

English Education in Japanese Elementary Schools: An Analysis of Interactions

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1 Introduction

This study investigates utterances and interactions among Home Room Teachers (HRTs), an Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) and pupils in English classes in a Japanese elementary school.

English education became compulsory starting in 2011 in all elementary schools in Japan. According to the research conducted by Kobayashi (2008) on English education in Japanese elementary schools, 78.3% (253/323) of HRTs conducted team teaching with ALTs in their English classes. Thus, this form of team teaching with ALTs seems to be popular in current English education in Japanese elementary schools. This study investigates English education, focusing specifically on team teaching between HRTs and ALTs.

Research on English education in Japanese elementary schools has developed rapidly (Kobayashi, 2008; Koizumi, 2009). However, minimal research on discourse analysis has been carried out with regard to the investigation of utterances and interactions among HRTs, ALTs and pupils. It is, therefore, meaningful to examine utterances made by these three parties to investigate the nature of their interactions.

This study, however, focuses mainly on the utterances by HRTs during English classes. This is because it is found through observation¹ that each HRT has various ways of controlling his or her class and teaching English with the ALT, using English and Japanese, although the HRTs are not used to English teaching. Therefore, to investigate these features would lead to finding effective ways of conducting smooth team teaching in English classes, and it might help

teachers who are involved in English teaching in Japanese elementary schools. In this investigation, these HRTs' utterances have been classified into three types: (a) Response-oriented utterances, (b) Immediate translation and (c) Repetition and checking of pupils' understanding². All three types of utterances can be effectively utilized by HRTs in the process of their ongoing adjustment in team teaching. In particular, in relation to (b) and (c), most HRTs used Japanese to some degree, while they tried to use as much English as possible. Therefore, this study will focus on describing these two types of utterances which relate to L1 use and translation. In the following section, I shall briefly review existing research of L1 use and translation in second or foreign language learning or teaching.

2 Theoretical background

The use of L1 and translation in second or foreign language learning or teaching has been controversial (Cook, 2010; House, 2009). For many years, Grammar Translation was an established way in foreign language teaching (Cook, 2010; House, 2009; Takanashi & Takahashi, 1990). However, there was a rejection against it by the Reform Movement and the direct method which excluded the use of L1 and translation from foreign language classes (Cook, 2010; Harbord, 1992; House, 2009). There are also other supporters for excluding L1 from the classroom (Chambers, 1991; Harmer, 1991; Haycraft, 1978). Atkinson (1987) also specifically states the dangers of overuse of the mother tongue as follows:

1. The teacher and/or the students begin to feel that they have not 'really' understood any item of language until it has been translated.
3. Students speak to the teacher in the mother tongue as a matter of course, even when they are quite capable of expressing what they mean.
4. Students fail to realize that, during many activities in the classroom, it is crucial that they use only English.

(Atkinson, 1987, p. 246)

However, there is opposition which states that the use of the mother tongue to a certain degree is more effective (Bolitho, 1983; Duff, 1989; Edge, 1986; Harbord, 1992; Howatt, 1984; Riley, 1985; Thomas, 1984; Widdowson, 2003). House (2009) mentions advantages of using translation as follows:

1. Translation helps in the development of proficiency by economically and unambiguously explaining the meaning of foreign language items.
2. In exploiting their knowledge of a language they are already *familiar* with translation activities, learners increase their confidence and motivation to learn a *foreign* language.
3. Translation promotes explicit knowledge about the foreign language and helps develop awareness of differences and similarities between the native and the foreign language systems. (House, 2009, pp. 63–64)

Cook (2010) refers to an advantage of using L1 and translation. This could be related to HRTs in Japanese elementary schools who are not used to English teaching.

On the basis of the brief theoretical backgrounds presented in Section 2, the next section will examine the survey administered at S Elementary School.

3 Survey methods

This study is based on the observation of English classes at S Elementary School. English classes were observed in 2009 from May to December. I was a participant observer as well as a teaching assistant and taught English, with the ALT and HRTs, to the pupils from the first to sixth grades. Utterances of the HRTs, ALT and pupils in English classes were audio-recorded³ and analyzed, focusing on the interaction of the HRTs with the ALT and pupils.

4 Findings from the observation

Utterances of the HRTs were classified into three main types as follows:

1. **Response-oriented utterances:** utterances made by the HRTs when they reacted to the ALT in English together with the pupils
2. **Immediate translation:** utterances made by the HRTs when they translated English sentences into Japanese directly after the ALT's utterances
3. **Repetition and checking of pupils' understanding:** utterances made by the HRTs when they repeated the ALT's English and waited for the pupils' reaction before translating it into Japanese

In addition to this, all of the HRTs used Japanese for behavior management. We shall now examine each type in more detail in the following sections.

4.1 Response-oriented utterances

There are types of utterances where the HRTs seldom instructed or complemented⁴ anything but followed the ALT, acting as if she was one of the pupils. English was used mainly in response to the ALT's questions directed to pupils. A typical example of this is seen in Extract 1, which is from the situation where the ALT confirmed pupils' readiness.

Extract 1. ALT: Everyone, are you ready?

HRT & Pupils (Ps): Yes!

In this extract, the HRT just responded to the ALT's question together with the pupils. Through this, the HRT appears to be trying to encourage some pupils who were poor at English. However, when they seemed to have difficulty in understanding the ALT's utterances, the HRT often translated them into Japanese immediately, to which we shall now turn.

4.2 Immediate translation

The second type of HRTs' utterance is immediate translation. Some HRTs tend to literally translate the ALT's English at once. This case was observed in the lower grades when there were many restless pupils as seen in Extract 2,

which was in the situation where the ALT was telling the second grade pupils to make lunch groups for the game.

Extract 2

ALT: Let's make lunch groups! (with gestures)

HRT: はい、給食の班になりますよ。どの班が静かにできるかな？
(*Now, we will make lunch groups. Which groups can get together most quietly?*)

Here in this extract, before the lower graders started moving, the HRT gave a direct translation and instructions in Japanese. This pattern was seen not only in the lower grades, but also in the upper grades at times when pupils learnt new and complicated things in English classes as seen in Extract 3. The situation was where the ALT was explaining how to conduct an activity to the sixth grade pupils.

Extract 3

ALT: Listen to the direction, use your cards and put them where the kids go. (with gestures)

HRT: 大丈夫？ 今から先生が、誰がどこに行くか案内するから、それを聞いて到着した所にカードを置くのよ。
(*Did you get that? Now the ALT will give the direction, so you will listen to it and put your cards where kids go.*)

(Pupils prepare for the activity with the ALT and HRT)

ALT: Everyone, are you ready?

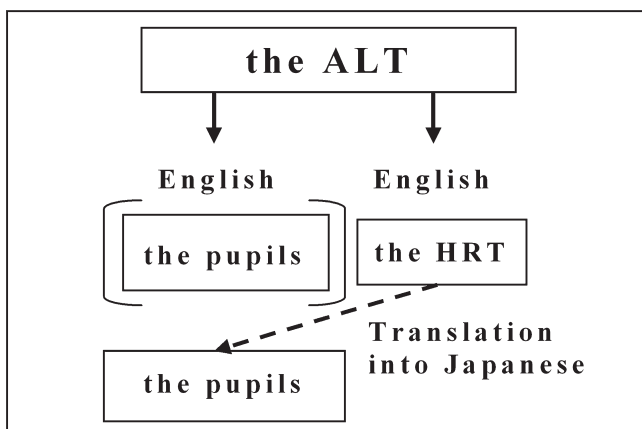
Ps & HRT: Yes!

As seen in Extract 3, when the upper graders tried to learn complicated content, the HRTs directly translated the ALT's instructions into Japanese with an additional instruction and explanation, in this case, '大丈夫？' (*Did you get that?*) and '今から先生が、誰がどこに行くか案内するから' (*Now the ALT will*

give the direction). Another reason seems to be the lack of time according to HRTs. To compensate for this, they sometimes translate English to Japanese for smooth understanding and teaching⁵.

Accordingly, the immediate translation type happens when pupils cannot concentrate during English classes because of disciplinary problems, when pupils try to learn difficult content and when there is little time to conduct classes. Figure 1 illustrates this:

Figure 1: Under the circumstance of immediate translation



Under the circumstance shown in Figure 1, classes can be conducted smoothly but pupils' motivation to try to understand the ALT's English could become lower because they tend to rely on the HRT's instructions in Japanese (see also Atkinson 1987). Although we have to bear in mind that in some situations, the use of the mother tongue to a certain degree is more effective as is discussed in Section 2.

It is therefore up to the HRTs' discretion as to when and how much Japanese should be used in English classes as they are well informed about the class dynamics.

4.3 Repetition and checking of pupils' understanding

The third type of utterance is: repetition and checking of pupils' understanding. With this type, the HRT supports pupils' understanding by repeating part of the ALT's instructions in English before explaining it in simple Japanese. The following situation is where the ALT is explaining how to use marbles for the activity.

Extract 4

1. ALT: Use five *ohajiki* and put them on any five pictures. (with gestures)

2. HRT: Use five *ohajiki*. Five pictures. (with gestures) ← **repetition**

3. ALT: Are you O.K.?

4. HRT: O.K.? ← **repetition**

(Most pupils seem to have understood.)

5. HRT: 5 枚絵を選んで、おはじきを置きますよ。

(Choose five pictures and put marbles on them.)

← **translation**

(Pupils prepare for the activity. The HRT and ALT help each pupil.)

6. ALT: Everyone, are you ready?

7. Ps & HRT: Yes! ← **response-oriented**

As the above utterances show, the HRT picked up and repeated the ALT's English in a slightly simplified version in line 2. Then in line 4, the HRT repeats a part of what the ALT has said in line 3, "O.K?", and confirms the pupils' understanding. After this, most pupils seem to have understood the ALT's instructions. In line 5, however, the HRT uses simple Japanese because there are some pupils who could not understand his simplified English with gestures.

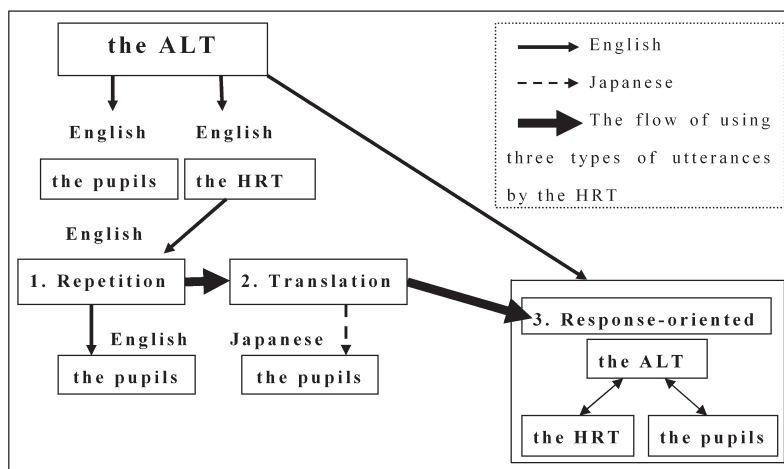
This example shows that it could be effective to wait for pupils to comprehend the utterance for as long as possible before translation, using repetitions or rather, partial repetitions as above, where necessary. It is interesting to see, in the above example, all types of the three different responses we discussed earli-

er, namely, repetition in lines 2 and 4, translation in line 5, and then response-oriented utterances in line 7, are used. Widdowson (2003) refers to a matter of adjustment of settings as follows:

Teaching, we might say, can be defined as the art of appropriate parameter setting, and effective methodology is a matter of continual online adjustment of settings as the course proceeds. (Widdowson 2003: 24)

We can see how this HRT is effectively adjusting to pupils' needs in the process of teaching. This could be illustrated as follows:

Figure 2: Illustration of the use of repetition and checking of pupils' understanding seen in Extract 4



In this figure, the HRT repeats part of what the ALT has said in a simplified version (see also line 2 in Extract 4) and then uses translation if pupils do not seem to understand the ALT's instruction (see 1 and 2 in Figure 2). Lastly, when the ALT confirms the pupils' readiness, the HRT uses a response-oriented type of utterances, responding to the ALT together with the pupils (see 3 in Figure 2). In this situation, thanks to the HRT's effective continual 'online

adjustment' (Widdowson, 2003, p. 24), pupils can gradually understand English. Thus, this type can be said to be effective for pupils' step-by-step understanding in English classes.

5 Conclusion

In this paper, we have seen various ways of using L1 while most HRTs and pupils are teaching and learning English in English classes respectively. 'The potential of mother tongue as a classroom resource' (Atkinson, 1987, p. 241) might be good for English education in Japanese elementary schools as a way for smooth teaching. Therefore, to find how effectively HRTs, who are not used to English education, can conduct team teaching with ALTs, further investigation as to how and how much to use L1 during English classes would be needed.

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Notes

¹ As stated in more detailed manner in Section 2, I was a participant observer as well as a teaching assistant.

² Three categories are partially based on existing research on discourse and conversation analysis (see Murata, 1994; Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson, 1974).

³ Total length of recording was about 20 hours.

⁴ This happened only three times during a 45-minute session.

⁵ This idea is based on HRTs' comments from interviews which I conducted with them.