

Destroying Myths: Japanese primary school teachers CAN teach English

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本稿では、まず文科省により義務付けられた小学校5-6年生の「外国語(英語)活動」における小学校教諭による英語の授業に関する神話と困難について考察する。次に、飯塚市が採用している研修プログラムを紹介し、最後に、外国語学習と文化的な意識向上に関する進歩の度合いをアセスメントし、今後の研修に関する提案を論ずる。

First, the myths and difficulties that primary school teachers face in teaching English as a part of the Foreign Language Activity class required for all 5th- and 6th-graders by the MEXT will be discussed. Next, a description of the training program that Iizuka City has adopted to assist the teachers will be given. Finally, an assessment of the progress teachers are making in introducing EFL and cultural awareness to students, and recommendations for future teacher training will be presented.

Background

For many years, parents and business organizations have been pressing the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) to include English in the primary school curriculum. The main reasons being that, firstly, Japanese are far behind people in other countries—especially its Asian neighbors—in the abilities to communicate in English and teach English. Secondly, there is a need for Japanese children to learn about other countries and develop a global understanding required for peaceful international relationships. Thirdly, the increasing differences in English language abilities among students entering middle schools are problematic. The differences have resulted from a growing number of primary schools deciding to teach English as a Foreign language (EFL) using a variety of materials and methods. Some schools had begun teaching EFL more than 5 years ago.

It was officially acknowledged by the MEXT that children can benefit greatly from learning foreign languages at an early age. Primary students are more flexible than middle and high school students. And using appropriate teaching content and methods can have positive influence on students'

attitudes toward other languages and cultures. This April, the Foreign Language Activity, in which English is the main subject, became a mandatory weekly subject for all fifth- and sixth-grade students. Some schools are teaching EFL in the lower grades, as well.

Myths

A *myth* is a story or idea that is passed along through time from person to person. Myths are not *fact* (something that is definitely "true"), but someone's idea of what *maybe* fact. Eventually, as time passes and people and circumstances change, people realize that certain myths are not fact. "Japanese primary school teachers cannot teach EFL" is a myth that most people believe is true and is often repeated. However, people are discovering that more and more Japanese primary school teachers *can* teach EFL. As a matter of fact, some have been doing so for several years, now.

Concerns about teaching EFL

As EFL and EFL methodologies were not part of their university education, naturally, many primary school teachers had a number of concerns about teaching English. According to one survey (Fennelly & Luxton, 2011, p.21), 77% of the primary school teachers felt that their English ability was not sufficient and 69% believed that they did not have enough knowledge about how to teach EFL. Furthermore, only 20% felt that they had a good understanding of the new Foreign Language Activity class and most were worried that they would not have enough time to teach an additional class (ibid.). Some even believed that teaching EFL would cause students' Japanese language skills to suffer (J. A. Johnson, personal communication June, 2011).

The homeroom teacher (HRT) is the best teacher

In spite of concerns and the lack of ESL training, the task of teaching EFL was given not to EFL specialists or ALTs, but to homeroom teachers. Although it is rumored that this decision was made mainly due to budgetary constraints, the pedagogical rationale presented has merits.

HRTs have a deep understanding of their students. They know what motivates the students to learn and to communicate with others. They know what knowledge and skills students have acquired in other subjects and can transfer to the Foreign Language Activity class. Building on previous learning, HRTs can easily connect familiar topics and skills learned in Japanese to those in English. They can use content and skills learned in English to reinforce what students have learned in Japanese. For example:

日本語	英語
赤	red
キリン	giraffe
靴	shoes
3 + 7 = 10 → 3 たす 7 は 10	3 + 7 = 10 → 3 plus 7 equals 10

Iizuka's training plan is helping teachers get started

There are four stages to Iizuka City's 2011 training plan. The first 3 have been carried out. Unfortunately, due to the different schedules at the schools, Stage 1 training was only for one teacher from each school and the total time was only 3 hours. School visits are from 1.5 to 2 hour. Stage 4 will be carried out from October to March, 2011.

- **Stage 1:** Two introductory workshops were given to teachers responsible for the Foreign Language Activity at Iizuka's 22 primary schools.
- **Stage 2:** A demonstration class was taught by a HRT followed and a feedback session attended by everyone who saw the class.
- **Stage 3:** A training session was given for all teachers at each school.
- **Stage 4:** Each school will request the type of assistance the HRTs think they need.

In addition to the 2-volume textbook, *Eigo Notebook* (英語ノート), for fifth- and sixth-graders, the Iizuka City Board of Education has bought copies of two other books for each school: *Active Phonics* and *Bridges to the World*. As the level of *Eigo Notebook* is quite low and it does not provide a well-rounded, integrated EFL education, the two books are used by teachers as supplemental materials.

Results and Conclusions

As a result of the training program, teachers' professional experience and determination, many teachers are gaining confidence in their ability to use classroom English and teach the Foreign Language Activity class. They are acquiring knowledge of new skills (i.e. questioning and higher-level thinking), and teaching methods that can be used to teach not only EFL but other subjects, as well. They are using their creativity to make learning interesting and fun.

Most important, children are communicating in English inside and outside of the EFL classroom. In addition to English, they are having fun

learning

greetings in other foreign languages. They are interested and eager to learn about other cultures. They are learning to ask questions, to use basic communication skills (i.e. listening, caring, giving positive feedback), to respect and appreciate others, and to work cooperatively.

In conclusion, order for primary school education to develop students' EFL, interpersonal communication, and thinking skills to levels that will enable them to function and be agents of change in an international setting, the following steps are essential:

1. University K-12 teacher education programs must change to meet the needs of new teachers.

2. On-going in-service EFL and cultural education for teachers must be provided by local boards of education and prefectural education centers.

3. The MEXT must provide teachers with opportunities to travel and study abroad.

4. Teachers must use English naturally, throughout the school day to improve their own speaking ability and that of the students.

5. Teachers must strive to improve their English speaking skills and teaching methods.

6. Teachers must model the behaviors they want students to acquire.

References

Mark Fennelly and Robert Luxton, Are they ready? On the verge of compulsory English, elementary school teachers lack confidence. *The Language Teacher*, 35(2), 19-24.