

Examining Foreign Language Activities in Elementary Schools:
Retrospective of the English Activity Lessons Led by Students in the Teacher Training Course
from Kobe College

小学校外国語活動に関する考察

— 教職課程学生によるボランティア英語活動を振り返りながら —

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要旨

2020年度から新学習指導要領が導入されることになり、小学校の英語に関する項目が大きく変わろうとしている。現在5、6年生に課されている『外国語活動』が3、4年生に、そして5、6年生には『外国語』という新しい科目が導入されることになる。『外国語』という名称ではあるが、児童が学ぶ言語は英語であり、今後は英語も正式な教科として扱われる。小学校教員が英語の免許状を保持していない等、指導教員についても問題があるが、文部科学省はこの方針で小学校の英語教育を進めている。このことを受けて、本論では小学校の英語教育について考察する。また、本学4年次教職課程の学生がボランティアとしてかかわっている西宮市立西宮浜小学校と山口小学校における英語活動についても取り上げている。これは小学校1年生から4年生を対象にした活動であるが、その活動についてもこれを機会に振り返る。さらにこの変化を受けて、今後の学生による活動の在り方についても考えている。

Keywords: English teaching in elementary schools, Foreign Language Activities,
curriculum course guidelines, collaboration with local community

キーワード: 小学校英語教育、外国語活動、学習指導要領、地域連携

1. Introduction

During their fourth year, students in the teacher training course deliver English activity lessons on a voluntary basis to grades 1 to 4 at two elementary schools in Nishinomiya: Yamaguchi and Nishinomiya. This volunteer program has been praised for fostering close ties between the college and the local community. The program began in 2009, when Nishinomiya Elementary School asked Professor Emeritus Sonoko Harada to assist with the school's English activity classes. Yamaguchi Elementary School then started requesting assistance in 2010. The program was the brainchild of Nishinomiya's principal, who wanted to familiarize children with English in grades 1 to 4, so that when they reached grade 5, they would be ready for Foreign Language Activities, which MEXT has designated as a formal subject.

The next curriculum course guidelines will arrive in 2020 and will significantly disrupt English teaching in elementary schools. Looking ahead to this change, I reflect on our experience in conducting English activities. As part of this retrospective, I discuss activities including the lesson plans that the student volunteers developed for these English activities.

2. Curriculum Course Guidelines and the Situation on the Ground

Under the existing course guidelines, fifth and sixth-graders in elementary schools receive one hour per week (35 hours per year) of "Foreign Language Activities" (*gaikokugo katsudou*) lessons. Although the current guidelines treat Foreign Language Activities as schoolwork, children's performance is not marked or graded. The guidelines stipulate the following as the overall objective of Foreign Language Activities:

I. OVERALL OBJECTIVE

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.

Thus, Foreign Language Activities focuses on fostering communication abilities and emphasizes fun in listening and speaking.

Theoretically, class teachers conduct Foreign Language Activities. However, elementary school teachers lack an English language teacher's certificate. Therefore, lessons are conducted in practice by a specialist English language (*eigo senka*, "a new educational guidance system") teacher. Alternatively, the teacher conducts the class in collaboration with a non-Japanese assistant language teacher (ALT). However, educational authorities lack the budget to deploy ALTs in all schools.

According to a 2014 MEXT handout, which was distributed at an expert panel that discussed approaches for English language education, ALTs feature in 54% of the total time spent on foreign language class teaching.¹⁾ In a 2006 Benesse survey, elementary schools were asked how frequently ALTs visit the school, and most answered around once a month, suggesting that the use of ALTs is steadily growing. In 2014, MEXT issued prefectural authorities with guidelines on the special teaching licenses (*tokubetsu menkyojou*) that they can grant to experienced ALTs.³⁾ Therefore, we can expect to see many more experienced ALTs in the future. Nonetheless, it is still the class teacher who is technically in charge of Foreign Language Activities.

To recap, Foreign Language Activities is classified as an “activity” (*katsudou*), rather than a marked or graded subject, and the lessons are primarily intended to provide fun encounters with English. However, the “three sacred treasures of singing, dancing, and conversation” have come under criticism from Yukio Otsu.⁴⁾

Amid such criticism, MEXT amended the course guidelines significantly. Elementary schools, especially, will see a complete overhaul of their English language curriculum. MEXT published a summary of the new guidelines in March 2017, and according to this summary, the bulk of the changes concern general education and English language education. To this end, MEXT reauthorized university teacher training courses in 2018, established core curriculums for general teaching courses and English courses, and undertook a rigorous screening process.

Therefore, once the new guidelines come into force in 2020, what kind of foreign language curriculum will elementary schools be following?

1. Third and fourth-graders will have one lesson per week of Foreign Language Activities.

Under the existing guidelines, Foreign Language Activities is provided in grades 5 and 6. However, under the new guidelines, Foreign Language Activities will be switched to grades 3 and 4. Foreign Language Activities is still not a formal subject, so children’s performance will not be marked or graded. However, teachers will record their observations.

2. Fifth and sixth-graders will have two lessons per week of Foreign Language (English as a formal subject).

This change means that English becomes a formal subject in grades 5 and 6, and teachers will mark/grade the children’s performance.

With the foreign language curriculum undergoing such a drastic transformation, schools may struggle to cope. To minimize the chaos and confusion, some municipalities started implementing the new course guidelines in April 2018, ahead of the official 2020 implementation date. Others have decided to implement a portion of the changes over a transitional period. To take English activity lessons as an example, some schools have used the transitional period (2018 and 2019) to adopt

part of the new curriculum for Foreign Language Activities. For third and fourth-graders, these schools have introduced 15 hours of Foreign Language Activities per year (the mandatory minimum). For fifth and sixth-graders, who had until then spent 35 hours per year in the existing Foreign Language Activities, the schools have introduced an extra 15 hours of lessons, for a total of 50 scheduled hours per year. The textbook for third and fourth-graders (Foreign Language Activities) is *Let's Try!* The textbook for fifth and sixth-graders (Foreign Language) is *We Can!* The guidelines stipulate the learning objectives:

Part 1: Objectives

Learners should gain the competency and basic skills necessary to communicate by (1) communicating in a foreign language in such a way that they think and see in different perspectives and (2) exercising the four linguistic activities (listening, reading, speaking, and writing).

These new objectives differ from the existing ones in one important respect; whereas the existing objectives focus on familiarizing children with English through speaking and listening, the new objectives extend beyond this scope to encompass reading and writing. In MEXT's *Guidebook for Foreign Language Activities and Training in Elementary Schools (Shougakkou Gaikokugo Katsudou / Gaikokugo Kenshu Gaidobukku)*, this new scope is explained in the basic approaches⁵⁾:

1. Basic approaches for Foreign Language Activities
 - (1) Foster elementary communication skills in a foreign language.
 - (2) Foster broad linguistic competence.
 - (3) Familiarize learners with the phonology and basic expressions of a foreign language.

2. Basic approaches for Foreign Language
 - (1) Foster basic communication skills in a foreign language.
 - (2) Teach the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing.
 - (3) Guide learners in making the transition from speaking/listening to reading/writing.
 - (4) Use language activities to foster understanding of sentences and the structure of sentences.

Whereas third and fourth-graders acquire “elementary” communication skills, fifth and sixth-graders learn “basic” skills, reflecting the idea that fifth and sixth-graders should learn skills at a slightly more advanced level. Foreign Language Activities, previously taken by fifth and sixth

graders, is shifting down to third and fourth-graders. In place of Foreign Language Activities, fifth and sixth-graders will now learn content previously taught in grade 1 of junior high school. Although third and fourth-graders will take lessons previously taught in grades 5 and 6, the content will emphasize listening and speaking. Special importance will be assigned to speaking, which is further divided into conversation and speech presentations.

During this period of massive change, student volunteers in the teacher training course had an opportunity to assist elementary schools in conducting English activities. Below, I describe the activities they conducted.

3. Lesson Activities (Lesson Plans)

First, we look at the activities the student volunteers conducted. The student volunteers led three lessons per year for each grade between the first and fourth elementary grades. They prepared lesson plans and teaching materials by themselves. Although they did so on a voluntary basis, they were effectively standing in for the class teachers, who had no English teaching licenses. Because the learners were elementary school pupils, the student volunteers aimed for lesson content that would be familiar and relatable to them. For example, they taught everyday words such as numbers, foods, and animal names. They also practiced basic self-introductions (“Hello. My name is...”) and simple question-and-answer responses. The lesson plans also included games and songs related to the content the children learn.

An example of a lesson plan is shown below. This lesson plan was for third-graders. The plan covered the names of months and ordinal numbers. The children had learned numbers in a previous lesson, so the foundation was already established for them to learn about ordinal numbers.

Lesson Plan for Third-Graders at Yamaguchi Elementary School

Time	Activity	What assistant says / does	Requests to teacher
2 min.	Greeting	Assistant: “Good morning, everyone.” Class: “Good morning!”	

8 min.	The names of the months	<p>“We will listen to a song about the months of the year.” (play <i>Musical Months</i>)</p> <p>Show flashcards bearing names of months. (January, February, March, April, May, June, July, August, September, October, November, and December)</p> <p>“I’m going to play the song again. This time, I want you all to sing along.”</p>	<p>Please join in pronouncing the month names.</p> <p>Please join in singing the month names.</p>
8 min.	Saying the date in English.	Using a calendar, read out the days of the month (1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, etc.).	Please join in pronouncing the days of the month.
10 min.	<p>Asking when someone’s birthday is.</p> <p>Telling someone when your birthday is.</p> <p>Birthday conversation</p>	<p>Teach how to ask the question. (“When is your birthday?”)</p> <p>Teach how to respond. (“My birthday is...”)</p> <p>Role-play the question and response.</p>	<p>Please join in pronouncing the words.</p> <p>Please join in pronouncing the words.</p>
15 min.	<p><u>Activity</u></p> <p>Ask your friend when his/her birthday is.</p>	<p>(1) The children practice the question and response with the teacher and with one another. (“When is your birthday?” / “My birthday is...”)</p> <p>(2) The children say the date of their birthday in front of the class. (If their birthday happens to be on the day of the class or close to it, they receive a “Happy Birthday!” message.)</p>	Please join in the activity.
2 min.	Farewell	<p>Assistant: “That’s all for today. Goodbye, class.”</p> <p>Class: “Goodbye!”</p>	

The student volunteers who prepared this lesson plan defined the learning objective of the plan as follows: “Pupils should learn how to say the months of the year and the days of the months in English, and master the ability to tell their friends, teachers, or parents when their birthday is in English.”⁶⁾ In short, the aim was for learners to master how to say dates in English through a fun activity. The key point is that this lesson could have focused on teaching children how to answer the question “What’s the date today?” but instead, it took a more creative approach, focusing on the birthdays- information that children find more interesting and relatable. In this way, the lesson plan conformed to the following provision in the course guidelines:

When giving pupils opportunities to experience communication in the foreign language, teachers should mainly set the communication situations and functions listed in the following examples:

[Examples of Communication Situations]

- (a) Situations where fixed expressions are often used
 - Greeting • Self-introduction • Shopping
 - Having meals • Asking and giving directions etc.
- (b) Situations that are likely to occur in pupils’ lives
 - Home life • Learning and activities at school
 - Local events • Childhood play etc.

[Examples of Functions of Communication]

- (a) Improving the relationship with a communication partner
- (b) Expressing emotions
- (c) Communicating facts
- (d) Expressing opinions and intentions
- (e) Stimulating a communication partner into action

The lesson’s activity incorporated “communication situations” in that it involved giving personal introductions and finding out something through a question and answer exchange. As I mentioned above, at an elementary school level, the primary aim of English activities is to expose children to English. Hence, it is important that lessons use scenarios that are familiar and relatable to children. To take an example from another student volunteer’s lesson plan, the children learned English numbers by stating their registration number, the number of players on their favorite sports team, and the number on a player’s uniform. The children enjoyed stating their registration number in English, and they were curious to know how to pronounce sports players’ numbers. In this way, the student volunteers taught the target items using scenarios that were familiar to the children.

However, the lesson plans were not always successful. For example, there was one grade 2 lesson on numbers that aimed to teach the numbers up to 20. The activity for this lesson was a game

of Bingo. When the student volunteers introduced 16-cell Bingo cards, the teacher pointed out that the children were confused. The student volunteers had used 16 cells because they wanted to include as many different numbers as possible. However, being only beginners, the children often failed to spot a number that was called out. This misfire continues to serve as an instructive example for those who are preparing lesson plans.

4. Reflecting on the Activities

The student volunteers were praised for their creative ideas and the materials they prepared for the activities. Moreover, activity lessons at the elementary schools have been going on for nearly 10 years now. How have the teachers appraised the activities? Makoto Ietsuka, a teacher at Yamaguchi Elementary School, highlighted the following outcomes of the activities⁷⁾:

- The children usually engaged in Foreign Language Activities from grade 5 onward without any resistance.
- At each grade, the children attempted to speak in English unabashedly.
- The children showed an interest in learning about different cultures.

We heard that one of the children came up to a teacher during lunch break, saying “Your hair is *brown*, isn’t it?” Just before this, the class had conducted an activity for learning the English names for colors. Having made a point of using subject matter that is relatable to the children’s everyday lives, the student volunteers were reassured to know that the children applied what they had learned outside the classroom. The teachers also benefitted from the student volunteers’ program; although they initially felt some trepidation about the Foreign Language Activities lessons, after observing the student volunteers’ activities, they got an idea of how they should develop lessons. The student volunteers’ experience at the elementary schools inspired them in their subsequent activities. Indeed, the student volunteers (including those who are still students and those who have graduated) often make comments such as the following⁸⁾:

- I got a boost from seeing the children enjoying the English activity.
- I felt that the children had a very acute awareness of English phonology.
- I do not usually interact with children, so the experience taught me how to engage them.
- I had to think about what activities would engage the children in a meaningful way. This experience will serve me well when I start teaching.
- The experience made me realize how effective it is to base the lesson on an activity in which all the children participate.
- There is a large knowledge gap between first and fourth-graders, so you must select the topics judiciously.

- You must ensure that the activities do not get dominated by those children who are receiving English tuition.
- My experience at the elementary school formed the foundation for my present teaching job at a junior high school. Whenever I have to organize communication-related activities for my class, I always recall the activities I organized at the elementary school.
- I now teach at a junior high school, but the experience I gained from the activities has helped me enormously.

From the above comments, we can tell that the former student volunteers had endeavored to use familiar, relatable content, just as MEXT had advised in its curriculum course guidelines. It is also interesting to note that one of the commenters felt the children had an acute phonological awareness. The feedback from the student volunteers is particularly meaningful; although graduates teach at a different level of the education system (i.e., at a junior high school rather than an elementary school), they nevertheless believe their experience at the elementary school underpins the communication-related activities they conduct at their school. It is clear that as volunteers, they prepared their lesson plans based on the objectives of Foreign Language Activities, as stipulated by MEXT.

Opinion is divided on Foreign Language Activities in elementary schools; some are for it and some are against it. Those in the latter camp, such as Yukio Otsu and Kumiko Torikai, argue that elementary schools should focus more on establishing a solid grounding in Japanese, which will provide learners with a foundation for developing their thinking abilities.⁹⁾ Proponents of this view are skeptical about the three components of Foreign Language Activities - singing, dancing, and conversation. However, in the case of Kobe College's volunteer program, the student volunteers had to prioritize making English fun because they had only a minimal amount of teaching hours (only three activities were held in a year). If we want to treat Japanese, the learners' native tongue, as an important foundation for learning, we should presumably think about ways to integrate Foreign Language Activities with Japanese. However, before we can do so, we would first need to secure an adequate number of teaching hours and ensure that there are regular activities taught by holders of English teaching licenses, all of which must be done with MEXT's leadership. According to a 2011-2012 MEXT survey of Foreign Language Activities in elementary schools, 72% of elementary schoolchildren said they enjoy English lessons and 91.5% said they want to use English. Additionally, around 80% of junior high school first grade students said that the Foreign Language Activities they attended at elementary school have proved useful in junior high school.¹⁰⁾ Although Foreign Language Activities has its fair share of problems, including infrastructural problems, the above data demonstrates that following the objectives set by MEXT has, so far, been successful.

5. Future Activities

To recap, we are in a period of transition to the new curriculum course guidelines. Third and fourth-graders receive 15 hours per year of Foreign Language Activities lessons, which are based on the textbook *Let's Try!* In the case of Yamaguchi Elementary School, student volunteers from Kobe College conduct three extra English activities lessons per year. Although they only come in three times a year, the student volunteers discuss with the school how to develop activities in which the children can practice what they have learned in textbook-based lessons. The textbook *Let's Try!* is designed for third and fourth-graders. Unlike the existing textbook, *Hi, Friends*, which used to be designed for Foreign Language Activities for fifth and sixth-graders, *Let's Try!* includes plenty of content on the alphabet. Third-graders learn capital letters, while fourth-graders learn lower-case letters. The intention is for learners to start learning basic phonics once they begin Foreign Language Activities lessons, fulfilling one of the basic approaches for Foreign Language lessons: to “guide learners in making the transition from speaking/listening to reading/writing” (as stipulated in the *Guidebook for Foreign Language Activities and Training in Elementary Schools*). Until now, the focus has been on phonology; learners are exposed to English through speaking and listening. Going forward, speaking and listening will remain the gateway into the language, but lessons will now need to include content on English reading/writing. Accordingly, the student volunteers who assist at Yamaguchi Elementary School should develop content for first and second-graders that will prepare these learners for the Foreign Language Activities lessons they will take in grades 3 and 4. Then, for third and fourth-graders, they should develop activities that, on the one hand, are relevant to Foreign Language Activities lessons and, on the other, will prove beneficial to the learners once they start Foreign Language lessons in grades 5 and 6.

Yamaguchi Elementary School runs a yearly exchange program in which its fifth and sixth-graders interact with Kobe College's international students. Last year's exchange featured presentations delivered by the international students and the schoolchildren. The international students gave presentations on the leisure activities of their home countries. The fifth-graders delivered presentations about the neighborhood around the school and about Japanese cuisine, while the sixth-graders delivered presentations on leisure activities in Japan. The students and children ate lunch together, and after finishing their presentations, they conversed with each other. The children practiced the English they had learned in lessons, while the international students practiced their Japanese. The result was a thoroughly enjoyable intercultural experience. The student volunteers from Kobe College also participated by acting as interpreters. In this way, children in grades 1 to 4 had an opportunity to encounter English, albeit gradually, and they are eagerly awaiting the exchanges they will have with the international students once they get to grades 5 and 6. According to the school, the children speak English confidently with the ALTs. Individually, these activities may seem insignificant, but collectively, they profoundly impact all children.

As for Nishinomiya Elementary School, last year, it decided to let student volunteers lead five activity lessons per year with first and second-graders. This move was in response to Foreign Language Activities formally becoming a school subject for third and fourth-graders. The school is situated in the same schooling district as Nishinomiya Junior High School. Taking advantage of their proximity, the schools have established a cooperative framework for learning activities. English teaching has benefited from this situation; teachers at the junior high school visit the elementary school to give English lessons there. Building on such collaboration, teachers at the elementary school will work closely with the junior high school teachers in organizing activities for third and fourth-graders, who must now take Foreign Language Activities. Therefore, Kobe College student volunteers conduct lessons for first and second-graders, who do not take Foreign Language Activities. Given the circumstances, the student volunteers who assist at Nishinomiya Elementary School should tailor their activities to a lesson plan that prepares these learners for grades 3 and 4, when they will start learning elementary communication skills. The school will share its teaching plan with the student volunteers, so volunteers should aim to add more of a fun-factor to the activities, while ensuring that they fully cover the school's target items.

6. Conclusions

I discussed the English activities program that is approximately 10 years old in which fourth-year students from Kobe College prepare and deliver learning activities at elementary schools. The aim of these activities was to prepare learners for the Foreign Language Activities in which they will engage in grades 5 and 6. However, Foreign Language Activities is now being revamped under the new curriculum guidelines for elementary schools, and this change provides an opportunity to review the volunteer program's activities. Until now, the activities for third and fourth-graders have focused exclusively on familiarizing learners with English. However, this approach will no longer be enough to prepare learners for grades 5 and 6, given that fifth and sixth-graders will now be taught content that was hitherto taught in grade 1 of junior high school. We need to consider how student volunteers can help pupils develop basic English competence within the extremely limited number of sessions they teach. As of 2019, English Language Teaching Methods (*eigo-ka kyouikuhou*) IV will be formally established in Kobe College, and this subject will deal with English teaching in elementary school. Moreover, some graduates with a license to teach English in junior high school or high school have started teaching English in elementary school as English language teachers with a license for a single subject. Opinion is divided on whether or not English should be introduced into elementary schools; however, given the circumstances, it is vital that we make a serious effort to offer activities that will stimulate children's intellectual curiosity, while also deepening ties with the local community.

Notes

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