

Teaching English to Elementary School Children

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to make an investigation on successful teaching of English as an L2 to elementary school children. The main issues in this paper are as follows: discussions on an appropriate age or age range when English teaching is most effectively introduced, and on the desirable syllabus design for elementary school children. Concerning the age range, there are two viewpoints which should be taken into consideration: that is, the suitable age for L2 pronunciation acquisition and for L2 syntax acquisition. With regard to the former, my theory is based on the critical period hypothesis advocated by Lenneberg,¹ and on several experiments made on the aural perception of English phonemes, which were administered to approximately 150 elementary school children in Fukuoka prefecture. Concerning the proper age range for syntax assimilation, my reasoning is based mainly on my experience and observations of elementary school English teaching. The suitable age or age range for L2 learning are assumed from an amalgamation of the above two factors.

The concept of syllabus design with some examples of teaching plans is introduced. The syllabus design developed herein has the following three essential elements. First, it is made to provide language learning activities using the total physical response strategy so that children can feel learning English is fun. Second, it is made to enable children to

repeat English words, phrases, and sentences so that they can learn the speech patterns of L2 as their new speech habit. Thirdly, it is structurally oriented, that is, the sentences used are arranged in an appropriate step-by-step order of progress.

My syllabus design is planned in accordance with the present elementary school situations, where the allotted time for English is rather limited, once a week or once every other week. The discussion on this issue is focused on those who learn English in classroom situations. That means it does not include those who may learn English as an L2 in bilingual situations, or those who have private tutors in such learning environments as so-called *juku*.

In connection with the critical period hypothesis and its verification, I will also comment on the influence of English teachers on the children's acquisition of English pronunciation.

1. The Most Suitable Age to Begin Teaching and Learning English as an L2

1-1 It has been discussed that there exists a critical period for learning a foreign language as an L2. Lenneberg (1967),² Jacobson (1975),³ and Lecours (1975)⁴ call this phenomenon "the Pubertal-Critical Period." The reason they use the term "critical period" is that they envision certain crucial limits in age when L2 learning is most effectively achieved. Morris and Gerstman (1986)⁵ say that the most successful L2 learners are seventh and eighth graders, that is, 13-and-14-years-olds. Fathman (1975),⁶ Ramirez and Politzer (1978),⁷ Snow and Hoefnagel-Hohle (1978)⁸ all maintain the theory which says "older is better" for syntax and semantics in learning an L2.

In this section, I would like to demonstrate and verify the above mentioned hypotheses, especially when they are applied to Japanese

learners of English as an L2.

Lenneberg's (1967) hypothesis of the relation between brain development and L2 pronunciation acquisition is very convincing. He hypothesized that the development of cerebral dominance was completed by puberty. According to Lenneberg, the right hemisphere, which later becomes firmly lateralized, is able to assume language function until one reaches the age of around 10. That is the reason why one is able to speak foreign languages without accent if one learns them before one reaches that age.

On the other hand, when Fathman, Ramirez and Politzer, and Snow and Hoefnagel-Hohle say that 12-and-13-year-olds are the most successful L2 learners, they do not mention the feature of pronunciation acquisition. Also in Morris and Gerstman's report, the aspect of pronunciation seems to be ignored. In their experiment, they used the Hawaiian language as an L2, which has a fairly simple phonological system. Therefore, when they say seventh and eighth graders are the most successful learners, it is evident that they did not take the pronunciation acquisition into consideration.

When we deal with an L2 of which the phonological system is greatly different from that of the learner's L1, or of which the phonological system is more complicated than that of the learner's L1, the aspect of pronunciation acquisition should be taken into great consideration. This leads us to doubt the validity of the precedent research established by Morris and Gerstman, Fathman, Ramirez and Polizer, and Snow and Hoefnagel-Hohle.

The critical period means the age range after which the learner begins to have difficulty in perceiving and assimilating foreign speech sounds. There are various theories as to the specific age or the age range when the critical period occurs, that is, when the sensitivity of hearing capacity of speech sounds comes to its limit. Some say the critical period

comes at the age of nine, and others say it is as late as the age of 13. According to Lenneberg's (1967) cerebral biological development hypothesis, the functions of the right hemisphere and that of the left are not separated until one reaches the puberty period; therefore, one can process any speech sound one hears as the language signals. Therefore, one can assimilate any speech sound until one reaches the critical period. On the other hand, after the critical period, the speech sounds which one does not need for one's own language are not transferred into the left hemisphere, of which the function is the operation of language. In this paper, I would like to specify the age or the age range of the critical period regarding Japanese learners of English. First, I will introduce three experimental investigations reported by my former students. Second, I would like to introduce my own teaching experience which is related to the L2 speech sound acquisition.

The following is a data obtained in 1996-1998 by Kuramori,⁹ Nakashima¹⁰ and Takeuchi.¹¹ When they were senior students at Fukuoka Jo Gakuin University, they taught English in an elementary school as guest teachers. They made an experiment on the aural perception of English phonemes. The data of the experiment was collected from approximately 150 elementary school children and from approximately the same number of junior high school students. The former group consisted of fourth graders, ages 9-10, and the latter of tenth graders, ages 13-14.

Kuramori, Nakashima and Takeuchi used the following procedure to obtain their data. The students (informants) listened to twenty pairs of English words, and they were asked to write on the assigned sheets of paper "S" if they perceived the words to be the "same" and "D" if they perceived the words to be "different." The phonemic contrasts and the minimal pair words used in the experiment are shown as in the following:

Phoneme Contrast	Minimal Pair Words	
/ɪ/ vs /e/	pin : pen	tin : ten

Teaching English to Elementary School Children

/e/ vs /æ/	pen : pan	bed : bad
/æ/ vs /ʌ/	cat : cut	cap : cup
/ʌ/ vs /ɑ/	hut : hot	color : collar
/b/ vs /v/	base : vase	best : vest
/t/ vs /d/	two : do	hat : had
/f/ vs /h/	fair : hair	fat : hat
/θ/ vs /s/	thumb : some	think : sink
/ð/ vs /z/	breathe : breeze	clothing : closing
/s/ vs /ʃ/	sign : shine	see : she
/l/ vs /r/	light : right	collect : correct play : pray

The informants listened to these pairs of words once and wrote the answers. This aural perception test took approximately 10 minutes. With the elementary school examinees, it took slightly longer because a careful explanation was necessary using some Japanese examples such as /makura/ and /makkura/. Kuramori, Nakashima, and Takeuchi succeeded in making the test as if it were a game when they dealt with the elementary school children.

The results were very interesting. The younger group, ages 9-10, did better in distinguishing these English phonemes which are not distinctive in the Japanese language. The following figures show the percentages of the correct answers. The figures are the average of the three reports made by Kuramori, Nakashima and Takeuchi, which were administered in 1996, 1997, and 1998, respectively.

minimal pairs	9-10 age group	13-14 age group
/ɪ/ vs /e/	96.2%	96.7%
/e/ vs /æ/	66.5%	65.3%
/æ/ vs /ʌ/	85.2%	66.3%
/ʌ/ vs /ɑ/	52.3%	50.3%

/b/ vs /v/	45.5%	40.5%
/t/ vs /d/	81.9%	71.3%
/f/ vs /h/	72.1%	70.3%
/θ/ vs /s/	54.4%	51.3%
/ð/ vs /z/	63.9%	49.1%
/s/ vs /ʃ/	86.6%	88.7%
/l/ vs /r/		
initial position	45.5%	44.5%
medial position		
post-vocalic	57.5%	54.2%
post-consonantal	52.5%	37.7%

The above results were remarkable. Even though the distinction between /l/ and /r/ does not show a high score for both groups, the elementary school children were able to hear the difference of these words such as “play” and “pray” almost twice as well as the junior high school students. The score of the aural perception of /ð/ vs /z/ also demonstrates better aural perception by the younger group. The results of these investigations no doubt show that there is the critical period in perceiving and distinguishing the foreign speech sounds which the Japanese do not use in their native language. Furthermore, these experimental reports evidence the age range of the critical period for Japanese learners of English: that is, it occurs between 9 and 12 years old.

The above experiment explicitly reveals that learners who begin to learn an L2 before the above mentioned age range are able to perceive foreign speech sounds much more easily, which will lead to a better acquisition of L2 pronunciation. That is the reason they can acquire L2 pronunciation much easier and much more closer to the native-speaker’s pronunciation than those who begin learning an L2 after this age range.

Togo (1998)¹² introduced a very interesting episode as follows. When

he and his family stayed in England for several years, his neighbor commented on his excellent English. When he thanked her for her compliment, she said, "You speak like an English, but your son's English is native English." This little story showed that a child as young as five years old was able to assimilate English pronunciation by simply listening to the spoken language.

I also have a similar experience. Several years ago, I observed 10 elementary school children who began to learn English when they were 10 years old. As a comparative group, I also observed the learning process of another group, approximately the same in the number, whose age range was from 12 to 13. The younger group learned English in a so-called *juku* (a private class) under the guidance of a teacher who had a near-native pronunciation, and with the help of English audio tapes. The younger group had English classes twice a week, 60 minutes each. The older group had their regular English classes at school, three times a week, 50 minutes each.

The following are the results which were obtained after approximately 18 months of observation. After 10 months of instruction, the younger group learners developed a fairly good pronunciation. And after one year and a half, such consonants as /l, r, θ, ð, f, v/, which are not in their native language, were almost successfully assimilated into their new speech habits. The distinction between /l/ and /r/, which is very difficult for adult learners, did not seem to have given them any problem. The recognition of differences between /s/ and /θ/, or /z/ and /ð/, or /b/ and /v/, or /f/ and /h/ was obtained fairly easily, and it did not take them long to incorporate these sounds into their speech habits.

Vowels were taught using the minimal pair comparison, such as /i/ vs /e/, or /e/ vs /æ/, or /æ/ vs /ʌ/, or /ʌ/ vs /ɑ/. The young learners seemed to have more difficulty in acquiring vowels than consonants. Yet, they were far more successful than the older group was.

Concerning stress and intonation, there was a noticeable difference between the younger group learners and the older group learners. It did not take more than four weeks for the younger group learners to notice the stress-timed rhythm of English, while for the older group learners, it took more than 10 weeks even simply to notice. Moreover, approximately 60 percent of the older group learners failed to learn the characteristic stress-timed-rhythm of English. Contrary to the older group, two learners among the younger group even imitated the exact intonation of the instructor, even her idiosyncrasy. Strangely enough, young learners seem to be especially sensitive to the idiosyncrasy of instructors, all the more so if it is a very peculiar one. This means these learners who were before or even in the critical period have a high potential in learning the prosody of the L2.

There is another example which verifies the critical period for learning the L2 pronunciation. When I was asked to choose 30 students as guest teachers for elementary school English, one of the most important criterion I set was their precision and authenticity of English pronunciation. Those who showed excellent pronunciation were almost without exception those who had been taught English when they were in elementary school by native-speaker English teachers or by Japanese teachers whose English was very close to native-speaker English.

Here we are able to come to a conclusion that the most suitable age to start learning an L2 with regard to the pronunciation acquisition is before the learner reaches the critical period. Then, there comes the next question, "What is the most suitable age to start an L2?" If viewed only from the aspect of pronunciation acquisition, we can say very easily, "the younger the better." However, as there are other aspects which should be taken into consideration, the conclusive words on this matter will be stated later.

1-2 In deciding the most suitable age for learning an L2, the next issue is the concern on the appropriate age or age range for syntax learning. The precedent investigations demonstrated that 13-and-14-year-olds are most suited for syntax learning, and another research group maintained “older-the-better” for syntax and semantics. Here questions arise as to the verification and applicability of the above theory to Japanese learners of English. In this section, I would like to demonstrate how the age of learners and syntax learning are related.

The following is my ongoing observation of six-and-seven-year-old learners. They are being taught by native speakers of English once a week, 60 minutes each. Basically there is no Japanese translation or explanations during the class, except when the Japanese teaching assistants explain the rules of games or activities. They learn mainly by the total physical response (TPR) technique. After about three months of instruction, they were able to say such phrases as “I’m fine, thank you,” or “My name is Risa,” which are composed of approximately five syllables.

Unlike English native speaker children, they are not able to analyze and assimilate the grammar inductively out of utterances given to them. Native speaker children are able to understand and construct sentences they have never heard. Brown (1970)¹³ reported that his informant, Adam, created the utterance “I digged a hole” by inducing the past-tense marker [-d] from utterances he had heard previously. He was 24 months then. This kind of induction operation of the child’s mind, unfortunately, does not function in Japanese young learners of an L2. The reasons are self-evident. For one thing, they are not exposed to the L2 frequently enough to enable them to operate induction. For another, Japanese young learners do not need the L2 for their basic daily lives.

When these six-and-seven-year-old learners were able to say these phrases, it seemed they uttered these sentences as a chunk of sounds

without a proper syntactic recognition and without the recognition of words as the phrase composing elements. One of the examples was when they played the “Head and Shoulders” song. The song follows the appropriate gestures so that the learners should be able to identify what ‘shoulder’[ʃouldə] or ‘head’[hɛd] or ‘knees’[ní:z] mean. The gist of the song is that it gets faster as they sing along. Those young learners enjoyed the faster song and the lively gestures which accompany the song. I soon noticed, however, that they thought ‘kneesandtoes’[nizəntouz] as one chunk of words. As there was almost no Japanese explanation, they were not taught how these sounds are separated into words, and what each word precisely means. As for the effect of this kind of instruction, that is, the TPR method with very limited Japanese explanations, the evaluation must be suspended until I can see how these young learners develop the L2 proficiency in their later years.

On the other hand, the older group, ages 10-11, who were learning the L2 in the same teaching method as in the above, showed somewhat different development. First of all, they understood the segments of words such as “knees” “and” “toes” no matter how fast the song goes. They were able to say sentences composed of approximately seven syllables such as, “What do you have in your hand?” Then, was it possible for them to recognize and abstract one word out of an utterance? For instance, could they recognize the possessive pronoun *your* in “your hand” and “What’s your name?” They can say these sentences very smoothly, yet, I doubt if they can abstract the word element, “*your*”, out of the sequence of these utterances, and apply the word “*your*” in a new context. That is to say, they are not able to learn the function of “*your*” by induction operation. The meaning of the word must be made clear by a Japanese speaking assistant, saying, “*your* means *anato-no*” at some point in their learning procedure. One 60-minute-a-week exposure to English is absolutely too short to enable them to isolate word segments

out of the utterance and infer the meaning and function of words by induction. Unlike “Adam” in Brown’s investigation, Japanese learners would not be able to draw an analogy from utterances spoken to them, or to create a word such as “played” by inducing the past tense marker [-d]. It may be impossible for them to induce the past tense sentence rule even after they have heard and used the word “play” and the past tense marker [-d] 50 times. Here I feel the need of the instruction of sentence formation rules using the learner’s native language, even though we must be careful to use an inductive method in teaching grammar.

The report of Azumano Elementary School, one of the research schools designated by the Ministry of Education and Science, clearly evidenced this need of sentence structure instruction. A questionnaire was taken after the research period of three years. An interesting comment was made by a few children who said they could not enjoy “Communication Time (English conversation).” They wrote that “they cannot enjoy speaking English because sometimes it is hard to memorize long sentences without understanding how the sentence is formed.” It was the sixth graders, 12-year-olds, who wrote this. Even though more than 90 percent of the children answered it was fun to speak English, this comment seems to present a very suggestive issue. That is, there is a limit beyond which elementary school learners are unable to assimilate an L2 without a proper introduction to the rules of sentence formation, that is, syntax.

Here, it seems I am able to come to a conclusion concerning the most suitable age for learning L2 syntax, approximately 12 years old, when the mental development of children is mature enough for reasoning and analyzing. Here I must accept the precedent research made by Morris and Gerstman, and the others, who maintained that seventh and eighth graders are the most successful L2 learners.

I would like to discuss the most suitable age to begin learning an L2

from the viewpoint of the above two aspects, the acquisition of the L2 pronunciation and the learning of the L2 syntax. Concerning the former, that is, pronunciation acquisition, I have made it clear that the younger the better. Concerning syntax learning, on the other hand, I found out that it is better to wait until the learner's brain develops mature enough to assimilate grammar. However, empirically we know the danger of the grammar-translation method, which unfortunately has been used in quite a few junior and senior high schools even after teaching English as communication has been strongly advocated. It may be because we begin teaching English when the learner is 12 years old, a very suitable age to assimilate syntax. Also it may be because the age of 12 is after the learner has passed the critical period for learning pronunciation. Therefore, it is a great deal more comfortable for both the learner and the teacher to rely on the traditional grammar-translation method. At the same time, the age of 12 is the crucial adolescent period, when most learners are vulnerable in their ego-images, which naturally makes them sensitive in making errors in front of others. Krashen comments on the difficulty of teaching pronunciation at this period as follows:

Pronunciation seems to be the most difficult aspect of a second language to acquire after this age (adolescent) perhaps, because it runs deeper into the center of the student's personality than any other aspect of language.¹⁴

If pronunciation is the factor which "runs deep into the center of the student's personality," we should introduce an L2 before the adolescent period, at a point when learners are less conscious of their self-images.

Before coming to a conclusion on this matter, let me point out one more issue, the acquisition of L1. Usually "sometime in the six months after children were born, most of them say the first intelligible word. ... At about 18 months children are likely to begin constructing two-word utterances. ... By the age of 36 months some children are so advanced in

the construction process as to produce all of the major varieties of English simple sentences up to a length of 10 or 11 words.”¹⁴ That means by the time they are three years old, most of the children succeed in acquiring the basic rules of sentence construction of their L1. Amazingly they are able to do this by inferring and inducing rules from utterances spoken to and around them. The progress of L1 acquisition, needless to say, will not be completed at this early age. Rather, it keeps developing until children are well past the puberty period. From this point of view, the primary concern in the first two or three years in the elementary school curriculum should be on the development of the children’s L1, that is, Japanese. Empirically, I have never heard of any Japanese native speakers who are good at English but poor at Japanese. Almost without exception, those who are good at their L1 have a higher potential in mastering an L2. It is because language learning shares the same skills, such as memorizing vocabulary items, analyzing the structures, applying the rules and items of vocabulary in making sentences, and the auditory sensitivity to be able to imitate the speech sounds given by adults or native speakers.

Considering all the factors stated above, the most suitable age to begin an L2, in such an environment of once-or-twice-a-week instruction, is the third or the fourth graders, that is, age from nine to ten. That is the age range of the critical period for pronunciation acquisition, and also that is the closest possible age range when the learner is able to assimilate sentence construction rules. I do not support the policy which insists English should be taught beginning in the first grader. I do not see any point in starting an L2 for first and second graders, not to speak of kindergarten children, that is, six-and-seven-year-olds or younger. That is the crucial age for developing their native language, which will become the basic and essential element in their logical thinking in later years. Moreover, as the total teaching hours in the elementary school time table is limited, an L2 teaching should not impede the necessary time for the

sufficient development of the children's L1.

2. English Curriculum for Elementary School Children

2-1 In January 2001, the Committee for Improvement and Promotion of English Education, an advisory committee of the Ministry of Education and Science, issued the following report concerning English teaching in elementary schools.

a) First of all, learning English must be fun for elementary school children. This feeling is cultivated by giving them positive motivations through experiencing foreign ways of lives and cultures, as well as through practical teaching of English which is suitable to the children's physical and mental development.

b) Advancing the junior high school English teaching contents to the elementary school English must be avoided.

c) Songs, games, and skits are advised to be used as appropriate learning activities. However, English classes should not always rely on these activities, since they may not be enough to properly promote language learning. It is necessary to consider teaching plans as well as teaching techniques in accordance with the children's physical and mental development.

d) Excessive expectations and competition should not disturb the basic curriculum of elementary schools. Also, these feelings should not lead to negligence of desirable disciplines at home.

The Ministry of Education and Science also published "Practical Handbook for Elementary School English Activities" in January 2001. The handbook gives guidance regarding the purpose of elementary school English, teaching materials, and some samples of teaching plans. However, it does not specify the overall aims such as the basic and compulsory

vocabulary or sentence structures to be introduced. The Ministry of Education and Science is not able to specify these details because elementary school English is not a school subject yet. It has been taught experimentally at first, and still is taught outside the regular framework of the curriculum, using the time allotted to International Understanding which is a part of Integrated Study Hour (*Sogoteki Gakushu no Jikan*).

Under this circumstance, whether to teach English or not is entirely up to the decision of the individual schools, and so is it with the number of hours allotted to English classes. Therefore, it is impossible to decide the compulsory vocabulary items or the levels of sentence structures. Likewise, it is up to the individual elementary schools how to adopt English in their curriculum. Also, it is up to them to decide the syllabus design, teaching plans, teaching techniques, and the levels of sentence structures.

If the school chooses to adopt English in its curriculum, the easiest way is to follow the curriculum models developed by those elementary schools which have precedent experience. Examples of these curricula are introduced in such publications as *Reports: Learn from the Research Development Schools*.¹⁵ This introduced many interesting games and songs and other language activities full of innovative ideas. These are mainly based on the TPR strategies so that children may feel learning English is fun.

Game-oriented curricula are mandatory for elementary school children. The problem is, however, whether the curriculum has the step-by-step structure-developing design. The teaching plans shown in the above-mentioned book are mostly not structure-conscious. Take the curriculum of Minato Elementary School in Fukui city,¹⁶ for example. The following shows the sentences that the fourth graders are to learn in a year. This school allotted 35 hours a year for English classes. The sentences are arranged in the following order: "When is your birthday?"

“What foods do you like?” “This is my father.” “Do you have a notebook?” “Whose stapler is this?” “What do you want?” “How many?” “How much is it?” “What are you doing?” “I’m making cake.” “What’s Taro doing?” “He is running.” “What games do you like?” “I like Duck Duck Goose.”

The sentence structures being introduced do not follow the step-by-step progress. After the children learned and began to assimilate the sentence pattern, “what + noun + do + you + verb?, i.e., *What animals do you like?*”, they have to make a jump into “subject + be + possessive + noun, i.e., *This is my father.*” Then another jump into “whose + noun + be + this?, i.e., *Whose stapler is this?*” As I have not personally observed the class in session, I cannot say definitely that this curriculum will not work. Yet, I suppose that the children do not have sufficient time to learn and habitualize one sentence pattern before they proceed to the next sentence pattern. They may be able to say the sentences given in the classroom situation but it is doubtful if these sentence patterns would be assimilated so that they might be able to use these patterns in other contexts. Here, I feel it is not wise to rely only on games without an adequate consideration of the sentence structures. Rather, it is the sentence structure that we should first take into consideration. In other words, the core of the elementary school English curriculum should be on the sentence structures, not on the games. The games must be designed in accordance with the structures to be introduced.

2-2 There are several concepts concerning syllabus design. I will list the main syllabus designs in the following.

a) Structural syllabus. This is a grammar-centered syllabus, which is also called grammar syllabus. The teaching materials are carefully arranged so that the learner can assimilate the grammatical structures in a step-by-step order of progress. English textbooks in Japan adopted this

syllabus concept until 1979, when the communicative approach was introduced. Almost without exception, the first sentence structure was S V C, with a sentence such as "This is a pen." The teaching materials were carefully focused on grammar, gradually advancing from one structure to the next, repeating the same structure if necessary so that the learner was able to fully understand the grammatical structures of English. The problem with this syllabus was that it did not teach English as a means of communication. There was a popular television comedy program in Japan in those days in which a comedian used this as a joke. When he saw a foreigner, he greeted him/her, saying "This is a pen." He pointed out humorously the defect of the grammar syllabus.

b) Function syllabus. This is a communication-oriented syllabus, which is also called communication syllabus. Teaching materials are selected according to the functions of language, such as greetings, expressing appreciation, expressing apologies, explaining, negating, negotiating, etc. Japanese junior high school English textbooks applied this syllabus concept after 1979. One seventh grade textbook's first lesson was as follows: "Hi. My name is Junko Tanaka." This concept was successful in teaching English as communication. However, sometimes there are gaps in the order of structural introduction. For instance, in Book 2 of one of the junior high school textbooks, the very first sentence of lesson one was "Would you like some tea?" Even though this is a natural way of offering a drink to someone, it has several problems. For those who have not yet assimilated the basic interrogative sentence formation of general verbs, it is slightly too advanced in structure. Also the use of "tea" as a mass noun is confusing for those who have not assimilated plural and singular distinctions of countable nouns. Also for those who cannot distinguish between "some" and "any" in statements and interrogative or negative sentences, this usage of "some" may cause confusion. There are quite a few university students, even among those who are in the teaching

diploma course, who make mistakes in the use of “some” and “any.”

c) Situation syllabus. This is the design of curriculum focused on the usage of language in accordance with the situations when conversations take place. Situations include “at the bank,” “at the hospital,” “at the department store,” “at the airport” or “at the restaurant.” The situation syllabus is used together with the function syllabus. Rather, the function syllabus needs the situation syllabus so that the functions of the language can be materialized. This is a good syllabus to learn the language for practical use. However, this syllabus also fails in presenting English grammatical structures in an appropriate step-by-step order of progress. There are gaps in the levels of structures so that the learner might be confused.

2-3 Basically, the elementary school English syllabus should follow the function syllabus along with the situation syllabus. At the same time, the syllabus design should not neglect the structural introduction. In other words, the elementary school English syllabus should be designed by adapting the merits of all these syllabi stated in the above section. When we introduce English sentences, the structures to be presented must be very carefully selected, and must be arranged in an appropriate order. Then the next question is what structures should be taught and in what order they should be arranged. Should it be in the order of the traditional Japanese textbook, that is, SVC? Or should we arrange the structures in the order of native speaker children’s acquisition of English as an L1? The following list depicts the ordering relations among grammatical morphemes when bilingual children learn English syntactic rules.¹⁶

- 1) ING precedes regular past tense verbs
- 2) ING precedes irregular past tense verbs
- 3) ING precedes third person singular present verbs
- 4) ING precedes possessive pronouns

- 5) ING precedes auxiliary verbs
- 6) PLURAL precedes regular past tense verbs
- 7) PLURAL precedes irregular past tense verbs
- 8) PLURAL precedes third person singular present verbs
- 9) PLURAL precedes possessive pronouns
- 10) COPULA precedes regular past tense verbs
- 11) COPULA precedes irregular past tense verbs
- 12) COPULA precedes third person singular present verbs
- 13) COPULA precedes possessive pronouns
- 14) ARTICLE precedes possessive pronouns
- 15) ARTICLE precedes third person singular present verbs
- 16) ARTICLE precedes regular past tense verbs
- 17) AUXILIARY precedes possessive pronouns
- 18) AUXILIARY precedes third person singular present verbs

Even though the above list does not show an overall order of syntax acquisition of the L1 learning, it gives me a valuable insight into a design of elementary English curriculum. To recapitulate, the present progressive of verbs comes first of all, then the distinction between plural and singular follows, and after that comes the be-verbs. Articles and Auxiliary verbs come next, and then follows the verb past tense. The third person singular of the verb present comes last. This give me a very good suggestion in the selection of structure items as well as the order of structure introduction. We may introduce the singular and plural distinction of countable nouns at a relatively early stage, and the present progressive of verbs also at an early stage. Possessive pronouns “my” and “your” may also be taught in the early stage, especially because we will repeatedly use these possessive pronouns in introducing each other. Verbs can be introduced in present progressive as well as with an auxiliary verb, “can.” The present tense of verbs may be introduced only with the subject “you” and “I”, not with the third person singular.

3. Examples of Elementary School English Teaching Plans

3-1 Considering the actual situations of the Japanese elementary school system, where English is taught only once a week, or once every other week, the best possible syllabus design seems to be an adaptation of structural step-by-step presentation, which is taught in the forms of TPR techniques. One of the models of the order of structural step-by-step presentation is shown as follows.

- a) Coupla in SVC
- b) What-Question in SVC
- c) Possessive Pronouns: *your* and *my*
- d) Articles (Indefinite)
- e) Personal Pronouns: *you* and *I*
- f) Countable Nouns, Singular vs Plural
- g) How Many
- h) How Much
- i) General Verbs in Imperatives
- j) ING in Progressive
- k) Auxiliary Verbs: *can*

These structures are repeated in both a linear order and in a spiral progress so that these sentence patterns can be repeated. Children are able to learn basically by repetition, since grammar is not taught until they are somewhat advanced in age. Also, the lesson plans are designed using games in the form of TPR.

3-2 In this section, I will demonstrate nine lesson plans as examples. The following lesson plans are for fourth graders who have had about five hours of English experience in the previous year.

The First Lesson: The aim of this lesson is to become familiar with English sounds. Ten or fifteen English words are introduced. The game

can be “Musical Chairs” or the “Card Getting Game” (karuta-tori) or both. “Musical Chairs” goes as follows: the children make a big circle and are seated except for one child. The number of chairs is one fewer than the number of the children. Every child has one picture card (9×6 cm). The child who is standing in the center of a circle says an English word he/she likes. The other children listen to the English spoken, and those who have the card with the same word are supposed to change the seats. As there is one chair too few, the child who cannot get the seat becomes the one to call out an English word next. This game is simple, but very animated. Children enjoy the excitement of moving and listening to English. The “Card Getting Game” goes as follows: the children are first divided into groups which have six or seven members each, and they make circles. Next, 10 to 15 picture cards (9×6 cm) are placed face-up on the floor in the middle of each circle. They compete with each other for grabbing cards when the English words are said. The aims of this game are to get accustomed to English sounds, and also to learn English words. The children who get the most cards must speak the corresponding words. This card game can be used as speaking activity as well as listening practice.

The Second Lesson: The aim of this lesson is to know how to greet in English as well as to become acquainted with some more English words. The number of new words to be introduced depends on the learner. However, “the 7 plus or minus 2 theory of immediate memory span”¹⁷ is useful when we decide the number of new items. The following greeting phrases are introduced: *How are you? I'm fine, thank you, and you? What's your name? My name is Nice to meet you.* These greeting phrases will be repeated in all English classes throughout the year. As the sentence structures are not taught, children will learn these phrases only by repetition. A new card game, “Touch Me,” may be practical for getting acquainted with English sounds and learning new

words. It goes as follows: as many as 20 or 30 pictures cards are placed all over the classroom. The room should better be an open space without chairs and desks so that children can move around freely. When the instructor calls out the words in English, children run around to find and get the cards. This game is suitable for the early stage of instruction.

The Third Lesson: The structure targets of this lesson are “what + coupla + demonstrative: i.e., *What’s this?*” and “demonstrative + copula + a + noun: i.e., *It’s a pencil.*” Even though the instructor uses “a” or “an” attached to a singular countable noun, it is not necessary to explain the usage of articles at this early stage, both in the age and in English learning experience. The important thing is to make the question plausible. The question, “What’s this?” will not make sense if one asks this question when one sees the object openly and knows its identity. The question can be valid if the interrogation is made to ask the identity of a strange object. In the classroom, however, this will not be the case. The instructor must invent some techniques so that he/she may appear to be really asking the identity of the items. A big bag or a sheet of paper with holes can be used to hide a greater part of the items or pictures so that this question can become relevant. There are many games which are suitable to teach this sentence structure. I would like to introduce “Rhythm Chants.” As the English stress-timed rhythm should better be learned at an early stage of instruction, this game will be an appropriate choice. The utterance, “What’s this?” is composed of two primary stresses. Therefore, the instructor claps his/her hands twice in accordance with the sentence stress rhythm. The learner does the same while saying this sentence. It is better not to use loud instruments or loud clappings of hands so that these sounds will not disturb the English speech sounds.

The Fourth Lesson: The structure target of this lesson is “What + noun + do you + like?, i.e., *What color do you like?*” The words to be used

are repetitions of those previously learned, or some new words may be introduced. Children will find it fun to know who likes what kind of colors or sports. Here only colors and sports are used. It is because these are used without the singular or plural distinction. We can repeat “Musical Chairs” game in a slightly more sophisticated way. In the first lesson, when we played Musical Chairs, the children called out words, but in this lesson they speak in sentence. The children who are seated say in unison, “What color do you like?” Then the child standing in the center of the circle will answer, “I like pink” or simply “Pink,” for example. We must accept a one word reply if he/she cannot respond in a sentence. We must avoid intimidating the young learners.

The Fifth Lesson: The structure target is the distinction between the singular and plural of countable nouns. The concept of pluralization must be introduced at the early stage of instruction. Brown states that when the mother expands (corrects) the child’s speech in such a case as *a hands* to *hands*, “she may be teaching something like a world-view.”¹⁸ In teaching the singular and plural of countable nouns, I recommend using English nouns with which children are familiar through English loan words in Japanese. It makes the teaching target of singular and plural more focused. To make it impressive and clear for the young learner, we should not use irregular plural nouns. Several games will support the teaching of this target, such as the “Card Getting Game” or “Listen and Touch.” Let me explain “Listen and Touch.” Approximately 20 picture cards (20×35 cm) are posted on the blackboard. Children are formed into four or five lines, each of which has six or seven members. First, let them count off and tell them to memorize their respective numbers in their lines. The instructor says, “Tomato! Number Five!” Then the children whose number is five in each row will compete for touching the card that was called out. They must listen carefully so that they can touch the correct cards on the blackboard. The instructor mixes singular

and plural from time to time. The aim of this game is to be able to listen and understand the plural markers such as [-z], [-s] or [-iz].

The Sixth Lesson: The structure target is “What + noun + do + you + like? i.e., *What fruit do you like?*” This lesson is designed as a review of the structures taught in Lessons 4 and 5. The questions are “What fruit do you like?” and “What animal do you like?” In answering these questions, the learners must use the plural forms of countable nouns, such as “I like apples” or “I like dogs.” Even college students make mistakes such as “I like *an apple* better than *an orange*.” One of the games can be the “Interview Game.” Each learner is given an interview sheet on which the names of fruit and animals are written. The learners ask each other, “What fruit do you like?” or “What animal do you like?” As a simpler game, “Musical Chairs” is always successful. Despite the efforts of the instructor, sometimes the learners do not respond orally if they are required to work individually. In this case, “Musical Chairs” does not fail to give them an animated activity, since they ask in unison, “What fruit do you like?” Then the child who missed the seat is to say on his/her own, “I like oranges.” There may be occasions when the instructor’s prompt is necessary. The pluralization of nouns may also require assistance.

The Seventh Lesson: The structure target of this lesson is “Where + is + proper noun? i.e., *Where is China?*” This lesson is also designed to evoke the children’s interest in Social Studies. Elementary school English is meant for integrated studies. This lesson plan is an example where children will become interested in world geography and national flags. In addition to the target word, *where*, a review of Lesson 3 is included. The sentence patterns “What’s this?” and “It’s + (a) + noun” are repeated. The first part of this lesson is to introduce the names of the countries. Let the children locate the countries on the world map, listening and responding to the target sentence “Where + is + proper noun? i. e., *Where is Brazil?*” Next, the instructor shows the flags using the sentence pattern which has

been already introduced, "What's this?" Let the learners guess the names of the countries of the flags. A simple game such as the "Flag Touching Game" is practical for this lesson. The main aim of this game is listening. Using the same game, we can include a review of the previous lesson of color words. Children are formed into five or six lines. First they are assigned numbers. After 10 or 12 flag cards are posted on the blackboard, the instructor says, "It is black, red, and white. Number Three!" Then the children whose number is 3 compete for touching a Korean flag.

The Eighth Lesson: To learn approximately 10 names of countries in English, both in nouns and adjectives, is not easy. Therefore, I will use the same teaching materials in a different sentence structure using different games. The new sentence structure is "Do + you + have + a + adjective + proper noun? i.e., *Do you have a Canadian flag?*" which is an adaptation of "What + noun + do + you + like?" One of the games which is appropriate for learning this sentence structure is the "Collect World Flags" game. Each learner is given three different flag cards at the beginning, such as a Japanese flag, a Chinese flag, and an Australian flag. They walk around the classroom and ask each other "Do you have a Japanese flag?" If the answer is "Yes," they can get the flag card. When they are given a flag card, they say "Thank you." The winners are those who get the most cards in the allotted time. The instructor may ask those who get many flag cards to say aloud the names of the countries of the flags they have collected.

The Ninth Lesson: The target structure is "How many + noun + do + you + have? i.e., *How many apples do you have?*" This lesson includes a review of the previous lessons. I have already introduced the sentence pattern "Do you have + a + noun?" and also the plural forms of countable nouns. Therefore, this lesson is a review, except for the new phrase "how many?" In the introductory part of this lesson, we can review the sentence pattern "What's this?", a repetition of Lesson 3. First, show the

pictures of many kinds of fruit in singular, asking “What’s this?” After all the cards are named and posted on the blackboard, the instructor flashes a card on which is painted a number of tomatoes, for example. Then the instructor asks, “How many tomatoes?” “Now, guess how many tomatoes I have.” We cannot expect a prompt reply, since the children have not yet learned this phrase. We can very well explain the meaning of *how many* in Japanese, but the inductive teaching technique is better in elementary English classes. We had better not say easily, “Ok, *how many* means *ikutsu* in Japanese.”

Rather, let the children guess the meaning of the phrase by context or gestures. There are several games applicable for this teaching target. One of the most successful is the “Card Getting Game.” The preparation for this game is to divide the children into five or six groups, with six or seven members in each. Each group makes a circle, and 25-27 cards (9×6 cm) are placed face up in the middle of each circle. First, the instructor gives a cue, saying “Apple” for example. Then the children ask the instructor in unison, “How many apples do you have?” The instructor answers, “I have seven apples.” The instructor dramatically puts a pause before he/she says the number, while the classroom atmosphere seems to be filled with excitement. Listening to the number, the children compete for finding and getting the card which is called.

Conclusion

I have discussed the most suitable age and the age range to start teaching English in Japanese elementary schools from the following two viewpoints: the acquisition of pronunciation and the learning of syntax. Concerning the former, I have demonstrated the validity of Lenneberg’s (1967) biological research finding that L2 learning can be most successful if started before the learner reaches the critical period, or at the latest

during the critical period. This finding is supported by experimental investigations on the aural perception of English phonemes.

Consequently, the critical issue is the English pronunciation of teachers. At present, there are usually no qualified English teachers in ordinary elementary schools. If children should learn English from teachers whose English pronunciation was not acceptable as the model speech, what would happen? The results are self-evident. Children would learn the Japanized English pronunciation believing it is English. Moreover, their sensitive ear is able to assimilate any speech sound they hear. Once I observed an English class recorded on videotape. It was a fifth-grade class in Kyoto, a class of a research development elementary school. The fifth graders had had three years of English by then, partly from English native speaker teachers and partly from Japanese teachers. The video showed a scene from shopping game. I witnessed an amazing phenomenon in the class. The children were deftly using two kinds of English. When they were speaking with an ALT (native English speaker), they used native English pronunciation, and when they were interacting with a Japanese teacher, they were using a Japanized English pronunciation. This episode shows the 10-year-olds' high learning potential of pronunciation as well as the danger of inadequate pronunciation models. This case is not entirely a disaster, since they have learned a proper English pronunciation through native English speaker teachers even though it seems a waste of their effort to have to learn two kinds of English pronunciation, which is absolutely unnecessary.

What would happen if elementary school children learn English only from Japanese teachers whose pronunciation is uncommunicable and far from being standard? As the learners are before or during the critical period, their acquisition of English sounds can be true to the model pronunciation. I do not insist that our elementary school children must acquire English pronunciation exactly like that of native speakers. My

concern is whether they can learn communicable pronunciation if the model speech given to them happens to be uncommunicable. This issue will be discussed in another paper.

When we teach young learners, we should keep in mind that they have many options in their future career choice. Some of them may choose to become English teachers. In the teacher training course which I teach at Fukuoka Jo Gakuin University, there are quite a few students whose pronunciation is not acceptable as a model speech, and who are trying very hard to re-learn what they have learned under the guidance of the teachers whose English pronunciation was not acceptable. Chino Eiichi, a celebrated Japanese linguist, once said that it is almost impossible to re-learn the wrong pronunciation one has acquired at the initial stage. I strongly feel we should not repeat this mistake, because it will cause a vicious circle.

The next issue is who teaches the elementary school English. It seems that the Ministry of Education and Science expects elementary school teachers to take the responsibility of teaching English. If they have not studied English as their major in university, it is hard to imagine that they can teach English comfortably. It is also very dangerous if the Ministry of Education and Science think elementary school English teaching materials are very basic, meaning that anybody who knows the basics of English can teach. If the Ministry of Education and Science should think so, it must not have realized that the pronunciation feature is the most basic of all the basics.

I had a bitter experience at the age of 13, when English was first introduced to me. Immediately after the end of World War II, there were no qualified English teachers in my school. The teacher who taught my class was a Japanese language teacher. He insisted he would have no problem in teaching beginning English even though his major was not English. But he did not teach us proper English pronunciation. All of the

English sounds were transformed into some similar Japanese sounds. As the Japanese language has far fewer phonemes than the English language, the damage done was not trivial. The six different vowel sounds of English such as [æ] [ə] [ɚ] [ʌ] [a] [ɑ] were converged in one simple Japanese vowel, that is, [a] sound. It was very difficult for me to re-learn English pronunciation at the age of 26, long after I had passed the critical period. Yet, my re-learning process of English pronunciation has helped me to teach those students who have had a poor pronunciation introduction at the initial stage.

The validity of training elementary school teachers so that they are able to teach English seems to be, generally speaking, questionable even though it depends greatly on the individuals. If they have not learned good English while they were in junior and senior high schools, it will be almost impossible to re-learn the acceptable English pronunciation because they have passed the critical period some time ago. On the other hand, elementary school teachers know teaching methodology, child psychology, and how to discipline children in the classroom. Therefore, a better compromise may be to have a team teaching program with ALTs or with someone whose English is standard enough to be a model. Fukuoka Jo Gakuin University students are invited as guest teachers to several elementary schools, and the results of the team teaching are reported to be very successful. To make a scientific investigation on this matter will be another research topic.

Another solution is to have junior high school English teachers teach in elementary schools. They have had a professional training in teaching English, and their students' age range is not very different from that of elementary school children. Moreover, junior high school English teachers will learn a great deal through teaching English to elementary school children. The exchange policy of elementary school teachers and junior high school teachers will bring a great advantage for both of them.

Eventually this will give valuable suggestions concerning how to deal with those children who have had English before they enter junior high schools. It will be the beginning of building a bridge between elementary English and junior high school English. This topic is to be discussed fully in a later paper.

I have also discussed in this paper the issue of syntax learning from the following two viewpoints: the desirable syllabus and the suitable age for learning English syntax. The lesson plan examples I demonstrated in the earlier section have shown how the structural syllabus can be compatible with games. The total physical response learning strategies are mandatory in the elementary school English, because our primary concern should be to make children feel that English is fun. However, if the syllabus is focused solely on games, or if the design of games controls the syllabus, it will fail to teach English: only fun but nothing much else. I maintain that the structure-oriented syllabus using games (TPR) as the actual classroom activities will provide the most successful teaching plans. The suitable age for syntax learning is approximately 12 years old. I can conclude that the most suitable age to begin English is 9 or 10, as a compromise between the two factors of the pronunciation acquisition and syntax learning.

The following episode is an example of a case where a game-oriented curriculum was not effective. It happened in a small city in Fukuoka prefecture. When English was introduced in an elementary school, the parents of a nearby elementary school where English was not taught, thought it was not fair for their children. They worried that their children would be under great disadvantages in junior high school English class, where the children of the other school were given a head start. Strangely enough, after about three months, the parents found out that their worries were needless. Actually there was not much difference between those children who had had two years of English and those who had had no

English. This episode seems to be extremely ironical. There must be something gravely wrong. One explanation must be the failure of the game-oriented curriculum, another must be the improper introduction of pronunciation, and still another can possibly be the wrong teaching policy of the junior high school.

The school which I mentioned above was again chosen by the Ministry of Education and Science as a research development school in April 2001. This time, English was chosen as a research development school subject. Now the children have two or three classes of English a week. I had an opportunity to observe a third-grade class. The students' English was surprisingly spontaneous and they could have a short dialogue in English with a stranger like myself. When these children enter a junior high school, they will have a remarkably advantageous head start.

The difference is due to the curriculum, which is more structurally organized, and also to the time allotted to English. Language learning needs habitualization of new sound patterns and new sentence patterns. It is impossible to expect children to learn them through once-a-week or once-a-month English classes. I would rather like to say that no English might be better than once-a-month English. The spasmodical English classes may give immunity to the learner against English so that he/she will have a lackadaisical attitude when learn English as a compulsory subject in junior high school. My point here is that it is better to start English from the third or fourth grade, and try to arrange the school time table to allow at least twice-a-week English classes.

Teaching English to elementary school children is like a double-edged sword. It must be implemented with a great care. It is not essential to learn some vocabulary items in advance, rather, the crucial issue is whether the teacher is able to plant good seeds so that children will be able to develop desirable English proficiency in later years. These indis-

pensable seeds are the acquisition of proper pronunciation and the awakening to some basic elements of English syntax.

Notes

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