

Picture Stories in Japanese Elementary School English Classrooms

(1) An Overview

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Abstract

This is an overview of a series of discussions on the effectiveness of using picture stories in elementary school English classrooms in Japan. English activities are now delivered mainly by homeroom teachers who are not specially trained to teach English. It is scheduled that all 5th and 6th graders will start learning English as a school subject in three years. In this context, picture stories will become very valuable and easy-to-use teaching materials. How both theoretical backgrounds and the revised course guide policy, which comes into force in 2020 by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), promote the use of picture stories including read-aloud activities in classrooms are discussed.

1. Introduction

This paper is the first of a series on the effective use of picture stories including read-aloud activities in elementary school English classrooms in Japan.

In the present paper, an overview of some theoretical backgrounds on reading picture stories aloud in elementary schools will be discussed. The importance of interaction between teachers and pupils based on the story told will also be explored. The second half of this paper will focus on the value of read-aloud activities, in accordance with the new foreign language course guide being produced by the MEXT and scheduled to start in 2020.

2. Theoretical backgrounds for picture story activities

In this section, some theories which explain why stories, especially when read aloud by teachers, are recommended in language teaching, from what age children enjoy stories, and in what way illustrations in story books support children's understanding of the story will be discussed.

2-1. The Episode Hypothesis

Many researchers, including Richard-Amato (1996: 285), argue that a lot of foreign language textbooks contained "disconnected lists of sentences or, at best, sentences that were related but were not part of any motivated or logical interaction." Richard-Amato further suggests that stories which consist of episodes will motivate learners more than disconnected

sentences and introduces the Episode Hypothesis presented by Oller (1983: 12) as shown below.

Text (i.e. discourse in any form) will be easier to reproduce, understand, and recall, to the extent that it is motivated and structured episodically.

Schank and Abelson (1977: 17-18), explain an episodic view of memory as follows:

An episodic view of memory claims that memory is organized around personal experiences or episodes rather than around abstract semantic categories... An episodic memory ... is organized around propositions linked together by their occurrence in the same event or time span... A trip is stored in memory as a sequence of the conceptualizations describing what happened on the trip.

They state that it is their view that humans both acquire and store information in episodic form.

Stories usually develop along a storyline from the beginning to the end. Mystery stories, for example, tell one episode after another leading listeners or readers towards a solution to a case. Stories read aloud in classrooms can provide the learners with a more realistic opportunity to connect a few episodes as one set of events and encourage learners to engage and become more familiar with the whole storyline. Even if each lesson is devoted to listening to only one episode from a story, children may not lose the storyline.

2-2. Illustrations in picture storybooks

Children's picture storybooks generally include not only the words of a story but also illustrations. Children who haven't yet acquired any literacy can enjoy picture books by looking at the illustrations. Even after they acquire literacy, they enjoy the illustrations while reading the story. Satou (1993) and Sakai and Satou (2004) study to what extent illustrations help children understand the story in books. They conclude that stories with colored illustrations were understood better than those with black and white. They also found that the lower the age of the children, the more they focus their attention just to listen to the story or just to look at the illustrations and it is more difficult for them to do both at the same time.

Imai and Nakamura (1993) present seven variables in the action of reading stories aloud. They are picture books, readers, listeners, relationship between picture books and readers, relationship between readers and listeners, relationship between listeners and picture books, and relationships among picture books, readers and listeners. Among the seven variables, the picture book is the key factor for effective story reading. The first variable, a picture book, consists of the theme, content, writing expressions, illustrations and the size and shape of the book.

It seems that the younger the learners, the more value illustrations have for understanding

the story. Children aged 2 or 3 years are not good at listening to stories silently but gradually they start interacting with story books through the auditory and visual senses. Justice, Pullen and Pence (2008) studied children's visual attention to print and found that "children rarely look at print, with about 5%-6% of their fixations allocated to print" (2008: 1). However, they state that preschoolers' visual attention to print increases significantly when adults verbally reference print, or reference it nonverbally, for example by pointing to words or sentences in the text.

Since most of the children's attention is on the illustrations when listening to a picture book story, attractive colored illustrations which match the content of the story not only help children's understanding of the story content but also develop their interest and motivation for listening to narrative stories as well as for staying in the world of fantasy.

2-3. Input, interaction and output

Input is defined by Lightbown and Spada (2006: 201) as "the language that the learner is exposed to (either written or spoken) in the environment." They also explain the following three types of input in the glossary of the book.

(1) Comprehensible input

Steven Krashen [1977] introduced this term to refer to language that a learner can understand which may be comprehensible in part because of gestures, situations, or prior information.

(2) Enhanced input

This is input that is altered in an effort to make some language features more salient to learners. It can be more or less explicit, ranging from explicit metalinguistic comments to typographical enhancement, bold type or underlining or exaggerated stress in speaking.

(3) Modified input

This is adapted speech that adults use to address children and that native speakers use to address language learners so that they will be able to understand. Examples of modified input include shorter, simpler sentences, and basic vocabulary.

The above types are not exclusive of each other. Modified or enhanced input should be naturally offered by the teacher to the students in relation to the language and cognitive levels of the students to make target language features more salient to students.

It is true that no one wonders if input is necessary for second or foreign language learning. However, many do not completely agree with the idea that by only giving appropriate comprehensible input, learners do acquire language as proposed by the Input Hypothesis by Krashen (1982). The hypothesis is based on his non-interface position, which states that 'learned' knowledge is completely separate and cannot be converted into 'acquired' knowledge.

Most second language acquisition researchers and also most teachers question his non-interface position as they believe that learning, for example, in classrooms, connects to acquisition or at least ‘learning’ supports the later acquisition (Ellis, 1994).

Matsuura and Ito (2012) explain that elementary school learners of English need comprehensible input with supports like some hints or clues from the teacher. They refer to Muranoi (2006) and state that input involving a topic directly relevant to elementary school learners, such as daily routines and family, with authenticity, and with appropriate balance between sounds and letters are optimal conditions as input connects to language acquisition.

Input is a necessity for language acquisition but it is not the only factor. Input, interaction and output as well as learner factors, for example, motivation and age, should also be listed as key factors in the language acquisition process.

2-4. Cognitive and social development

Cognitive development refers to how a person perceives, thinks, and gains understanding of his or her world through the interaction of genetic and learned factors. Children continually advance their skills in observing and interacting with the world around them. In order to discuss the way to use picture stories in elementary school classrooms, it is extremely important to understand the cognitive and social development of the learners.

Lightbown and Spada (2006) explain that cognitive and developmental psychologists argue that language acquisition is only “one example of the human child’s remarkable ability to learn from experience” (2006: 24). They learn other kinds of skills like walking or holding a spoon in the same way. Lightbown and Spada (2006) further explain that the psychologists hypothesize that “what children need to know is essentially available in the language they are exposed to as they hear it used in thousands of hours of interactions with the people and objects around them” (2006: 24).

The Swiss developmental psychologist Piaget (1971) identified the following cognitive developmental stages in children as they progress from birth to adolescence. The following stages of intellectual development formulated by Piaget appear to be related to major developments in children’s brain growth. The following explanation of Piagetian stages of development is based on Pinter (2006: 7) and Nunan (2011: 4-6).

(1) Sensori-motor stage (from birth - 2 years of age)

The young child learns to interact with the environment by manipulating objects around him or her. Linguistically, this stage is characterized by the rapid growth of the child’s vocabulary, and the gradual transformation from “proto-language” to real language through the emergence of grammar, for example the child will possess an idiosyncratic set of “words,” each of which will have only a single meaning, as “num-num” to mean “Give me food, I’m hungry.”

(2) Pre-operational stage (from 2 - 7 years of age)

The child's thinking is largely reliant on perception but he or she gradually becomes more capable of logical thinking. On the whole this stage is characterized by egocentrism (a kind of self-centeredness) and a lack of logical thinking. Linguistically, learners consolidate their knowledge of the grammatical system and, by the age of seven, their acquisition of the target grammatical system of non-complex structures is almost complete.

(3) Concrete operational stage (from 7 - 11 years of age)

Year 7 is the 'turning point' in cognitive development because children's thinking begins to resemble 'logical' adult-like thinking, though limited to the immediate context. This means that children at this stage cannot yet generalize their understanding.

(4) Formal operational stage (11 years onwards)

Children are able to think beyond the immediate context in more abstract terms. They are able to carry out logical operations such as deductive reasoning in a systematic way. They achieve 'formal logic'.

Piaget's stage theory shows that children progress through qualitatively different cognitive stages of development.

In classrooms, teachers need to introduce stories thoughtfully in the form of activities, from having the students listen to CDs to reading aloud themselves. We need to consider to what extent each type of instruction based on narrative stories are developmentally appropriate. Linse (2005: 2) explains that "experienced early childhood professionals encourage caregivers and teachers of young learners to provide developmentally appropriate instruction." She states that social/emotional, physical, cognitive, and moral development should be taken care of and shows attributes of each kind of development. Linse (2005: 4) further refers to McClellan and Katz (2001) and shows the stages of children's cognitive development by what children can actually do based on their own ideas as shown below, which is also useful information when teachers plan their instruction in classrooms.

Attributes of Cognitive Development

- Can follow one-step instructions
- Can follow two-step instructions
- Can follow three-step instructions
- Understands the concept of symbols such as numbers and letters
- Is interested in academic content
- Likes reading or being read to
- Likes playing with word, numbers, or abstract symbols
- Grasps concrete and/or abstract concepts easily
- Can make connections between different concrete concepts
- Can make connections between abstract and concrete concepts

- Can make connections between different abstract concepts
- Comprehends concrete and/or abstract cause and effect relationships
- Can recognize patterns
- Can follow a sequence of events
- Can classify concrete pictures, objects, and/or abstract concepts

Teachers also need to find out what sociocultural theories such as Vygotsky's say about children's development. Vygotsky (1978) emphasizes how other people and the attitudes, values, and beliefs of the surrounding culture influence children's development. Vygotsky's theory emphasizes the fundamental role of social interaction in children's cognitive development and argues that development follows social interaction. However, since his claims are most relevant to the actual teaching methods or techniques of picture stories to children, more detailed discussion about them will be found in later papers in this series. At any rate, narrative stories will become appropriate teaching material which elicits the learners' chances to develop concepts, for example, for and against, cause and effect, as well as their thinking skills.

3. Use of narrative picture stories in the new course guide

In this section, the current and the new MEXT course guides for English will be explained first, then some studies on the result of the English instruction in elementary schools will be discussed, which leads to a discussion on the role of narrative picture stories in classrooms.

3-1. The current and the new course guides

The present course guide for elementary school English activities was put fully into force in 2011. 'Chapter 4 Foreign Language Activities' in *MEXT Elementary School Course of Study* (2010) shows the overall objective of the classes as below:

To form the foundation of pupils' communication abilities through foreign languages while developing the understanding of languages and cultures through various experiences, fostering a positive attitude toward communication, and familiarizing pupils with the sounds and basic expressions of foreign languages.

The above mentioned classes are for 5th and 6th graders who now have English activities and the instruction by teachers are given to help pupils actively engage in mainly receptive communication in foreign language in 35 class hours a year.

The MEXT reports the effect of English language activities administered so far and states that 76% of the pupils surveyed answered that they liked studying English, and 91.5% of them wanted to be able to use English in the questionnaire administered in 2013.

In addition the questionnaire, which was also administered to junior high school students who learned English in elementary schools in 2012, shows that students thought English activities were useful for learning English. The teachers also showed a positive attitude toward elementary school English activities. They indicated in the questionnaire that the students who experienced English activities were more interested in foreign countries and their cultures and had a positive attitude to communicating in English.

The results of the above questionnaires basically lead to additional English classes in elementary schools. The newly revised course guide which regulates the 3rd and 4th graders 35 English activity classes a year and the 5th and 6th graders 70 regular English classes a year is scheduled to commence from 2020. It will also be possible for some elementary schools to carry out advanced implementation of the revised course guide from 2018. According to the new course guide, 5th and 6th graders are going to learn not only receptive skills but also basic productive skills including simple basic grammar. However, even from 2020, most classes are still to be taught by the pupils' homeroom teachers, who have almost no training in English language teaching.

Regarding the teaching materials, the new course guide is supposed to indicate a similar content as for the present junior high foreign language course guide. Therefore, stories set to the learners' English and developmental levels, which can promote fair judgement, and a rich sense of feelings through experiencing varieties of cultures, will be highly recommended.

Detailed discussion will be kept for the latter part of this series after the formal announcement of the revised MEXT course guide.

3-2. Studies on elementary school English education in Japan

Since the first discussion on the introduction of elementary school English education in Japan, some researchers and educators have been supporting the plan but some have taken up a negative position. Tosu (2004), for example, states that by introducing English education in elementary schools, it is hoped that Japanese English education as a whole will change to a better direction. On the other hand, Otsu (2005) states that the primary focus should be placed on Japanese language education not on English education for elementary school children.

Since around the time English activities were introduced to the 5th and 6th graders by the MEXT's decision, there have been several detailed studies regarding the relationships between learners' interest, motivation or attitude and the effect of learning English skills in elementary schools. Many of these studies are showing positive results. Shizuka (2007) finds that the learning experience while in elementary school mostly improves listening among the four macro skills and affective feelings toward learning English, for example whether the learners like English or recognize the importance in learning English. Higuchi et al. (2008) show that the interest, motivation and attitude to learning English by university students

was much higher among the learners who had English learning experience than those with no experience.

However, one very serious concern is noted by DeKeyser (2013). He states that “there is little research on age effects that meets very high methodological standards,... and almost no evidence that is clearly of educational relevance” (2013: 61). The way children and adults learn English as a second language (ESL) in the United States and the way they learn English as a foreign language (EFL) in Japan is different. In the States, the ESL learners are immersed in an abundance of high quality native speakers’ English input both in the immersion class and in the environment outside the classroom. In the EFL setting in Japan, it is not at all easy for learners to attain higher levels where they are taught mostly by non-native speakers of English at most for a few hours a week with little English exposure outside the classroom. We need to wait for further research to find the results of elementary school English education.

3-3. Role of narrative picture stories in elementary school English classes

Given that it is extremely important for children to be immersed in English receiving lots of genuine input, narrative picture stories are highly recommended as one of the best types of teaching material.

In the light of the discussion so far, there are four good reasons to use narrative picture stories in primary school English language teaching:

- (1) Authentic stories with pictures especially read aloud can provide a motivating, meaningful context for language learning, since children are naturally drawn to stories.
- (2) These stories can contribute to effective language learning, because they enable the presentation and use of natural language.
- (3) These stories can promote the first step to academic literacy and thinking skills.
- (4) These stories tend to deal with aspects of the human condition, and can thus contribute to the emotional development of the child, and foster positive interpersonal and intercultural attitudes.

4. Summary

Although the number of native speakers of English is said to be less than 5% of the world population, it is necessary for us to learn English so that we can communicate using English in various intercultural contexts including education, science, technology, and business. The fact that there are over 4 million people who use ESL in the world reinforces the importance of using English.

At the same time, cherishing each language in different cultures is vital in this

globalized world, because language is one of the main components of culture and identity.

As a result, being exposed to English can provide learners with valuable opportunities to learn and experience the important role of language. This is a reason that many people and the MEXT are now clamoring about the need to start English language education from elementary school. It is hoped that by doing so, children will continue to be highly motivated to learn English and attain better communication skills, which are pointed out to be so essential for Japanese learners in general.

Our history in English teaching shows that the focus has been more on explicit knowledge about the language rather than implicit knowledge of the language although what the learners need is the latter. Exposing children to English from an earlier stage of elementary school is a good way to increase their awareness of the importance of communication, making connections with the world, and enabling them to enjoy getting in touch with people around them.

In this context, read-aloud activities in English in elementary schools have a key role, where children are able to receive a lot of English input in episodic contexts so that they have chances to enjoy English rather than putting their focus only on the grammar of the language. By having chances to interact with teachers and other pupils about the story in addition to receiving input as they listen to the story, they can also recognize the importance of communication. Reading aloud to children does not only aim to teach a knowledge of English but to maximize children's experience of the language as they receive some useful message from the stories that contributes to their cognitive development. In addition, through the activities, children can expand their world as they learn to appreciate something of the value and attraction of understanding different languages.

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