of foreign languages. What is needed in Japanese EES, where English is expected to be primarily taught by elementary homeroom teachers, is to bring together homeroom teachers' wisdom along with that of language teachers. One way to do this is by team teaching (elementary homeroom teachers and language specialist teachers), and another way is by training elementary school teachers in English language teaching pedagogy. Either way, there is an increasing importance on enhancing the quality and quantity of teacher education, ensuring adequate support for teachers.

A closer look at the advanced EES practices in other countries reveals more things that need to be done and updated in teacher education. In South Korea, one of the first Asian countries that introduced EES in 1997, it is mandatory for elementary school teachers to receive 120 hours of training annually on English language education (MEXT, 2010a). As the Korean Ministry of Education states "teachers are able to spontaneously take the courses they want and maximize their professionalism" (2022, para. 4) which means teacher training opportunities are abundant in Korea and they also cover overseas training to help teachers obtain a masters' degree (MEXT, 2010a, Lee, 2013). In China, and in Taiwan, qualification training is supported by a variety of entities. Teachers not only have access to both face-to-face and on-line teacher training, but they are financially supported by local as well as central governments (MEXT, 2010b, c). While in Japan, where teachers' extremely heavy workload always receives attention, school boards and administrators fail to encourage their teachers participate in professional development. Nevertheless, teacher empowerment programs are flourishing at the local level. For example, the Tokyo Metropolitan Board of Education has started sending elementary school teachers abroad to study TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) for young learners, based on the fact that elementary school teachers' English proficiency has direct impact on the students' ability to communicate in English. As Nicholas and Lightbown (2008) suggested

that the distinctive nature of young child second language acquisition requires a distinctive child second language pedagogy so that elementary school teachers are, as are English specialized teachers, expected to build professional knowledge on English language education.

Once the language policy and curriculum are established and the teachers are trained and qualified, then the next challenge is to refine the methodology of the EES programs. Muñoz (2007) discusses the learner characteristics in a younger child period (below nine years of age) and an older child period (above 10 years of age) from the viewpoints of cognitive development, language aptitude, age-related styles, and strategies, as well as affective, personality and social characteristics. Judging from the facts that the third graders are eight or nine years of age, and the fifth graders are ten or eleven years of age, “Activities for young children” can be applied to *Gaikokugo Katsudo* and “Activities for older learners” to *Gaikokugo* classes. The following Table summarizes Muñoz’ discussion.

	Activities for young children	Activities for older learners
Cognitive development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • involve “doing things” • involve simple actions that do not require multiple cognitive operations • can “stretch” children’s performance when they are embedded in a familiar context and children can make sense of them 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • may involve logical reasoning • may involve multiple cognitive operations • can be disembedded from the immediate context
Language aptitude	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • use meaningful chunks and routines • essentially communicative activities that involve holistic use of language • provide massive amounts of input to guarantee incidental learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • can help deconstruct and analyze memorized chunks • may involve language analysis • involve both implicit and explicit learning
Age-related styles and strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • involve physical and manual movements • make use of repetition 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • varied to accommodate to different learning styles • may involve metalinguistic awareness and reflection • can be planned by learners based on their superior metacognitive knowledge

Affective, personality, and social characteristics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • enjoyable in themselves to stimulate motivation • in group tasks, the share of each member is clear from the start • in L2 oral activities, children are provided with an interactional scaffold 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • may refer to topics connected with learners' interests and professional concerns to stimulate motivation • in group tasks, learners can cooperate efficiently and make decisions about who does what • do not expose learners to their peers in ways that may threatened learners' self-image
Age effects on language outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • mostly oral so that learners can benefit from their enhanced perceptive receptiveness • avoid heavily accented L2 input • involve great amounts of listening comprehension that do not make very high cognitive demands • provide massive amounts of L2 exposure for learners to capitalize on their implicit learning mechanisms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • involve focused phonetic training and practice to allow the potential reorganization of the L2 learners' phonetic system • integrate attention to meaning and attention to form to foster accuracy, on the basis of learners' superior explicit learning mechanisms and metalinguistic awareness

Characteristics of adequate second language (L2) learning practice (Muñoz, 2007)

According to Muñoz, the activities for *Gaikokugo Katsudo* should be simple (not requiring multiple cognitive operations) and involve physical as well as manual movements since younger children have not yet mastered logical or analytical thinking and learn holistically. They like repetition and routines and can use meaningful language chunks. Younger children are mainly concerned with familiar immediate contexts and are inclined to have a positive attitude toward L2 learning when they enjoy language learning activities. They need massive amounts of L2 input, which does not always result in immediate or direct production. Younger children's learning can be enhanced by adults' scaffolding, too. *Gaikokugo Katsudo* instructors should be reminded of the importance of adequate input in both quality and quantity to meet the demands of young children.

Among older learners, on the other hand, individual differences are more prominent such as interests and professional concerns. They are closely connected to the motivation

of older learners in a similar way to how fun activities are connected to the motivation of younger learners. Furthermore, social differences are notable among *Gaikokugo* learners; they can study more independently and take advantage of group work, which promotes social, interactional language learning. The advanced logical and analytical thinking of older learners also enables systematic learning which helps to develop the basic understanding of the language. Accuracy and metalinguistic awareness that are more prominent for older learners, according to Muñoz, is also true for *Gaikokugo* learners. This is where the gap lies between the learner characteristics and the actual practice in English language classrooms in Japan. How to utilize metacognitive awareness and / or logical and analytical thinking among older learners will remain the challenge for Japanese EES.

Edelenbos and Kubanek (2009) also claim that children's aptitude can be developed and increased in the primary school years so that activities to internalize meaningful concepts are encouraged and not just fun activities based on language use. In addition, they propose alternating between talk-activities focusing on confident, fluent expression and those more focused on accuracy of form and meaning. Their argument overlaps with Muñoz' discussion, calling for the importance of balance in *Gaikokugo* classrooms where focus has been too often on fun elements and not on didactic ones and where fluency is given greater emphasis than accuracy.

Perhaps the next challenge for Japanese EES will be how to incorporate gradual and systematic reading and writing, including phonetic training in daily lessons. Shin (2018) among others consistently points out the importance of introducing phonics in early language classrooms since that is the key to early reading success (Beck, 2006). Under the current Course of Study, sound-symbol relationships are to be taught in junior high school, while letter-sound relationships are in elementary school. In other words, elementary school children start discriminating English sounds through phonemic awareness activities before focusing on phonics introduction. This is a new challenge for teachers in *Gaikokugo* classrooms where reading and writing was introduced for the first time under the current Course of Study. There is a need to conduct further research in this field, develop methodologies, accumulate practices, and disseminate them through teacher education.

In this section, the main principles of early English language teaching, the implication for its practice, and characteristics and adequate language activities for learners in younger and on older child periods were discussed. Edelenbos and Kubanek (2009) provided us with the main principles of early English language learning, and Muñoz (2007) presented age-appropriate activities for language classrooms. Their claims have direct impact on the EES classes under the revised Course of Study that emphasize the importance of considering learners' cognitive development. By applying the discussion in this section, we should be able to improve our EES practices in the future.

Conclusion

In response to the claim that children's developmental characteristics were not fully incorporated into the English language programs in Japanese elementary schools (MEXT 2018), this paper attempts to find a solution in relevant child SLA research. Perhaps the key to a successful program is to go back to the basics and, once again, ask the fundamental questions: what goals are appropriate for elementary school students, what their developmental characteristics are, and what activities can help children to achieve greater success in light of these goals. Every school board and individual school is expected to clarify the educational goals to ensure the fulfillment of the basic policies regarding designing curriculums. These educational goals must be clearly defined and disseminated through teacher education. Each teacher is then expected to reflect the language principles and learner characteristics in his / her daily teaching. In this way, the basic idea of the revised Course of Study will be realized.

Due to the limitations of this paper, the systematic introduction of literacy skills and the use of children's meta-linguistic cognition have not been adequately addressed, which remains to be discussed in future studies. EES in Japan is still young, and continued efforts to build empirical findings are expected. The ultimate goal is to find ways to bridge English education programs from primary to higher education. Introducing a coherent framework for proficiency-based assessment is an important first attempt, but it is not the only solution. The transition from primary to secondary education should be carefully designed. However, what is discussed in this paper is also relevant to secondary English language education. The developmental stages of elementary school students can help secondary school teachers better understand their students, and the activities suitable for secondary school students should build on activities appropriate for younger learners. Incorporating children's SLA research in English language education in Japan will help children enjoy the privileges of learning English, which will in turn produce better outcomes and improve the standard of English education in Japan in the future.

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子供を対象とした第二言語習得研究から得られる 小学校外国語・外国語活動への示唆

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【要 旨】 平成 29 年改定の学習指導要領によって、外国語活動の開始学年が小学校 3 年生に引き下げられ、高学年では教科としての外国語学習が始まった。このことは、それまでに蓄積された外国語活動の教授法や活動例をそのまま中学年に移行させればよいということではない。では、実際にどのように小学校外国語・外国語活動を実践していけばよいのか。本論文では、子供を対象とした第二言語習得研究ならびに先行事例を参考に、学習者の発達段階とその特性を取り入れた、小学校外国語教育の在り方と教員の研修、学年に応じた目標や活動について議論する。

【キーワード】 小学校外国語 外国語活動 小学校英語教育 教員研修