Developing an English Storytelling Task for Preschoolers

幼稚園児向けストーリーテリングタスクの分析

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要旨：日本で保育園が不足している問題に応じて代替教育のオプションが増えています。一つは幼児園というの早期教育の学校という可能性です。いくつかの幼児園で運動技能から英語に至るまで，さまざまなカリキュラムに焦点があてられています。本研究では，東京にある英語幼児園におけるストーリーテリングタスクの説明や分析を行います。この学校では，探究教学法「Inquiry Learning」を用いて児童に教えています。英語イマージョンの環境ですべての科目を英語を用いて教えています。アメリカの小中学校の学科「Language Arts」言語技術に基づく科目もカリキュラムに入っています。一学期で三才児から四才児のクラスで毎日ストーリーテリングタスクを行い，それを録音したものを書き起こし，そのデータを収集・分析しました。

1.0 Introduction and Teaching Environment

The story telling task was designed and implemented at an English immersion preschool in Tokyo. The focus group was a small class of 8 students aged 3 and 4 at an immersion preschool in Tokyo. The parents of the students are all Japanese nationals whose native language is Japanese. Data was collected using daily recordings from an iPhone. The names of the students and participants in this study have been changed to protect the personal information of the participants.

Students come to the school 5 days a week from 9:15 to 2pm. Their primary teacher is from the United States and speaks primarily in English. The primary teacher is assisted by a Japanese staff member with a preschool license who assists with transitions throughout the day. Both the primary teacher and the staff member use English as the main language of communication with each other and the students. The curriculum is inquiry based; meaning students are encouraged to question themes and construct their own ideas surrounding a topic, rather than to hit specific learning targets. The environment provides a meaningful context through which students become communicative in English quickly. However, as noted by Lynne Cameron (2001) in reference to immersion programs, "focusing on meaning is important, but it is not enough for continued language development." (Chapter 2.6, para. 4) Therefore it's necessary to create focused tasks that improve students continued language development.

For the purpose of comparison Language arts is one of the most common subjects taught in American public and private schools. The subject generally begins in kindergarten. While standards vary from state to state and school to school, common core curriculum standards describe the achievement expectations aimed at preparing students for successful language use through to high school and college. Activities are focused on developing integrated competency of the four strands: reading, writing, speaking and listening. Other metrics are encouraged such as a balance between information and literacy. With more of a focus on literacy in the younger grades moving towards a greater focus on information in the latter grades ("English Language Arts Standards, 2018).

Caretakers in the preschool immersion environment often have conflicting ideas regarding the capabilities of young learners. It's a privilege that these students have so many people invested in their development. However, it presents challenges as a teacher in creating acceptable language learning tasks. Expectation and vision can range from family to family. There are the parents who send their child not only to learn English, but also to gymnastics, ballet, piano and swimming, all in the same week. Then there are parents who just want their child to have fun playing and to explore at their own whims. There are the preschool staff, some who think students should only be exposed to things that are cute, girls to things that are pink and boys to things that are blue. There are teachers or trainers who have very rigid views of age and stage in how children develop, while others are quite flexible. This broad range of views continues to splinter when focus is put on how young learners acquire a second language. These views are often dynamic and change if the students develop an observable competency through the task and have enjoyed the process.

Enjoyment is important, however preschool students are as easily amused as they become bored. If learning outcomes are expected from a it is more essential to focus on limiting stress than on maximizing enjoyment. According to the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University (2012), stress can be detrimental to healthy development and as some studies show, can result in changes in brain architecture that have detrimental long term effects. In the storytelling task avoiding stress was a priority. This was done through means of conscious action. The teacher must remain engaged and show the child that they are present in the activity. It means the teacher is listening and interested in what students are trying to say and supporting them in the interaction that the task presents. It means avoiding neglect or the possibility that a child feels ignored. It is also important to know when to abandon a task even when it may have taken considerable time and effort to create.

At the beginning of the first term, students had spoken mostly in Japanese with some scattered output in English. They would repeat things the teacher said, mostly when prompted. When a familiar routine or format came up in the day they learned to recite the language that they had heard in context, searching for affirmation or praise for their effort. At the beginning of the second term of the school year, students made a rather large shift in their English output. They came back to school using more English and were rarely using Japanese. There is a month-long break between terms, and this highlighted the change even more. Krashen's input hypothesis offers one possible explanation for this phenomenon, "the ability to speak fluently cannot be taught directly, and rather it "emerges" independently in time, after the acquirer has built up linguistic competence by understanding input." (Krashen, S. as cited by Richards and Rodgers, 2014, p.266). A term lasts around 70 days and students are there for 5-6 hours of each day. At the end of term one students will have had around 350 hours of exposure to English.

Students were outputting a lot in English, but during free playtime they were primarily using Japanese. Their play was largely imaginative. Listening to their dialogue in Japanese they would describe ghost elevators that appear at the wall and then break down. Insects would attack them as they drove them away with strange weapons and magic. Together they would radio for back up from police and fire trucks. They would attack each other with magical spells that made each other freeze or turn into various things. I tried to enter into their play and encourage communication through English, but I found their logic or lack thereof impenetrable at times. For example, they were running around the room saying "Erebeta ga Kowareta! Erebeta ga kowareta! Tasukete! Tasukete!" So I drew a picture of an elevator door on a big piece of white paper and next to it some buttons. I attached it to the wall with tape. "Look I fixed the elevator! Who wants to go up?" I remember them being confused, whatever could I be talking about? My concept of a broken elevator and what I had drawn on the wall were certainly miles apart. Nonetheless, they obliged me in my attempt at entering their play by allowing me to pick them up as if they were riding an elevator. "One

more time!" is an easy phrase to elicit in English.

Observing the students imaginative play that was taking place in Japanese, I created a story telling task in hopes of creating a semi-structured version in English. The task was inroduced in the middle of the second semester.

2.0 Task Creation and Expectations

The inspiration for this task came from observations in the classroom and also a Radiolab podcast titled "games". Radiolab is a radio program produced by WNYC a public radio station in New York City. Every episode is put together using interviews, field recordings, and other found sounds to explore various scientific and philosophical themes. This episode discusses the psychology of games. In the middle of the episode the hosts interview American cognitive scientist and developmental psychologist Dr. Alison Gopnik, presents some interesting findings emerging from observing children play over time. She says, "Babies and young children spend almost all of their time playing" (Radiolab, 2011). She describes a fundamental difference in the way children play, between the age of 2-7 and those who are between 7-10. Pre school play is all about innovation, making "crazy psychedelic connections". Then around age 6 play becomes centered on rules, as Gopnik puts it "School age children are practicing being in a society, developing a theory of sociology." (Radiolab, 2011). Gopnik's descriptions seemed close to what I was observing in my class and I revisited the episode for inspiration in designing a new language-learning task.

Language Goal for the Task

By Term 2 students had become adept at using chunks of English to successfully navigate the daily schedule and to engage in short conversations with peers, teacher and staff. They had developed a certain level of communicative competence, but it was very limited. I tried to think of ways that I could help students to expand their ability to communicate. I decided to experiment with creating a task that attempted to build their discourse

competence. Discourse competence is described as "the interpretation of individual message elements in terms of their interconnectedness and of how meaning is represented in relationship to an entire discourse or text" (Richards and Rodgers, 2014, p.89) One of the obstacles in focusing on developing discourse for preschoolers is that developmental psychology has historically suggested preschoolers aren't ready for it. Students in Piaget's (1983) preoperational stage exhibiting illogical and irrational behavior are incapable of logic. However, Gopnik claims that advances in developmental science have overturned this notion, and that children may in fact be much more sensitive than adults and much more able to explore the world through testing different hypotheses (Gopnik, 2011). Following, I wanted to create a task that allowed students to engage in imaginative play using English.

The intention was that retelling a new story again and again using the same words would help the students to increase comprehension of the words in varied contexts. By creating a personal story students would be engaged and the activity would be more relevant to them. Also, by repeating the story patterns hopefully automatize new learned words and phrases.

Description of the Task

When I initially introduced the task to the students, it was an extension of a classroom routine called 100 days. From the first day of school, we had taken time each day to paste small paper pieces in the shape of a number on an A4 sized piece of paper, representing each day of school for 100 days. The paper pieces are little pictures that reflected a theme for each day. Students would have to either state what the picture was on the piece of paper or ask the teacher about it. For instance if the theme on day 23 was shapes the students would pick small pieces of paper from a bowl that had pictures of shapes on them, and paste them into a larger piece of paper that had the number 23 on it. If the students knew the word for the picture they would be asked to say it. For instance if the picture was a square, they would say, "square" as they paste the pictures on the sheet. If

the students didn't know what the item was then they would have to ask the teacher "what is this?" and they would receive an answer and then be able to paste it on the sheet.

When we finished creating a 100-day wall, we had a party. This left a void in our routine that I replaced with, an activity called "100 words". I let the students choose one word a day from the Usborne English Picture Dictionary. The dictionary has pictures and explanations for over 1,000 words. It is recommended for children two and up. After students chose a word I would read the definition and then try to confirm students understood the meaning. I tried to elaborate on the word if there were any questions or inquisitive looks after the initial explanation. I would write the words down in order on the board. When we reached 8 words I would tell a story to the students starting with first word. I tried to incorporate movement in with the story where the opportunity arose.

I took pictures of the words from the picture dictionary and made them into board magnets, so that the students had visual support for the stories in addition to the kinesthetic aspects provided by the themed movements.

Before the term ended I tried to hand the storytelling completely over to the students by providing less support of the content and more support for the routine with rules for taking turns and aspects that encourage listening to other students.

The task takes around 15 minutes from start to finish. We begin by students selecting one word each from magnets on the board. After everyone has chosen a word they like, we review the words together to confirm that everyone understands them. Then we take turns presenting each word and trying to connect them to make a unique story. At the end the teacher summarizes the story and then attempts to retell the story seeking confirmation of the details from the children.

3.0 Analysis of the Task

Lynne Cameron (2001) posits whether students learn something from a task depends on "the dynamic relationship between demands and support". This was something that I attempted to maintain throughout the presentation of the task. I recorded around 10 separate days of the storytelling task and have selected two days to transcribe and present here. The first occurred on February 18th, 2015 and another that occurred on March 2nd, 2015. Both tasks are at a time when I was moving away from completely supporting the task and handing it over to the students. I will use Cameron's types of task demand and support, cognitive, language, interactional, metalinguistic, involvement and physical (Cameron 2001, Chapter 2.4, Table 2.2) to analyze the way the task was designed and also to gauge what improvements should be made.

Cognitive Support

The students receive support from the pictures on the board. These are words that they have selected themselves. They have also practiced them many times, with the exception of the word that introduced in the same day or week. I copy the pictures out of the book and print them in color on the board, so the students are looking at the same picture and letters that they pointed at in the dictionary.

Language Support

The task is conducted mainly through speech and storytelling. However when the students finish their turn they place their word next to the preceding word. This is meant to create a sense of connectedness over the story, to help students remember a temporal order of events, and could also possibly serve as a way to get students thinking about reading from left to right.

Interactional Support

The routine is similar each time the storytelling task is presented. If students struggle with presenting part of the story I try to help them out by filling in the gap and providing them with an idea and the words in English. These will often reappear in retellings of a different story.

Risa: What about my magic?

Teacher: Well, first we have to take a journey to look for the biggest banana we can, then we can talk about your magic. Yes Aya?

Kenta: Me Please!

Aya: Yui magic and banana give it big.

The theme repeats itself in Day #2:

Excerpt from Day #2

Risa: I have a good idea!

Teacher: What's your good idea?

Risa: It's a magic..uh a magic uh..magical magical

Tony: needle?

Risa: Magical needle and make the ice cream, what about this?

Teacher: oh that's a great idea, I like it

Risa has created a reoccurring role for herself in the fictional story. She experiments with the word *magic* looking to the teacher for support and confirmation to continue the story. Other students behave in similar ways. For instance Jun finds a way to work the word *ninja* into the story in both exercises even though they occur almost a week apart.

Metalinguistic Support

The teacher doesn't teach language explicitly using meta-language. However it is important to note that all of the words with the exception of the word *slow* chosen on both days were nouns. And the picture in the dictionary for *slow* is a red train, so students will often try to use that word as train. I might be able to engage them in a talk about how most of the words are *things*. However, I'm not sure what support it would provide for the activity.

Certain patterns are recycled to reinforce structure, for instance we start stories out in similar ways, using "once upon a time" or "it was a dark, dark night". The patterns may be occasionally brought to student's attention. Whether this can be considered metalinguistic requires more investigation it seems the students are focused solely on their own agency in creating a story.

Involvement

I see the key support for this activity in that it indulges the students' already existent tendency towards imaginative play and creating new things. As long as we can both make some sense out of what they want to express, it's acceptable. Often times the biggest challenge is sharing involvement as a group. Often times a single student will want to take over the entire story. I feel like this drive can also be useful in developing discourse competency as students strive to make longer sentences and connect ideas just to stay in control of the story.

Physical

This task provides a lot of opportunity to engage the students in physical movement. During the first day students engage in physical movement that supports story meaning more than 5 times in 15 minutes. All the events are spurred from the words the children choose.

Words: plum, fairy, ice cream, train, tree, banana

Action #1 The students propose that "tinkerbell" is born from a *plum*. We open one hand and use the other hand to signal a small *fairy* flying out.

Action #2 We feed *tinkerbell* some *ice cream*. The hand that represented the peach changes to an ice cream cone. Students

make faces based on how we imagine the ice cream tastes, and if they want comment on the tastes "yucky" or "yummy etc"

Action#3
Students propose we ride a *train*. I line the students up in a straight line and we move our arms in a train motion.

Actions #4, 5, and 6
We ride the train to a *tree*. Then we climb a *tree*. Make climbing motions with our hands. Then we cut a *banana* from the tree (chopping motion), then we peel the *banana*. (peeling motion)

I noticed from the transcription that there is considerably less directed physical activity when I tried to let the students have more control of the story. During the second presented day of recording we only do one directed physical activity, a picture taking motion, when we are talking about the camera.

4.0 Conclusion

Without a longitudinal study it is tentative to claim the task builds students discourse competence in English. However, there are hints that point to the tasks success in doing so. There are examples of students making longer sentences in the summary at the end of each story. Notice for example Kenta's summary at the end of the second day.

> Kenta: Ren, and Here you are and slow train but is coming and ghost is so many eating ice cream and me lost and needle and needle is and needle is come but ice cream but fairy is needle is needle is color pick and me is so many times.

The output has a lot of inaccuracy, but he's using conjunctions to try and connect four different ideas. He does not speak frequently during the exercises. But individual analysis shoes him experimenting in

this way when he decides to speak.

We can observe students actively testing their hypothesis throughout both exercises. The task provides a great opportunity for students to confirm their understanding of words in different contexts and to confirm their meanings. During the first transcription, we feed the fairy ice cream, and in the second transcription, Risa decides to make ice cream with a magical needle.

After listening to the recording I see that I didn't describe the action of giving tinkerbell as "feeding" then later in the story when I said "we will feed her" Aya asks, "What's feed? What's feed?" Though I missed the opportunity to address her question in the story, she did ask me again later and I had the chance to explain it to her. A better example is when we are talking about ice cream flavors.

> Risa: It's the tinkerbell likes so so so strawberry ice cream
>
> Teacher: Yummy! And Masa what kind of ice cream do you think?
>
> Ren: But lemon and so so *supai* is okay?
>
> Teacher: What do we say in English, what do we say in English?
>
> Aya: Sea-wheat, suweet.
>
> Teacher: Do we say sweet?
>
> Aya: Yeah
>
> Risa: No, Spice
>
> Teacher: A lemon is sour
>
> Ren: A lemon is sour, very sour is okay?
>
> Teacher: Okay, Okay ready ready? Very sour ice cream?

Ren: ouweeee!

One of the most interesting things observed in comparing the transcriptions is the difference in student output. In the first transcription I tried to guide the story more whereas in the second one I tried to hand it over to the students. In counting lines of dialogue there is more student output in the first exercise than in the second, whereas I speak almost an equal amount of lines in transcriptions.

There is not enough data presented to make a definite decision about the significance of this. But it does seem that the exercise where I took more control over the storytelling produced more student output. Asking the students to guide the story may have placed too much of a demand on them offsetting the intend balance between support and demand.

I think this task will require more adjustment and further analysis of a larger set of data to draw any objective conclusions. It is however, well supported and seems to be an effective activity. I received a variety of interesting comments from outside observers who watched this activity. I remember in particular a Japanese applicant for a preschool staff position who had never worked with children before said to me, "Wow it's so hard, It's so hard for adults to even come up with those kind of ideas", and at that time I was reminded of Gopnik's idea and how children may be more capable in some ways than adults are.

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