Teacher Talk in the Elementary School EFL Classroom

by
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Abstract

In a push to promote and improve English Education, the Japanese government has instigated numerous policy reforms from elementary school through senior high school. The most ambitious plans relate to elementary school instruction. From 2020, fifth and sixth grade students will study English as a mandatory subject with double the number of classroom hours, and third and fourth grade students will be required to study English as a foreign language activity. There is concern, however, that elementary school teachers charged with teaching English may lack confidence in English communication, particularly in the teacher talk used to engage students. To better understand these constraints, this paper examines the importance of teacher talk, reports on observations in six Japanese elementary school classrooms, and provides direction in choosing the language of communication in different situations. Analysis of the transcribed data reveals that while many teachers may be proficient at English greetings and display questions, there are ample opportunities to expand English teacher talk by increasing the amount of general classroom instruction issued in English.

Key Words：　teacher talk, teacher training, elementary school English, CALL

1. Introduction

In December of 2013 the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology（文部科学省, hereafter MEXT） published “The English Education Reform Plan corresponding to Globalization” as part of a series of initiatives culminating in the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games. Among the aims of the Reform Plan is to implement English instruction by Japanese homeroom teachers from the third and fourth grades of elementary school, as well as provide additional training for elementary school teachers. The objectives of the plan exceed those outlined in the MEXT (2008) guidelines instituting Foreign Language Activities, in principle English, for all fifth and sixth grade classes from April 2011. There are concerns, however, that many current elementary school teachers may lack confidence in English communication, particularly in the teacher talk used to engage students (Fukuda,

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Fennelly, & Luxton, 2013; Nakajima & Okazaki, 2013; Wakita, 2013). The present study aims to determine both how much and what kind of English language teacher talk is being employed in these elementary school English classrooms and in what ways the amount and quality of teacher talk can be improved.

2. Literature Review

The Japanese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, particularly at the elementary school level, is clearly one of minimal input (Larson-Hall, 2008). Outside of an average of one hour of weekly classroom instruction (MEXT, 2012c), the majority of students experience no English in the rest of their school day, at their homes, in their neighborhoods, on television, or in any other setting. A notable exception, difficult to quantify, is extra-curricular participation in *juku* [cram schools] or *eikaiwa* [English conversation classes] as observed by Lowe (2015). Supplementary English tuition notwithstanding, there is very limited English input for elementary school students in Japan. As such, the role of teacher talk becomes very important as a means of English input (Forman, 2012; Moser, Harris, & Cole, 2011).

Though the trend of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) may have briefly rendered teacher talk as something to be avoided due to its perceived incompatibility with learner-centeredness, teacher talk has generally come to be accepted as potentially beneficial (Cullen, 1998). Cullen makes the case for teacher talk as a source of comprehensible input, inevitable in parts of the world where the teacher's role is more traditionally defined, and facilitative of quality interaction. Likewise, where it was once viewed as counterproductive to have any first language (L1) used in the second language (L2) classroom, a more nuanced view regards L1 use as potentially facilitative in explaining complex concepts or directions, certain aspects of classroom management, and evaluating learning, particularly in the context of lower level students (Cameron, 2001; Forman, 2012).

Cameron (2001) explains some important sociolinguistic effects of L1 versus L2 use. Cameron notes that teachers may consistently use the L1 to align themselves with students, consciously or unconsciously in fear of or opposition to the L2. Another reason for L1 use could be its relative potency over the L2. As an example, *Quiet please!* might be appropriate for general classroom management, but in cases of serious discipline problems, an L1 directive may be the more effective choice. Particularly in classrooms where there may be ambiguous feeling toward the L2, it may be best to keep L2 interactions as light and positive as possible.

In support of increased L2 teacher talk, Myojin (2007) found that Japanese university students who had taken a class with 93% of the teacher talk in English scored more highly on an end-of-term listening comprehension test than those in a similar class where only 53% of the teacher talk was in English. The remaining teacher talk in both classes was the students' native Japanese. An analysis of the teacher talk in both classrooms revealed that the functions of giving directions and explanations accounted for the majority of the language variance. Myojin concluded that increased L2 teacher talk has a beneficial impact on learners' L2 listening comprehension skills but cautioned that the effect on other components of the class such as comprehension of homework assignments, or on other skills such as reading remains unknown.

Looking more narrowly to English in the Japanese elementary school classroom, Moser, Harris, & Carle (2011) reported on "a teacher-talk training course for Japanese primary school teachers ... preparing to teach 'communicative English' for the first time" (p. 81). The researchers provided two main reasons for the teacher talk focus of their 15-week course. The first is that the nature of the MEXT mandated curriculum is very

clearly a communicative one. Secondly, Moser et al. assert that the teacher's speech is the principal source of English input for these young students. The researchers additionally noted that "communication" at the elementary school level in Japan "is not 'conversation' and is mostly teacher facilitated" (p. 88). A clearer understanding that classroom communication is indeed authentic communication in that context is echoed by a number of researchers (Cullen, 1998; Myojin, 2007; van Lier, 1996).

In another study conducted in a Japanese elementary school, Hosoda and Aline (2010) examined the professional development of two university student English teachers in training. The researchers observed the trainee teachers in cooperation with a native or expert speaker Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) and a homeroom teacher for more than 30 hours over the course of 19 months. Though the primary focus was on teacher identity construction, Hosoda and Aline (2010) found that the trainee teachers made progress in their ability to give English language directions.

2.1 Using English in the Classroom

Before delving into the current research study, it is first necessary to answer the question: When do we use the L1 and when do we use the L2? Forman (2012) asserts that "judicious use of L1 ... is both principled ... and productive" (p. 250) while at the same time maintains the importance of "maximum L2 use in the L2 classroom" (p.251). Cameron (2001) and Myojin (2007) essentially take the same position that both the L1 and the L2 can be beneficial and effective in the English language classroom. The following sections examine the alternative uses of the L1 and the L2 by the teacher.

2.1.1 Prompting

In the low-level, elementary school classroom, much of the English language teacher talk is used for prompting. Classic examples include the teacher asking the whole class, *How is the weather today?* This language is often carefully chosen by the teacher and can generally be expressed without difficulty in the L2.

2.1.2 Directions

Cameron (2001) notes that often the explanation for an activity can be more complicated than the activity itself. In such instances, Cameron (2001) and Forman (2012) suggest that the L1 can be used for efficiency and expediency. Cameron suggests, however, several tips for evolving away from reliance on the L1. One idea is to support explanations with clear pictures or to model the activity to be undertaken. The first time it may be necessary to have an L1 explanation of the activity rules or stages. Especially when activities are repeated in future classes, frequently the case in elementary school classrooms, the students will become accustomed to the protocol and will be able to undertake the activity with L2 directions only, or with pictures too, if necessary.

Many teachers will issue the directions in the L2 immediately followed by an L1 translation. This practice works well in the short term, but over time students may cease listening carefully to the L2 knowing that an L1 translation will be coming shortly. In such instances, Cameron recommends asking a student to translate for other students who may not understand. This action affirms the importance of the L2, gives translation practice to at least one student (if not others speechlessly), provides the whole class another opportunity to hear the directions, and can serve as a comprehension check.

2.1.3 Feedback

Cameron (2001) explains through discourse analysis that students (and teachers) tend to continue in the language that precedes their turn, a sort of language inertia. Holding the power of the discourse, the teacher thus has a unique responsibility to keep to the language of

instruction. When giving positive feedback, for example, statements such as *good job* and *excellent* should be made in the L2. If students do not understand, facial expressions, gestures, prepared pictures, or fellow student translation could all supplement the foreign language.

2.1.4 Translating Vocabulary

In EFL settings, Forman (2012) explains the function of translating L2 language into the students' shared L1. Forman notes that while translation is often discouraged because it reduces both the amount of L2 input and students' attention to it, translation can be useful in providing speedy and accurate explanations.

2.1.5 Comprehension Checks

In all classrooms, but especially in language classrooms, it is necessary to regularly check that students understand the language, the activity, and the expectations (Cameron, 2001; Myojin, 2007). While *Do you understand?* is brief and simple enough for students to comprehend, students of all ages often answer in the affirmative even if they have not understood one word (Cameron, 2001). Of course, this holds true for the L1 as well.

2.1.6 Talking about language and learning

One of the stated aims of elementary school English instruction in Japan is to learn both about foreign languages and foreign cultures. Lessons in the *Hi, Friends!* textbook series published by MEXT include greetings and animals in different languages, typical school schedules in different countries, and typical foods. When talking about such topics, especially when the teacher is attempting to elicit students' ideas about foreign languages and cultures, the L2 for this level is rather difficult. Teachers also frequently attempt to get students to inductively figure out patterns in the L2, for example the difference between plural and singular, which largely does not exist in Japanese. Encouraging this noticing is considered an excellent instructional technique (Nunan, 2004; Schmidt, 1993; Swain, 1998), but will again likely require the L1 for lower level, young learners.

3. Research Questions

Though some of the literature reviewed drew upon analysis of observations (Cameron, 2001; Cullen, 1998; Forman, 2012; Hosoda & Aline, 2010; Moser et al., 2011), the first three report on instances of instruction primarily outside of Japan, the fourth is a microanalysis of teacher trainees and their professional development, and the fifth reports on instances of Japanese teacher training sessions. What none of the studies examined, however, are the classrooms of regular in-service Japanese homeroom teachers now required by MEXT to teach English, preferably through an English medium. To better understand the nature of English language teacher talk in such classrooms, the current study observed and analyzed the language used by regular homeroom teachers in their instruction of English classes. The following research questions were devised:

1. *How much English language teacher talk is being used in the observed Japanese elementary school classrooms?*
2. *What kind of teacher talk is being used in those classrooms?*
3. *How can we effectively increase the use of English language teacher talk, both in those classrooms and in others?*

4. Methodology

There were three main components to this study: observations, analysis, and short interviews with teachers.

4.1 Observations

First, several elementary schools in the Kumamoto area were contacted to participate in the study. Schools were approached through personal

contacts or through previous involvement in a local English education seminar. Three schools agreed to participate and, in those schools, six different 5th and 6th grade classrooms were observed. The English lessons given by the six teachers were observed and audio recorded. It was decided to observe classes with no native speaker Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) present so as to understand the nature of teacher talk in the absence of a participating fluent English speaker.

4.2 Analysis

The recordings of the observations were transcribed by a native Japanese speaker and edited by a native English speaker. The six transcripts were first analyzed for English content. The English was coded into three categories: student speech, teacher talk, and audio-visual (AV) materials. Teacher talk was defined as words produced by the teacher and not from MEXT-produced AV materials, even if the teacher spoke along. Any other use of English language was recorded as teacher talk regardless of whether the talk was part of a drill, explanatory, interrogative, feedback, or other.

The next step was to analyze the teachers' English language and Japanese language teacher talk. Student language in either Japanese or English was not examined as it was not relevant to the current study. Coding of the transcripts of teacher talk took a bottom-up approach whereby there were no *a priori* categories when deciding the categories. The categories were empirically derived from the data (Lampert & Ervin-Tripp, 1993). Language that occurred twice or more in English and/or Japanese was identified. Based on the data, four categories emerged: greetings, display questions, directions, and classroom management. These categories largely fall under the broader groupings of prompting, directions, feedback and comprehension questions, as discussed in the literature review.

4.3 Short Teacher Interviews

Three of the six teachers were available for a short discussion of about five minutes following the observations. They were specifically asked what sort of English language they would like to be able to use in their classrooms. One teacher (B1) essentially explained a lack of training in speaking or teaching English and that this teacher needed *everything*. The two other teachers (A1 and A2), interviewed together, responded that they needed assistance with classroom management, praise, and pronunciation.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 Amount of English language teacher talk

The first research question asked about the amount of English language teacher talk in the six classrooms. Total teacher talk in both Japanese and in English varied with regard to a number of factors: teacher and teacher style, content of the lesson, and use or non-use of AV materials, among others. Given that there were six different lessons taught by six teachers covering differing content and allocating variable amounts of class time to the AV materials, a direct comparison of teacher talk in the different classrooms must necessarily be treated with caution. Nevertheless, Table 1 demonstrates that five of the teachers consistently spoke about 50 words of English during the course of a 45-minute lesson. The sixth teacher (A2), by contrast, used over 200. The difference is probably attributable to A2's possession of an English certification to teach

Table 1. Amount of English Teacher Talk

School / class		Code	Teacher's # English words
A	6-1	A1	56
A	6-2	A2	212
B	5-1	B1	50
B	6-2	B2	45
C	5-2	C1	51
C	6-2	C2	56

in elementary schools. In contrast with English education in junior and senior high schools, a certificate or qualification to teach English at elementary schools is not issued by a government body but instead by a number of independent organizations, including J-SHINE (2016) and JADP (2016). Though the requirements for certification vary by organization, Teacher A2 likely benefitted from the hands-on type of training advocated by Moser et al. (2012). Despite having limited English conversational skills (as observed in discussion with the author), this teacher appeared confident in using a variety of English expressions to consistently instruct the students. In the next section we will explore some of the differences and similarities in the English teacher talk employed across the six classrooms.

5.2 Type of English Teacher Talk

The second research question sought to analyze the type of teacher talk commonly used in the elementary school classrooms. An analysis was made of the most frequently occurring words and expressions in English and in Japanese. The first column of Table 2 shows expressions frequently observed in the six lessons, the second column displays the ratio of English to Japanese, and the third column includes any notes. Table 2 demonstrates, for example, that in four of the six classes observed, teachers greeted their students with *Good morning, everyone; Hello, everyone;* or simply *Hello*, and that in all instances the greeting occurred at least once in English. To open and to close the class, all six teachers used some spoken language, but only three used those expressions in English. Generally speaking, the teachers were fairly proficient in these typical English greetings and often asked students about the date, weather, and their wellbeing (i.e. *How are you?*).

These greetings and display questions appear appropriate for the students' level, though there is room for expansion as will be discussed in the next section. It should be noted that Tables 2 and 3 are not exhaustive lists of the English used and that some teachers, notably the A2 class teacher, were more effective in using this language than were others.

Table 2. Types of Teacher Talk: Greetings & Display Questions

Expressions	English Ratio	Notes
Good morning, everyone / Hello, everyone / Hello	4/4	
Let's start English Class. / Let's start.	3/6	T, CL, or Ss*
Let's finish English class. / That's all for today.	3/6	T, CL, or Ss*
How is the weather?	4/4	
What is the date / day?	4/4	
How are you?	4/4	

*T, CL, or Ss indicates Teacher Class Leader or Students chorally

Where there appears to be room for improvement is in the teachers' use of English for directions. For very simple commands such as *stand up* and *sit down*, the teachers reliably used English expressions as shown in Table 3. It should be noted, however, that English was recorded as used even if just in one instance. In class B1, for example, the teacher said *sit down* only once in English and a variety of Japanese expressions six times in asking the students to stand or sit.

Table 3. Types of Teacher Talk: Directions and Classroom Management

Expressions	English Ratio	Notes
Stand up / Sit down.	5/6	In B1, English×1; Japanese×6
Let's finish. / Did you finish?	3/6	T, CL, or Ss*
Textbook / Book	2/3	
Once more / Once again / One more time.	2/4	

Do / Did you understand?	2/4	
Boys / Girls / pairs / three people	2/5	In A2, only in English; In B2, Japanese followed
Are you ready?	1/2	
Speed up / Faster / very fast	1/2	
Look at ~ (me / screen / blackboard / textbook)	1/3	
Ask	1/4	
Next	1/5	
○(circle), X, △ (triangle)	0/3	
Let's Practice	0/3	
Today ~ (the day's purpose or activity)	0/4	

In class B2, the teacher either stated or asked all of the following in English:

Good morning everyone.	***Do you understand?***
Stand up.	***How many circles?***
Did you finish?	***What's the date today?***
How are you?	*Open your books to page …*
When is your birthday?	***Can you make pairs?***

For each of the above expressions marked in bold, however, the teacher immediately gave a Japanese translation of the English. As mentioned earlier, such translations can facilitate learning but when they happen with great frequency, there is a risk that students will stop listening to the English and simply wait for the Japanese (Cameron, 2001).

5.3 Increasing English Teacher Talk

The third research question queried how we can effectively increase the use of English language teacher talk in the English classroom. The data from Tables 1 and 3 appear to provide some answers.

As observed earlier, the teacher of class A2 used approximately four times as much English during the lesson compared with the other five teachers. The main difference in this teacher's language was in classroom management and giving directions for the various activities.

5.3.1 Prompting

The observed teachers were largely successful in prompting their students in English. Teacher directions such as *stand up* and *sit down* are very simple prompts with unambiguous L1 correlations that five of the teachers reliably produced in English. These frequent and straightforward commands should arguably always be made in the L2 as they provide essential exposure (Forman, 2012). In the case where some students do not understand the commands, they can usually get the gist by looking around at their peers. Failing that, teachers can easily incorporate unambiguous gestures to supplement the language.

5.3.2 Directions

Most elementary school teachers (at the time of writing) draw upon the *Hi, friends!* 1 (MEXT, 2012a) and *Hi, friends!* 2 (MEXT, 2012b) teacher resource books as well as the online resources produced by MEXT (2012c). These materials provide a consistent approach to classroom activities which frequently include listening to and watching MEXT-produced audiovisual resources, using picture cards for whole-class instruction, playing games in pairs or groups of three, and engaging in short speaking activities with multiple partners.

Regarding games and speaking activities, teachers frequently ask students to *make pairs, talk with three people*, and *talk with three girls and three boys*, among other commands. Table 3 shows that in the five classrooms where some sort of group activity took place, only two teachers issued

the directions in English and, of those two, just one teacher used only English. Particularly in classrooms where the same activities are used multiple times for different content, the instructions for these activities can and should be in simple English. Other examples from Table 3 include the notations ○, × and △ which are frequently used in games like rock, scissors, paper; quiz games; and on the end-of-lesson reflection cards. These figures can easily be taught and used in English.

Other aspects of classroom management can also facilitate English use. The teacher of class A2 used the expression *look at* five separate times to direct students' attention alternatively to the blackboard, to the handout, or to the teacher. The same teacher asked students *Do you understand?* or *Are you ready?* before beginning an activity, directed students to work on an activity with a partner *one more time*, and referred to an audio recording as *very fast* (there are multiple speeds available on the MEXT-produced materials). This teacher also used *next* to transition to the subsequent part of an activity. It should be noted that this teacher did make some mistakes in English and chose to speak primarily in Japanese in the short post-class discussion. Nevertheless, the A2 teacher was exceptionally successful in facilitating classroom activities through an English medium.

5.3.3 Feedback

There was very little teacher feedback observed during the lessons. One exception was in class A2 where the teacher said in English *very good* five times and *good job* once. How to praise students in English was, in fact, one of the concerns expressed by two of three teachers interviewed following the observations. Such a concern is not surprising given that every single lesson plan produced by MEXT (2012c) asks teachers to praise their students at the end of the lesson. Praise in English was observed only in class A2 and is indeed something for which teachers could benefit from more practice.

Regarding language use, there were no observed cases of teachers explicitly correcting students. The absence of corrective feedback could be due to several factors: a high student to teacher ratio, limited opportunities for individual feedback, avoidance of feedback that might potentially discourage young learners, limited confidence on the part of teachers, and/or a pedagogical focus on recasts as opposed to outright corrections. At this low level and with a MEXT priority of "fostering a positive attitude" toward English education, corrective feedback might best take the form of recasts or other subtle methods, if indeed it is found to be necessary at all.

5.3.4 Translating Vocabulary

There were few observed cases of teachers translating vocabulary into Japanese. Indeed, elementary EFL classrooms are usually rich in their instruction of vocabulary. In likely every elementary school in present-day Japan, there will be a great deal of visual stimuli such as large-screen televisions or projectors displaying software with abundant pictures, colorful classroom posters, students' and teachers' sets of instructional pictures, and graphic textbooks. In this context it should generally be unnecessary to translate any of the target vocabulary into the L1. Where questions do arise, generally for vocabulary outside the scope of the teaching materials, language such as *In English, you say* _______ will usually be sufficient. Where the teacher is unsure, he should be empowered to say *I don't know. I'll tell you later.* and make sure to follow up as promised.

5.3.5 Comprehension Checks

If the teacher is explaining anything in the L2, then there is always the potential for misunderstanding and therefore the need for comprehension checks. Sometimes a simple *Do you understand?*, as observed in two classes, will suffice. In circumstances where the teacher suspects that students do not in fact understand, she

could say *Do you understand? Ok, please tell me in Japanese.* In this way the teacher can reliably check for comprehension in English, while acknowledging that the student would be unlikely to be able to make an explanation in English. While the teacher has (perhaps) had training and practice in making explanations in the L2, the students certainly cannot be expected to do so.

5.3.6 Talking about language and learning

A major component of the MEXT curriculum is a self-reflection activity at the end of each lesson (MEXT, 2012c). Students are generally given several minutes to complete a short reflection [furikaeri ka-do] written in Japanese. The cards typically require students to indicate with a symbol (e.g. ◎, ○, △) the extent to which they enjoyed, understood, and were able to participate in the lesson. There is also often space allowing students to freely write their general impression of the lesson. Once again considering the low level of these elementary school students, it would be both unrealistic and demoralizing to expect them to complete these reflections in the L2.

6. Conclusion

The data from the six classroom observations shows that there is limited English language teacher talk in the elementary school classroom and that the amount generally appears to be consistent among teachers who do not possess English certification. As the country continues to promote English education in elementary schools, it is important that future research examine any variability in the quality of certification programs. As of 2015, only 4.9% of elementary school teachers were reportedly licensed to teach English at that level (MEXT, 2016). This number is almost certain to grow.

The English teacher talk observed could generally be categorized as greetings, display questions, directions, and classroom management. The teachers were typically effective in using greetings and display questions, though there remains room for improvement. Directions and classroom management are areas where teacher talk can be expanded without placing an unrealistic burden of learning on the teacher, or resulting in classes where students are unable to comprehend. Materials writers, teacher trainers, teachers and researchers should examine course materials to identify commonly occurring activities, themes and language in an effort to present a greater portion of this material in English. Further observational studies can also assist in identifying repeated Japanese language that might profitably be transformed into English. Given the generally low level of exposure to English in Japan, every bit of increased English teacher talk is potentially valuable.

From the short interviews with two of the observed teachers, it appears that praise in English and pronunciation practice could also be helpful in increasing the amount of teacher talk. With a little practice using simple language to praise (e.g. *great, good job, well done*), teachers may be able to develop an automaticity in using this language, whereby it occurs naturally without being forced. Likewise, if concerns about incorrect pronunciation are inhibiting teachers from using more English, then pronunciation practice could have great benefits.

The generalizability of this study is a concern given the small sample size and the location of the observation sites confined to just one prefecture in Japan. Replications of this research in different geographical areas would help to better identify patterns throughout Japan. The current research should nevertheless prove helpful in establishing directions for increasing the amount and improving the quality of English language teacher talk.

The current research is part of a larger project to create and administer a self-paced online study course for Japanese elementary school teachers to more effectively instruct their students in English

classes via an English medium. The data from this research is helping to inform the content of the online study course.

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