

[研究ノート]

Learning English by Teaching English to Children: A Project Seminar for Non-Education Majors at Tama University

Yumiko Sano

Key Words: curriculum design, university seminar, higher education, community involvement, elementary schools, teaching English

(原稿受領日 2006.10.13)

. Background

In keeping with the emphasis on “dialogue-based,” seminar-style education at Tama University, the university began in 2005 to offer “project seminars” in which students complete self- or teacher-designed projects as their primary coursework (Tama University, 2006). I first led a project seminar entitled *Teaching English to Children* in Spring, 2005, then offered the seminar again in Spring, 2006. The underlying concept of Tama University project seminars is that learning should take place not only within the university, but outside in the communities to which students belong as well; in accordance with this concept, *Teaching English to Children* provided students majoring in Management and Information Sciences with opportunities to serve as elementary-school English teachers in their communities. This paper discusses the development and implementation of the course, as well as its impact both on participating students and their communities.

. Method

The design of the course is informed by three goals, as follows. With regard to *learning strategies* and *communication strategies* (Brown, 1994), the two types of strategies often discussed in the field of second / foreign language acquisition, the course was designed to 1) improve students’ communication strategies. Communication strategies are relevant to output, that is, to how we express and deliver our communications. Since few university students have opportunities to interact with children in a society in which the number of children is decreasing, the challenge of communicating with elementary-school students would require students in the course to be very attentive to how they can convey information effectively. The skills students would thereby gain are adaptable to any situation, regardless of field.

The course was also designed to 2) promote students’ awareness of learning strategies. Learning strategies are “operations employed by the learner to aid the acquisition, storage, retrieval, and use of information” (Oxford, 1990). In the process of learning

a new language, children test various strategies to gain understanding; as their teachers, students in the course would have to consider what learning strategies are especially helpful for children. Knowledge of learning strategies can be “taught” in the classroom (Oxford, 1990), but experiencing them in the elementary classroom could ingrain such knowledge deeply.

Finally, the course aimed to 3) motivate students to pursue further study of English. At Tama University, many students are interested in communicative English because of their positive experiences in the compulsory English program that the university offers. Yet many tend to lack the motivation to undertake efforts beyond classroom study, and rarely have their knowledge tested in practical situations. In the role of teachers, students would be required to take responsibility for their knowledge of the subject they are engaged to teach. In particular, students in the course would have to find enjoyment in studying English themselves to foster a sense of excitement about studying English in their elementary-school students.

1. Elementary school

In a climate in which many Japanese educators are arguing for compulsorily English education at the elementary level, there are numerous elementary schools that welcome opportunities for their students to learn English. Expectations at such schools vary, however; some schools want structured instruction of English as an academic subject, while others want English to be introduced as a tool to foster students’ curiosity for learning. Schools in the former category require professional teachers with a wealth of knowledge of the target language, and native speakers of English tend to be preferred at such schools. Native speakers of English are often preferred in schools of

the latter type as well, though a central goal at such schools is for students to find enjoyment in learning English. Schools thus interested in fostering curiosity and enjoyment were judged best suited to the project seminar, in view of the short term of the course (one semester) and the limited English proficiency of the students in the course.

Among the elementary schools contacted, Hojirigaoka elementary school expressed the strongest interest. A meeting was held with the school principal in which the purposes of the project were detailed. A meeting with classroom teachers was held soon after; two third-grade and two fourth-grade teachers agreed to participate in the project. It was agreed that the project seminar would provide a series of three English lessons to each participating class, with two in June and one in July.

2. Students

All students who applied to participate in the course were accepted. However, in the course description distributed to applicants, five prerequisites were stated: 1) enjoyment of working with children, 2) the creativity needed to make things interesting, 3) sufficient curiosity to permit enjoyment of children’s activities, 4) enjoyment of teamwork, and 5) a willingness to spend the time and effort required to teach to one’s best ability. Thirty-two students participated in the Spring 2005 course, and twenty in the Spring 2006 course.

. Course design and procedure

The three dates for students to visit the elementary school to teach English were set for June and July. Eight class periods were devoted to teacher training prior to the first day of teaching for the students, who

had never had any prior training as teachers. The main elements of this training are described in this section.

1. Self reflection

Good teaching begins with self-reflection. The first task students were presented with in the course was to reflect on their own experiences as students, and to write about their memories of teachers that they had had. Some wrote about wonderful teachers whom they had respected, while many wrote about negative experiences with teachers. Though many students were at first worried about their lack of teaching technique or expertise in English, this activity led them to observe that the best teachers in their memories were not necessarily experts in their subjects. Rather, students realized that the most important quality in successful teachers was their sincerity in teaching their students. The importance of remembering students' names, talking to every student, presenting clear goals, and not showing disappointment were noted by students after completing this task.

2. Enjoyment

Enjoyable classes are created by teachers who enjoy working with students; students are unlikely to enjoy their activities if their teacher is bored. In *Teaching English to Children*, every class period started with a game or an activity led by the instructor. At the beginning of the semester, when students were asked to sing a song, all were embarrassed and reluctant to sing along. Yet to succeed in the classroom, they needed to remember how much they had liked singing when they were elementary-school students. As the semester progressed and a sense of community developed in the class, students began to feel more comfortable with activities that involved singing songs and moving their bodies. Ample time

was provided for students to discuss how to engage the interest of children. Students noticed themselves smiling while discussing a fun activity of the sort that was emphasized as important in a good lesson plan.

3. Cooperating and making a lesson plan

The 20 students registered in the Spring 2006 course were divided into four five-member groups, each of which would visit one of the four elementary-school classes participating in the project. Since this was the second time the course was offered, students were able to watch videos of students from the Spring 2005 course teaching at the same elementary school a year earlier. After discussing the good and bad points of the teaching performances in the videos, the four groups of students started to create their lesson plans. Two guidelines were given for the plans: 1) that lessons should relate to subjects children had studied at school or that children had knowledge of, 2) that the three sessions should be educational, should relate closely to one another, and should build upon each other. As Durkin (1995) points out, "(t)here is a tremendous difference between receiving comprehensible, meaningful input and simply hearing a language one does not understand" (p. 105); we have all had the experience of understanding language more easily when we are familiar with its subject than when we are not. Students needed to keep in mind that that they would be offering many children in their classes their first exposure to English, and that this experience should not be threatening. Books of teaching ideas for young learners were provided to students to help them prepare their lesson plans, as were stationery, music CDs, and possible teaching materials.

4. The language

Students were reminded repeatedly that their purpose was not to teach their elementary-school students the rules of English (which they would eventually learn in junior-high school), but rather to stimulate the children's curiosity and desire to learn more. Students in the course were instructed to teach their classes in English; many found this quite challenging. The course used the textbook *Rhythm de oboeru kyoushitsu eigo* (Learning classroom English with rhythm; Matsuka Phonics: ISBN 4-89643-212-6) as a primary instructional text, with students taking a vocabulary quiz from the textbook every week. As teachers, the students knew that they would need to speak up even when they were not confident, and this spurred most to make genuine efforts to learn new phrases and correct spellings and pronunciations. Some students mentioned that they had begun to take their own English classes more seriously; they had begun watching both how their teachers were providing instruction and how they were responding when their classes were distracted.

5. Textbooks

In addition to *Rhythm de oboeru kyoushitsu eigo*, students were instructed to read "*Shogakko eigokatsudo jissennno tebiki*" (Kairyudo: ISBN 4-304-04078-2), a document issued by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology that sets forth guidelines and suggested goals for English teaching in elementary schools in Japan. Students were also asked to read one of the following two books and write a review of it: 1) *Kodomo ni eigo wo shabersetai* (Matsuka: ISBN 4-584-00842-6), or 2) *Shogakko deno eigo kyoiku ha hitsuyouka* (Keiogijuku Daigaku: ISBN 4-7664-1093-9).

6. Rehearsal and evaluation

Most preparation, including drafting of lesson plans, creating teaching materials, and discussing how to organize the elementary class as a group, was done outside class meetings. Twenty minutes of in-class rehearsal was conducted weekly at the beginning of each class meeting, after which each group received feedback from students in other groups. Each group was asked to meet with the course instructor once (outside of class) before each teaching session for a full dress rehearsal. Table 1 shows the checklist that each group used for its dress rehearsals as well as after every teaching session. All teaching sessions at the elementary school were videotaped. After each teaching session, students were asked to analyze their own performances, and to write self-evaluations based on the checklist (Table 1).

Table 1

Self-evaluation Checklist
Followed lesson plan
Topic was appropriate for children
Number of games / activities was appropriate
Length of each game / activity was appropriate
Lesson was student centered
Lesson included quiet time and action time
Established class rules to control student behavior
New words and phrases were practical for students
New words and phrases were not discouragingly difficult
New words and phrases were repeatedly practiced
Provided opportunities to use new words / phrases in various settings
Adjusted teaching pace to students' understanding
Affirmed students' understanding demonstratively
Spoke loudly enough
Spoke at an appropriate speed
Cooperated as a group
Every group member was ready to help
Every student received attention from a group member
Helped students concentrate on lesson
Used only English
Used gesturing to support student understanding
Kept smiling
Talked to students who were outside circle
Carefully watched student reactions

7. Communication

Close communication with the elementary school teachers was maintained. A month before the first day of teaching in the elementary school, representatives from each of the four student groups visited the elementary school for meetings with their classroom teachers. At these meetings, the representatives presented drafts of lesson plans for their three days of teaching, and their classroom teachers provided feedback as necessary. The teachers also provided class lists so that the students could learn the children's names in advance. Based on the class lists, students prepared name cards for each child as well as their classroom teacher. Students also prepared a sheet of self-introduction, including photos of themselves, for the children whom they would instruct. Some of the classroom teachers used these sheets to introduce their elementary students to their "teachers" in advance, and had the children learn all of the students' names by the first day of teaching. A week before each teaching session, finalized lesson plans were faxed to the classroom teachers. Teachers who found problems with the plans provided advice prior to the scheduled teaching day.

Teaching sessions were held in the fifth period of the elementary school day, so that students could prepare the English environment while the children were at their noon recess. On the days of the teaching sessions, students were asked to speak only English from the time they entered the elementary school. As they prepared for their teaching sessions, students played English songs to create an English atmosphere; when the children entered the classroom, the lesson was ready to begin.

A feedback session was held at the elementary school in the evening after each teaching session. At the meeting, the course instructor and a student from

each group met with the classroom teachers. The classroom teachers had taken notes based on the lesson plans that the students had submitted, and provided them with specific advice. Based on this feedback and their self-evaluations, students prepared their lesson plans for the next session.

The teaching sessions were held in June and July at two-week intervals, with students and classroom teachers cooperating to maintain the children's interest in English between sessions. After each teaching session, students left CDs of the English songs they had introduced to the children with their teacher. Some teachers had children practice singing the songs at their daily morning singing sessions. Students also left a poster of the phrases they had introduced in their classrooms. Figure 1 shows an example of a poster that students created. At every session, cards with new expressions that were introduced in class were added to the slots on the hexagon. Each new phrase was written in English on the front, and in Japanese on the back. Children were able to flip the cards to practice the expressions. The empty slots stimulated children's interest in the new expressions that would be introduced, because these would finally complete the hexagon.



Figure 1

Some of the teachers taught Roman characters in their classes for children to compare with English writing. Teachers asked their elementary students to write letters to their student “teachers”; these letters were given to students on the last day of class.

8. Wrapping up

To complete the course, students were required to submit a course portfolio. Portfolios are an effective assessment tool for promoting learner responsibility and independence (Antonek, McCormick, & Donato, 1997; Gottlieb, 1995; McNamara & Deane, 1995); styles of portfolios can vary, but for this course, the portfolio included everything students created or presented during the course, including lesson plans, teaching materials, teaching reports, the book report, self-evaluations, and feedback sheets. In addition, students were asked to create and include a table of contents, a synthesis, and a course evaluation. As Simo (2003) writes, “students are required to examine, analyze, and evaluate their work and progress through creating a portfolio” (p. 177). In the portfolio process for this course, students were expected to consider what they had learned and what their next steps would be.

Student portfolios were collected for grading by the instructor, but were returned to students for future review should the students ever have the opportunity to teach English again.

. Discussion

The course required a lot of time and effort from participating students, but according to the evaluations in their portfolios, all students who participated in the project found the experience quite rewarding. Some reported that they had gotten to like the children even

though they hadn’t known how to communicate with them at first. The course was also evaluated highly by the VOICE, the system for independent student evaluation of courses at Tama University. Although no licensure system has yet been put in place for teaching English at the elementary-school level in Japan, the teacher training course J-Shine, offered by a non-profit organization, has been gaining recognition as a qualification. Two students who participated in the project have begun the J-Shine course in hopes of careers in the English teaching profession.

The course established a close relationship between Tama University and Hijirigaoka Elementary School. The relationship is no longer limited to English sessions for the course. As part of their community study, teachers at the school have brought all of their third graders to visit Tama University; the children toured the university and learned what the university has to offer.

Some problems remain. The English proficiency of students in the course will always be a concern. Some parents worried that their children might learn incorrect pronunciation or usage from such undergraduate “teachers.” Although the classroom teachers involved in the project thus far have recognized the educational value of the project, others may prefer professional teachers, who have far more training and experience, and may be native speakers of English. Nonetheless, the course will continued to be offered, with revisions and improvements, for students who value learning across generations.

In closing, I would like to thank the students and elementary school teachers who have actively participated in the project. Without their understanding and effort, the project could not have been a success.

References

- Antonek, J. L., McCormick, D. E., & Donato, R. (1997). The student-teacher portfolio as autobiography: Developing a professional identity. *The Modern Language Journal*, 81 (1), 15 - 27.
- Brown, H. D. (1994). *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching*. New Jersey, Prentice Hall Regents.
- Duekin, D. B. (1995). *Language Issues*. New York: Longman Publishers.
- Gottlieb, M. (1995). Nurturing student learning through portfolios. *TESOL Journal*, 5 (1), 12 - 14.
- McNamara, M. J., & Deane, D. (1995). Self-assessment activities: Toward autonomy in language learning. *TESOL Journal*, 5 (1), 17 - 21.
- Oxford, R. L. (1990). *Language Learning Strategies: What Every Teacher Should Know*. New York, HarperCollins Publishers Inc.
- Shimo, E. (2003). Learners' Perceptions of Portfolio Assessment and Autonomous Learning. *Autonomy You Ask!*, 175 - 188.
- Tama University. (2006). *Seminar-oriented Curriculum* [Online]. Available: <http://www.tama.ac.jp/english/undergraduate.html> [2006, September 11].

著者プロフィール

佐野 裕美子 (Yumiko Sano)

神奈川県出身。獨協大学外国語学部英語学科卒。カリフォルニア州立大学ソノマ校大学院修士課程修了 (MA in Education)。獨協大学非常勤講師、多摩大学非常勤講師を経て、現在、多摩大学経営情報学部助教授。