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〔研究ノート〕

## Possible Influence of the Introduction of English Education to Elementary Schools on College Students' Mentality

Reiko Kachi

### 要 旨

2011年、小学校5年生からの英語教育が必修化された。現在文科省の下、英語教育導入のさらなる低学年化が検討されている。早期英語教育の利点を疑問視する研究者は少なくないが、一般の人々にはその声は届いていないように見える。この一層の英語学習低年齢化を唱える声が、英語を伸ばしたいと望む年長の学習者、特に大学生の英語学習への士気をいかに損ない得るか考察した。

キーワード：英語教育，小学校英語，発音・アクセント，English as a Lingua Franca, World Englishes

### 1. Background: A popular topic in my “English Presentation” class

It has been three years since I was given the opportunity to teach “English Presentation” at the Nagoya Gakuin University. It is a demanding class, and my syllabus clearly states that beginners should not consider enrolling. Sometimes more than ten students enroll, but most drop out before the third week. I usually have only two to four students at the end of a semester. In this class, students learn how to construct argumentation to persuade their audience—first, in Japanese and then, in English. Naturally, I recommend that students choose a controversial topic, one that is personally meaningful to them. I find it very interesting that only one topic repeatedly comes up every year: “English should be a required subject in college.”

Since English *is* required in most universities in Japan, I expected students would take the CON position. In other words, I thought they would argue that “English credits should not be included in the requirements for graduation.” However, it turned out that all four students who chose this topic approved of English as a required subject. Moreover, when asked to expand on this topic, they insisted that English should not only be required but also be taught more extensively in college. They also said that English education should begin much earlier than it currently does; for example, it should start from the first grade.

Three out of the four students had experience, long or short, studying English in an English speaking country. One of the students spent a year in America as an exchange student, but was never

admitted to take a regular credit course. He remained in an ESL class the whole year. He said, “They asked me how many years I had been studying English in Japan. I was so embarrassed when I had to say, ‘More than ten years.’” At our college, with the exception of the Department of Foreign Language, he would be considered a well-motivated, competent student regarding his English ability, because his English was good enough to be selected as an exchange student. Thus, the criticism (or simply naïve but insensitive question) from his American teachers and host family must have hurt him considerably. On the basis of such a bitter experience in an English-speaking country, did he perhaps, like others with similar overseas experience, say, “Just like in the fields of sports and music, you can’t accomplish much in learning a foreign language unless you start as a toddler”?

It is not surprising that English education mattered to these students, considering their history of learning English, but why did they unanimously say that English needs to be taught from early childhood? It is unlikely that they simultaneously came up with the idea, because their home environments seemed rather diverse. Moreover, they must have seen at least one counter example among their teachers or family members or relatives, i. e., someone who had started studying English at the age of thirteen and became a good English speaker. Thus, I think their belief about English learning has been subconsciously shaped by a message/discourse to which they have long been exposed. That unspoken but strong discourse, “You need to start learning English while you’re a kid, or it will be too late,” is what I hope to discuss in this paper. There seem to be two problems with this discourse; one is its predetermining view of language acquisition possibly based on the critical period hypothesis (CPH) and the other is its too much emphasis on teaching/acquiring native-like pronunciation.

## **2. The discourse: “Start learning English while you’re still young, or you’ll never be able to speak it well”**

Another student among the four abovementioned students was a returnee, who had lived in both the UK and the USA for several years. He claimed that Japanese people are too ashamed of their “bad pronunciation” to speak English in front of others. Moreover, he said that if they were taught English in the same manner as he had been in the UK, that is, only allowed to speak English and taught by nativespeaker-teachers, then their pronunciation would greatly improve, and they would no longer have problems with international communication. Even when I suggested that the problem might not be so simple, and explained that it is not feasible to provide all Japanese children with the same linguistic environment as his, he was still not convinced. For him, with little knowledge of language acquisition, it was natural that he attributed his better English proficiency to his special upbringing. This equation is simplistic but powerful, and it currently seems to be dominating in Japan: the younger you start learning a language, the better. But what do we mean by better pronunciation?

The student said that he was irritated with the Japanese-accented English that his Japanese peers spoke. It is possible that he may have projected his own negative reaction to Japanese-accented English on Japanese people's hesitation to speak English. He also said that starting to learn English in the fifth grade is too late to acquire good pronunciation. I inferred that for him having good pronunciation apparently means sounding like a native speaker.

On the other hand, this returnee student admitted that he was not confident in his literacy skills, especially his academic writing. Though compared with his classmates he had little trouble writing the draft of his speech in my class, his comments reminded me of so-called "semi-lingual" students (Ichikawa, 2004), who are brought up in an English-speaking environment and have no problem with Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) in Cummins' term. They possess almost perfect native-like pronunciation and listening comprehension skills, but suffer in school with Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) not only in English but also in their mother tongue. This topic, that is, whether BICS always precedes CALP or whether they can be simultaneously developed is too broad to discuss here; however, we need to consider that even living in an English-speaking environment for several years, just as this returnee student had, only guarantees BICS. What is required to negotiate with people from other countries over rights and profits, however, is CALP. I will return to this point later.

"English Presentation" is an elective course, and I explicitly state that students need to have at least an intermediate level of English proficiency, which limits the number of students who sign up for this course. I am aware that the observation found in this class cannot be generalized to other populations even within the university. Unfortunately, a majority of students are indifferent to furthering their study of English once they are admitted to college. Precisely for this reason, however, I believe that the registrants in this course should be taken seriously. These students, except for the returnee student, are more motivated and have tried harder than others to study English and they are willing to make more effort to improve their skills. Because of their experiences overseas, they face the reality that their English is not good enough. Although improvement usually comes out of one's recognition of an undesirable reality, these students are on the verge of abandoning their study of English. Why? The trouble seems to lie in their childhood, which they will never be able to change. Without knowing it, they are accepting the popular discourse that puts an emphasis on the early onset of language learning. From this perspective, it appears that their efforts to learn English will possibly be wasted, because they did not start learning while they were younger.

### **3. Two problems with the discourse**

Regardless of the subject, it maybe the case that, if it requires some memorizing and/or motor

skills, the younger you start practicing it the more you are likely to achieve. That is to say, you can learn something as far as your talent and persistence will allow. After comprehensively summarizing the research to date that is related to age and language learning, Julia Herschensohn (2007) admits that not only first but also second language acquisition shows the effects of learners' age of onset. I have no intention of contesting that point. Rather, I maintain that the current English fervor of early childhood education and the introduction of English to elementary schools by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) seem to be based mainly on the CPH. Because private English conversation schools are for-profit businesses, they naturally utilize any theory or hypothesis that might help them attract more attention and eventually more customers. I'm afraid that the MEXT's policy of English education seems to have virtually endorsed what these conversation schools advertise to be correct.

In this section, I will discuss two possible problems with this discourse about language instruction as part of early childhood education. As mentioned above, one argument is based on the CPH and the other is its assumption about good pronunciation.

### **3-1. Critical Period Hypothesis**

First, let me summarize the findings related to the CPH, as reviewed by Herschensohn (2007).

The CPH is a hypothesis that human beings lose their ability to acquire their first language after a certain period of time in their life, which is hypothesized as 10 months to four years after birth. After this period, regardless of any effort or training, their language skills will never reach the level of native speakers'. Regarding second language, the main subjects of CPH studies have been immigrants who pick up a new language naturally, with little formal instruction. The outcome of immigrants' linguistic proficiency has been found to correlate negatively with the ages at which they arrive in a new country. Thus, the younger a person arrives in a new country, the better his/her language is expected to become. In the case of an immigrant who has already established the basis of his/her first language, s/he can achieve native ability in the second language as well if they are exposed to it between the ages of five and ten years. Compared with a person's capacity in morphology and semantics, their phonological sensitivity seems to deteriorate more drastically as the age at which a person starts learning increases. After the age of ten, a person is predicted to maintain non-native-like traits in his/her pronunciation for life, although s/he may possess a native-speaker level of command in other areas, such as grammar and vocabulary. Because the end states of second language acquisition, however, largely vary among individuals, this period is sometimes described as "sensitive" rather than "critical".

When it comes to learning a foreign language, however, research shows mixed results. Because individual differences are too large among foreign language learners, it is difficult to claim that even the "sensitive period" really exists. No matter how early they start learning, most foreign language learners fail to become native-like. On the other hand, there are some people who reach the near-

native level although they start to learn the language after adolescence. Herschensohn suggests that more attention should be paid to those good language learners in the field of second language acquisition. As she comments at the conclusion of her book:

We are not in a position to know the origins of language, but the evolutionary question might better be posed the other way around: Why is human language *not* susceptible to a critical period as are communication systems of other species? What is remarkable in the revolution of this human characteristic is precisely its availability for reimplementation with only superficial shortcomings in the cases of expert L2A (=second language acquisition). The rich complexity of language allows it sufficient redundancy systems for acquisition at any age. Under this interpretation, the observed deficits in L2A are due not to a biological critical period, but to the excellence of the neural architecture of the first language, the very architecture that permits second language acquisition. (p. 241. Emphasis is added)

Herschensohn values the firm first language foundation that second language learners possess. Though it gives our pronunciation non-native traits, we cannot learn a second language unless the first language is already established. She clearly sees that pronunciation influenced by one's first language is minor and insignificant compared with the ability to communicate in the second language with relatively correct grammar.

### 3-2. The CPH and the MEXT

As discussed above, it is simply not right to relate the CPH with foreign language learning, and especially to see the former as the latter's theoretical basis. Therefore, I was surprised to find a reference to the CPH in one of the MEXT's official homepages; [http://www.mext.go.jp/b\\_menu/shingi/chukyo/chukyo3/015/siryo/05112901/009.htm](http://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/shingi/chukyo/chukyo3/015/siryo/05112901/009.htm). This page contains the following statement as a reason why it is critical to ensure a sufficient number of Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) in elementary schools.

... The introduction of foreign language education to elementary schools should be given consideration. And when it is introduced, since it will be too late after the Critical Period, it is necessary to hire qualified native speakers to greatly improve students' pronunciation. And we also need to make sure to offer a certain level of educational contents to avoid any inequality caused by students' familial backgrounds ... (translated and emphasis added by the author)

This statement is not posted as an official view of the MEXT but as an opinion that was raised during the advisory panel's discussion. Nonetheless, I am afraid that ordinary people might think the

critical period exists as a solid fact or as a truth on which scholars have reached a consensus, because it is presented on an official homepage of the ministry office that oversees the national education system. In other words, such a statement appears to have the weight of authority.

### 3-3. Pronunciation we need to acquire

I have discussed why it is wrong to treat the CPH as an established theory of language acquisition, especially for foreign language learning. The other fallacy related to the discourse that I would like to point out is the (probably too much) emphasis on native-like pronunciation in English education. It is undisputable that pronunciation is important in language learning. The essence of language is sounds, not the written word. However, when the purpose of English education is considered, speaking like American or British people should *not* be included in our goals. Let us briefly discuss the purpose of English education in Japan.

Why do we teach (almost exclusively) English, among many other languages, throughout our compulsory educational system, to every student? The most widely accepted reason is that English has become an international language. Although the number of native speakers of English is smaller than those of other languages such as Chinese, English is used most frequently for international communication purposes, especially in cutting-edge fields including medicine, information technology (IT), and business. We teach English not because America is still a world superpower or the British culture is attractive, but because English seems to be the most versatile tool for international communication. Moreover, globally, majority of international communication is carried out among non-native speakers. Therefore, the goal of our English education should be to equip young Japanese people with the ability to communicate with foreigners, most of whom are non-native speakers of English, who do not understand the Japanese language. Trying to speak like a native is unnecessary and even inappropriate when there is no native speaker present.

### 3-4. English as a Lingua Franca

When Braj Kachru introduced the idea of three concentric circles of English users in 1985, the Expanding Circle, which is a group of countries/areas where English is taught as a foreign language, was classified as norm-dependent. In other words, we were recommended to simply follow the native speaker model. But times have changed. Presently, corpus studies have been conducted on communication among only non-native speakers (NNSs) with diverse first language backgrounds. We are becoming increasingly knowledgeable about what linguistic traits NNSs share and what traits hinder international communication. For example, Walker (2011) mentions five traits commonly found in NNS to NNS communication. She calls the non-native varieties of English with these traits “English as a Lingua Franca (ELF)”.

- Omission of the third person singular -s.
- Little attention is paid to articles (infinite/definite)
- Nouns (including non-count nouns in Standard English) can be plural
- The demonstrative *this* can be used with both singular and plural nouns
- More general usage of the verb *make* is allowed where other verbs (*do, have, put, etc.*) are used in Standard English

We should not misunderstand the concept of ELF here. Walker is not saying that we do not have to teach the third person singular simple present form or the distinction between singular and plural nouns. She states that the language model in the Expanding Circle will remain one of the native-speaker English varieties. What she asserts is that we do not have to spend too much class time correcting these grammatical points, because other NNSs will easily understand the meaning.

For teaching pronunciation, Walker also recommends promoting ELF. Here are some examples:

- Consonants must be mastered, except for dental fricatives, /θ/and/ζ/.
- Vowel reduction, schwa, and weak forms are not critical.
- When consonant clusters (e. g., *s-t-r* in *street*) are not common in the first language, vowels can be inserted (like *s-u-t-o-r-i-i-t*) except for the word-end position. Consonant omissions are more harmful.
- Stress-timing does not have to be emphasized.

Walker claims that if a student wants to acquire native-like pronunciation, s/he can make some extra effort outside the classroom to pursue his/her goal. One of the advantages of ELF is that it is an attainable goal within limited class time.

I think this position holds good for English education in Japan. As Otsu (2009) asserts, it is naïve to believe that the majority of students can attain the English proficiency that is useful for practical purposes only with classroom instruction in school. Limited class time should be allotted to necessary minimum instruction to ensure that every student receives basic knowledge about foreign language learning, for his/her future pursuits. Native-like pronunciation is a personal preference, and should not be considered as an essential part of education. And if the acquisition of native-like pronunciation is not emphasized, the current fervor about early English education with native speaker teachers might lose the majority of its foundation.

### 3-5. BICS and CALP

In addition to the above argument, we need to think about how BICS and CALP are dealt with in our English education system. As mentioned earlier, even the second language environment only



guarantees BICS. As Otsu (2007) points out, most college English courses have abandoned teaching grammar and instead adopted “oral communication,” which is full of formulaic colloquial expressions to memorize. And elementary schools, of course, are teaching their students BICS. The MEXT seems to have decided to reinforce BICS instruction, after being frequently criticized with the remark that “Japanese people can’t say a word (comprehensible to native speakers, probably) even though they have studied English (grammar and vocabulary, with some criticism) for ten years.” In reality, however, it may be difficult to obtain even BICS in a foreign language environment without real opportunities to interact with peers in English.

When we think about it, what percentage of adult Japanese needs to speak English daily in their offices? Naruke (2011) estimates the percentage to be only 10%. In other words, 90% of Japanese people do not need BICS. And for those 10% of English users, as Torikai (2006) maintains, CALP is more critical as it allows them to succeed in international debates and business negotiations. Then what the remaining 90% of Japanese people need? According to Otsu (2009), it is sensitivity toward language in general, basic competence in English, and the ability to cope with a new foreign language when necessary. I would like to add some internet literacy to this list. Most of what had to be carried out internationally either face-to-face or by telephone two decades ago can be accomplished through the Internet these days. Being able to speak English with no foreign accent is less important than being able to process and produce simple texts necessary for the Internet communication. There is no doubt that many more than 10% of Japanese, especially the younger generations who are accustomed to the latest IT, will need this ability.

### 3-6. About our students, again

Most of the fourth-year students were born in 1991 and the first-year students in 1994. College students today are among the “generation educated with latitude,” or *Yutori-kyouiku Sedai* in Japanese. According to Wikipedia, this generation is the people who were born between 1987 and 2004 and received a pressure-free education under the five-day workweek system.

They are described as conservative, seeking stability, and disdaining showy deeds. Ikegaya (2008) explains that people of this generation are uncompetitive because they are convinced that everyone is unique and irreplaceable and that they need not prove themselves, because comparison with others is meaningless. Observing their parents struggle after the burst of the bubble economy, this generation is considered to be somewhat pessimistic, unable to believe that tomorrow will be better than today. Ikegaya also maintains that they tend to avoid making an effort unless they perceive that there will be immediate tangible improvement.

Though overgeneralization is dangerous, it is possible to predict that this *yutori* generation, which is serious but lacking in fortitude, might be easily victimized by the discourse that puts (possibly unnecessarily too much) emphasis on the importance of English education in early childhood. In my

English class, the students with comparatively higher English proficiency expressed their uneasiness about the validity of English education that they had received. Other students, who claim to have given up learning English a long time ago, do not even have the voice to express their discontent. It is part of foreign language teachers' job to repeatedly remind them that they can start learning a foreign language at any time in their life, and that if they are persistent enough, improvement is guaranteed.

Why are adult learners doomed to be eventually defeated by young learners in learning a foreign language? Griffiths (2008) suggests that in addition to the cognitive deterioration due to natural aging, which curves down less drastically than is assumed by the critical period line, adult learners may not expect to make excellent progress in the first place. If learners cannot believe in their own potential, they can never optimize it. We should not let that happen.

#### 4. Conclusion

Criticizing English education in elementary schools is a dangerous thing to do for a person whose job is related to English education. It has already started anyway, and early childhood education is currently the biggest job market for English teachers. Thus, I am not criticizing early education itself. However, seeking theoretical endorsement for earlier introduction of English education and treating the CPH as the theory behind this is simply wrong. In order to avoid any misunderstanding on the part of ordinary people, the MEXT should provide them with other convincing reasons regarding why early childhood education is necessary and is beneficial for everyone.

Furthermore, if this early childhood education mainly aims at improving Japanese people's English pronunciation by approximating it to that of native speakers, it is pointless. Because the majority of their future interlocutors will be non-native speakers of English, more attention should be paid to determine how to make their pronunciation easier for other non-native speakers to understand. Remember; if we are learning a foreign language, no matter how early we start learning it, we cannot become native speakers, neither we do not need to be. Instead, we *can* and *should* become better users of English, starting at any age.

Pronunciation is always accompanied by evaluative judgment. I am aware that the majority of our students prefer to have accents like native speakers rather than non-native accents. However, if we truly believe in English as an international language, we need to teach our students tolerance toward non-native varieties of English and to have self-confidence as capable English users, despite the accent that comes from our first language. An appreciation of native accents might lead to negative feelings toward other non-native varieties, as seen in my returnee student. Mutual tolerance and respect are essential for global communication. We all need to learn these values.

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