

Original Article

Foreign Language Activities in Elementary Schools

Noriaki Ohashi

Department of English Communication, Chugoku Junior College, Okayama 701-0197, Japan

This paper examines the objectives of “Foreign Language Activities” in the new Course of Study for Japanese elementary schools and then discusses what these objectives should be. At the elementary school level, the first consideration should be to encourage an interest in foreign languages, and secondly the teachers should aim at fostering better Japanese citizens with a basic knowledge about languages.

Key Words: elementary school, Foreign Language Activities, English, objectives, metacognition

Introduction

On Mar. 28, 2008, the (new) Course of Study was announced by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT). Foreign language study will be introduced into the 5th and the 6th grades, 1 lesson a week (35 lessons a year). The language study subject was given the title “Foreign Language Activities”. The name was chosen to show that it is not a subject like mathematics or English but a lesson devoted to ‘activities concerning foreign languages’.

What was introduced?

‘Foreign language’ does not imply any particular language, but English is nominated as the main language in the document. MEXT does not make it clear if languages other than English should be studied or not, but it can safely be said that this course

time should mostly be devoted to doing activities in English. There are two reasons for this; first, in the draft documents issued by MEXT in November, 2007 and January, 2008, pupils’ experiencing the sounds of foreign languages other than English was recommended, but the final version does not include such statements: second, MEXT produced a pilot version of ‘English Notebook’, a learning aid for elementary school pupils to use in the classroom. The fact that this material is called English Notebook, rather than Foreign Language Notebook, shows that for MEXT ‘Foreign Language’ virtually means ‘English’.

Why was it introduced?

According to a national survey conducted by MEXT in 2006, 96 % of elementary schools (21,116 out of 22,031 schools) have introduced English language activities into their curriculum. But objectives differ from school to school because, from the perspective of English language education, there are almost no guidelines nor consensus on what abilities should be fostered. Therefore, it seems evident that MEXT is aiming at introducing nation-wide basic guidelines in the new Course of Study.

Corresponding author:
Noriaki Ohashi
Department of English Communication, Chugoku Junior College, 83, Niwase,
Okayama 701-0197, Japan
Tel & Fax; +81 86 293 3313(ex 416)

Aims of the Foreign Language Activities

The crucial matter to be considered is: what abilities should be developed in these lessons. Should the classes just be an introductory part of junior high school English lessons?

According to the new Course of Study, the objectives of the 'Foreign Language Activities' are:

Use foreign languages, to deepen the understanding of languages and cultures, to foster positive attitudes towards communication, and to nurture basic aptitudes for communication abilities whilst familiarizing the pupils with the sounds and basic expressions of foreign languages. (New Course of Study, 2008) (translation by the author)

There is no mention of any acquisition of the four language macroskills. This means pupils will experience listening and speaking, and possibly even reading and writing, but will not be expected to retain any of these skills. This leads to an obvious question: is it fair for them to spend about one hour per week on language experience and not acquire any language skills?

The past arguments

Let us rewind the clock and start with the arguments about English instruction in elementary schools, which were made two years ago, in March, 2006. When people heard that MEXT was starting to think about introducing a foreign language (probably English) into the elementary school curriculum, there were mixed responses.

Some welcomed the idea, saying that in the future Japanese people will need English language skills and also a new way of learning the language. They also said the reason why many Japanese cannot 'use' English is the way they were taught the language. These people naively cited the hypothesis of 'critical period', or 'sensitive period' of language learning, which assumes that new language sounds can be learned easily before the age of about nine, while it becomes quite difficult after that age. Most people seemed to believe that the hypothesis had been proved, whereas it remains just that, a hypothesis

which has been suggested, but not proved.

Others were against the idea of introducing English into elementary schools on the grounds that it is appropriate to start foreign language learning at junior high schools, and that the main problem to be addressed is how to improve English teaching at junior and senior high schools. In addition, this second group of people said that the critical age hypothesis for learning a mother tongue had not been proved; much less for a foreign language. They were afraid the early introduction of English study would produce pupils who are reluctant to continue language learning at an even younger age than what happens at present.

To put the arguments in a different way, most people, especially parents, believed that by starting earlier, pupils would become more fluent users, based on the assumption that learning a language would be easier if they started earlier. Others thought a mere two years of study at elementary school would not make much difference, and that the introduction might distort elementary school education and make the language learning situation worse. They thought the early introduction would result in pupils who are demotivated and lose interest in learning a foreign language at an even earlier age than what happens now. Both sides were considering how the learning of English skills would affect elementary school pupils and education, but there is still a different way of looking at the issue: skills, or not skills.

Objectives of the Foreign Language Activities

In considering what should, or could be the objectives of elementary school English, a distinction was made between English language skills and international communication abilities. English language skills implies that grammatical competence to use English is the central concern, whereas international communication ability means understanding the concepts of language and culture, and having a positive attitude for communication. The former language skills are the equivalent of 'English macroskills', which students study from junior high school onwards. The latter international communication abilities are a more expanded notion and do not always require the use of English in the classroom.

There were many discussions between two groups, each of them aiming to promote their own objectives.

But, it is possible to choose both of them as learning objectives because language skills can be regarded as a subordinate objective of international communication abilities, as Ohashi (2007, p. 95) showed using information from Matsuhata, Kiichi (personal communication, 2002) (See Fig. 1).

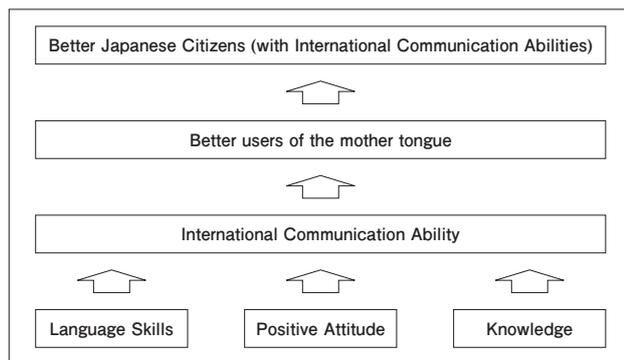


Fig. 1 Classification of the Objectives of Language Learning

Matsuhata's hypothesis (Fig. 1) is that an ability for international communication underpins the higher-level objective of fostering better users of the mother tongue. At the same time, international communication ability is underpinned by three categories: language skills, a positive attitude, and knowledge; which respectively mean "the four macro-skills of a foreign language", "a positive attitude toward successful communication in the foreign language", and "knowledge and understanding of the foreign language (mainly grammar) and of the culture attached to it". Following this concept of the levels of objectives, Matsuhata argues that in order for the pupils to acquire international communication abilities, they need to have some idea what the target language (English) is like and that, for this to happen, the pupils need to be exposed to the language first hand.

Most importantly, the final and ultimate goal of the foreign language activities is to foster better citizens, the same goal as other areas of elementary school education. In other words, pupils need to be brought up to be good citizens with core language skills and other skills like information technology (IT) literacy, a positive attitude toward learning, and a knowledge of other subjects such as history, health, art, and so on. In the present-day globalized world,

it is reasonable to expect every Japanese citizen to have international communication abilities. Foreign Language Activities is a good way to foster these abilities.

Metacognition of one's mother tongue

The objectives make it clear that pupils will acquire the very basic meaning of foreign language learning: knowing that their mother tongue is one of the many languages existing in this world. At the same time, Matsuhata hypothesis says that pupils can have some experience of what expert users of foreign language(s) know: by acquiring a foreign language, we can improve our command of the mother tongue as Swarbrick (2002) says:

"Learning another language can help develop greater confidence and aptitude in the pupil's first language. Foreign languages can also play a crucial part in educating pupil's to become citizens of the world." (Swarbrick (2002): p. 12)

Also, Commission of the European Communities (2003) says:

[The European] Union is developing a society based upon knowledge as a key element in moving towards its objective of becoming the most competitive knowledge-based economy in the world... Learning other languages contributes to this goal by improving cognitive skills and strengthening learners' mother tongue skills, including reading and writing. (Commission of the European Communities (2003): p. 3)

Next, I would like to present the idea of "Metacognition of one's mother tongue". The word 'metacognition' is used in the area of psychology. According to Eysenck and Keane (2005), it means "beliefs and knowledge about one's own cognitive processes" (p. 446). For instance, when you build a kennel for your dog, first you will make a plan of the building process. Then you start buying planks, nails, etc, and getting the tools ready. While cutting the wood and hammering the nails, you will check to see if you have enough materials and if the building process is going properly. When the work is done,

you will have better skills and knowledge of how to build a kennel and you will use them when the next opportunity comes.

During these building processes, you may find another 'self' watching over what you are doing. That self will tell you what you should do to build a better doghouse, how to hammer a nail better, and whether the planning was good or bad. The 'self' can be said to be the 'metacognition'.

Thus, "Metacognition of one's mother tongue" means "knowing the fact that we use the language to communicate: that the language is one of the languages existing in the world: and that all of the world's languages are equally valuable".

Conclusion

The newly introduced "Foreign Language Activities" are not intended to merely be an early start for junior high school English lessons. The lessons should be spent on pupils' experiencing a new language and acquiring an "International Communication Ability", which will ultimately lead to fostering better citizens. What should be avoided is producing

pupils who become reluctant about learning a foreign language before they begin junior high schools.

MEXT will deliver an "English Notebook" to each pupil in order to help teachers give lessons, but it is necessary to prepare teaching staff, develop a curriculum, and start accumulating teaching materials and practices so pupils can have an enjoyable experience studying Foreign Language Activities.

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