The Role of Japanese Teachers in English Classes in Japanese Elementary School

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Introduction: New proposal for English education in Japan, 2013

The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (henceforth, MEXT) has decided to introduce English classes compulsorily from the 3rd grade in elementary school by 2020. English education is incorporated from the 5th grade currently in order to foster positive attitudes toward communication in the globalized world and so that students become familiar with English sounds and basic expressions in English. In the new plan, MEXT declares Japanese children should have English education earlier in accordance with the rapidly globalized world. They divide the curriculum of English education in elementary school into two types, an “activity type” and a “subject type”. The subject type refers to English literacy (読み書き, yomikaki), which is currently taught in junior high school. It would be taught from the 5th grade and it aims to foster elementary proficiency to use English effectively including reading and writing. On the other hand, the usual subject which would be conducted for the middle grades is called the activity type because the goal is forming basic communicative ability through a pleasant experience of communication using English. The new plan says that the activity type should be homeroom teacher-oriented and the
subject type should be taught by the team-teaching of a Japanese homeroom teacher who has English teaching ability and outside personnel such as an ALT, or a professional English teacher who can teach English by themselves. They suggest that English classes should be conducted once a week for the 3rd and 4th grade (45 minutes/each class), and two regular classes and three 15 minutes-classes called module classes a week from the 5th grade. They have tried to gradually carry out the new system from 2014 so that they can make it complete by 2020.

**An Activity type for the middle grades**

The students started to learn English compulsorily from the 5th grade from 2011 but an English class is considered as not a subject but an activity which focuses on “international understanding and a basis of communication ability, rather than the acquisition of skills in English at the elementary level” (Wakita, 2013, p.5). MEXT will introduce it from the 3rd grade according to the new proposal of 2013. Benesse (2010) conducted a survey about what they do in the class of the activity type. The results are mostly practicing to greet people, playing games, singing songs and chants, practicing English conversation, pronunciation practice, and so on.

I interviewed two Japanese public elementary school teachers for this paper. One teaches English in Osaka. She has an experience of studying abroad in New Zealand. She was
majoring in English Education in her bachelor’s degree and Foreign Language Education and Research in her master’s degree. The other teacher is in an elementary school in Yamaguchi. She has studied abroad as well.

Who teaches English?

The English activities are currently carried out by team-teaching with homeroom Japanese teachers and native English speakers (henceforth, NSs) called assistant language teachers (henceforth, ALTs). In a white paper on the English education, MEXT states to have many chances to come in to contact with real English is important for Japanese students and thus instruction should include samples of native English. However, there is the fact that 54.6% of schools were not satisfied with the frequency of ALT’s visit to their schools because of financial problems according to the survey conducted by Benesse (2010). One Japanese teacher said,

Current English classes are almost all homeroom teacher-centered and I don’t think it would help children to foster international understanding and a basis of communication ability. Are singing songs and playing game with one ALT international understanding? In order to achieve it, I think students need to meet many people from various religions and countries. They will be able to know attractiveness of different culture and tradition and also reconfirm great Japanese culture at the same
time through mingling with foreign people. Also, students will be able to learn basic communication skills in those contexts more effectively and functionally.

The other teacher commented,

The reason why I think ALTs are important is because children would realize there are other countries where people speak different languages and they have different culture.

From their comments, Japanese teachers need ALTs not because they feel anxious to teach English to children and thus they need ALTs who teach English instead but because they think interacting with foreign people is important for children’s understanding of different culture and basic communication skill.

Machida (2011) found Japanese elementary school teachers usually hesitated to teach English and felt anxious before teaching English activities because they didn’t feel confident to teach English because of their English competence but they have gradually realized the activity type is easier to teach than they had expected. In the other words, Japanese teacher have found “the fact that competency in the language is only one of many important qualifications for successful language teaching” (Butler, 2007, p.). Therefore, what Japanese teachers really want are people who can show diverse perspective rather than people who can teach English. One of my interviewees said,

It can be not only ALTs but also immigrant people or foreign students learning
Japanese. I just want to provide chances to interact with foreign people to children. If MEXT thinks English education for the middle grades should focus on communicative skills rather than learning English grammar it is even more obvious the importance of existence of people who speak English.

Contrary to the interview of my two homeroom teachers, MEXT says Japanese teachers should be centered in the English classes for the middle grades rather than ALTs or team-teaching because, I think, the activity type doesn’t require high level of English proficiency.

A subject type for the upper grades

On the other hand, MEXT proposes to move forward the start of learning English literacy. In the other words, the 5th grader will begin to learn English literacy 2 years earlier than the current education system. In the plan, it says English literacy should be taught by team-teaching or professional English teachers. One of my respondents said,

I can plan and conduct the activity type but to teach English literacy is totally different. We need professional English teachers. I mean I can teach it if there is in-service training because we have learned English literacy for 6 years at least.

However, we don’t have much time to do that much.

It seems she thinks teaching English literacy would be the great burden because homeroom
teachers have to prepare for other subjects as well. In the existing circumstances, only 3% of
the homeroom teachers have certifications to teach English (Bennesse.2010). Furthermore,
ALTs have minimum education and pedagogic qualifications and training when they begin
teaching. (Mondejar, Laurier, Valdivia, Mboutsiadis, & Sanchez, 2012). That is, neither
Japanese teachers nor ALTs knows English pedagogy enough to teach English literacy. As for
professional English teachers, the teacher is afraid of financial problems at her school.

I wonder if my school can afford to employ professional English teachers. Also, it
would take a long time to make regulations of employment qualifications,
certifications, and conduct tests to assess their professionalism enough to teach
English to elementary students.

**Implications for future English Education for the middle grades**

It seems Japanese teachers think people who have different cultures are the most
important to understand different cultures and develop basic communication skills in the class
rather than teachers’ ability to teach English. This is why they think ALTs are necessary
although they think they can conduct an activity type. However, schools are concerned about
financial problems. It means that they can’t afford to hire enough ALTs. Although MEXT
suggests that they would expand the number of ALTs and give training for them, it could be
limited by the critical condition of the national finances. Also, Butler (2007) indicates “Despite
the lack of clear understanding regarding the role of NSs in English education at the elementary school level, the Japanese government plans to dramatically increase the number of NS teachers in classrooms in Japan” (p.12). As the interviewed teacher mentioned above, immigrants would play a significant role for English Education for the middle grades. Although the number of the immigrants is decreasing these years because of the influence of the 3/11 earthquake, there are still approximately 2 million foreign residents in Japan according to the Ministry of Justice research (2013). They usually try to study Japanese and Japanese culture so that they can live in comfort, get along with people, keep up with classes, and work effectively in Japan. Usually, NPOs and NGOs which aim to create a society where Japanese and foreign citizens live in harmony provide Japanese classes to them. Participants are eager to have chances to communicate with Japanese. If elementary schools offer to make opportunities to invite them to school and make chances to interact with students, Japanese teachers don’t have to worry about talking with ALTs in English to plan schedules of English classes and also for urgent changes during classes, which are the most anxious factor for Japanese teachers (Machida, p.122). It wouldn’t cost more than increasing the number of ALTs, and training ALTs who have no experience to learn Japanese and thus who have limited Japanese proficiency as well as Japanese teachers who have limited English proficiency (Butler, 2007, p. 13).

According to an interview conducted by Kusumoto (2008), “many teachers said they
want to learn how to make a one-hour lesson plan using effective activities which suit students’ abilities and interests and want to learn how to carry out the lessons with confidence given their current English proficiency” (p.32). It seems they are willing to conduct effective English classes so that they can foster children’s international understanding, but there is a gap on the concept of international understanding between the government and Japanese teachers. The Japanese government should realize that international understanding would not be achieved if they continue the current ALT system.

**Implications for future English education for the upper grades**

The activity type will be conducted from 3rd grade officially but in fact, 67% of schools are more or less conducting it in the 1st and 2nd grades as well according to Bennese (2010). If they continue the activity type through whole elementary school curriculum, even if the content of the activity type is improved, upper graders would get bored and their progress would not be expected. Thus, two of the teachers of the interviewees agree with introducing the subject type into upper grades. However, they feel they can’t afford to teach English literacy. That is, although Japanese teachers are supposed to know the basic English literacy because they should learn it when they were students, they are worried about a pedagogical problem, how to teach English effectively to elementary school students which they learned in junior high schools. It might be possible for Japanese homeroom teachers to take charge of English classes if they can have sufficient
in-service training as Mondejar, Laurier, Valdivia, Mboutsiadis, & Sanchez (2012) suggest.

However, “It seems very difficult for them to learn new things while engaging in their daily routine of classroom” (Kusumoto, 2008, p.33). I suggest that elementary schools should hire professional English teachers who have knowledge to teach English to Japanese children rather than ALTs who have no experience to teach English. As for the financial problems, I think schools should re-direct some of the money for ALTs towards hiring professional English teachers and reserving to homeroom teachers. It seems many schools are anxious about the budgets for employing external suitable talent for the new policy. However, if schools use the money for well-trained professional English teachers instead of ALTs, they would be able to afford it.

Because two my Japanese teachers seem to have confidence to conduct the activity type in English classes, and also if immigrants can help them with the classes, it wouldn’t cost a lot. That is, they can use the budget for the middle grades to carry out the subject type.

Furthermore, I suppose that “collaborate English lessons with subject area themes”, which is suggested by Takano, Kambara, and Suzuki (2012) would be appropriate for the upper grades. They support the content based instruction based on the idea that “a language is most successfully learned when a learner commits to understand and communicating within a meaningful context” (p.248). Collaborate English lessons with subject area themes is basically students learn simple English including literacy through regular subject areas such as math, history, home economics, and music. For example, a professional English teacher asks “Do you like
apples?” to students in the home economic course, and the teacher explains about it briefly. Then, a homeroom teacher talks about what kind of food group apples belong to and its nutrition. In this activity, the team-teaching of a homeroom teacher and an ALT is necessary but homeroom teachers don’t have to plan schedule of English class from the scratch. Even if students have English classes everyday because of the plan of a module class, they wouldn’t be bored because everything that they learn is related with subject areas which they must like at least one of.

References


