

A Report On Two Teaching Aspects in a Japanese Elementary School

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This report observes two aspects of teaching in Japanese elementary schools. Part 1 will examine the learner as a cultural being. Part 2 will examine the teacher's meta-language. Each part features short headings explaining the report's rationale, with references to background reading.

Key Words: [Error Correction] [Young Learners] [Meta Language] [TEFL]
[Observation]

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List of abbreviations used in the report:

ALT–Assistant Language Teacher

JET Program–The Japan Exchange and Teaching Program

JTA–Japanese Teaching Assistant

STT–Student talk time

TTT–Teacher talk time

Part 1: The Learner as a Cultural Being

This report summarises an observed Japanese elementary school class with “young learners” aged 5-10 years old. This fits Ellis' definition of young learners (2014, p76).

It is common for many English teachers in Japan to teach young children part-time, or in supplementary classes. The author decided that it would be useful to see what a weekly elementary school English class looks like. In an English class in Japan, there is usually a

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mixed cultural element present. On the one hand, the class is largely homogenous. 100% of the students in the observed school are monolingual Japanese speakers. However, for 45 minutes a week, the English class introduces things that are not culturally Japanese.

This report is an observation task examining Ruth Wajnryb's concept of "the learner as a cultural being" (1992, p40-42). Wajnryb's mentions "the inextricable bond between language and culture" (1992, p40). This report will examine several statements that Wajnryb makes, for example: when learning a language, a learner is also learning (about) a culture. The final statement is also something quite relevant to Japan, that being: a positive attitude towards the culture of the target language is a favourable factor in language learning.

Best (Current) practice:

English in Japanese elementary schools was initially taught to 5th and 6th grade students. The students ages are 10-12 years old in these grades. Since 2020 this has been expanded to 3rd and 4th grades. These grades range from 7 years old (Takamitsu, 2020). Standardized English classes featuring Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) have been present in junior high and high schools since at least 1987, when the Japan Teaching and Exchange (JET) Program was founded. Indeed, the author has personally found yearbooks from the junior college where he teaches dating from the 1960s which feature foreign (non-Japanese) teaching staff.

Brief class profile:

This class was held in Oho Elementary School, on Sakurajima Island in Kagoshima, Japan. It is a public school with about 25 students in six grades as of 2022. Due to a population decline in the area, the classes are small and occasionally mixed.

Results of observation:

The English lesson had a Japanese teaching assistant (JTA) present alongside the homeroom teacher. The homeroom teacher teaches the students all of their subjects from Monday to Friday. The class time is 45 minutes. Students didn't seem to focus on the JTA. Rather, they relied on the homeroom teacher's instructions. The students met the class goal of writing their names and where they live.

"My name is X."

"I live in Y village."

The class opened with a short video to 'warm up' the learners. The learners didn't sing along or seem to know the song in the video. The idea was that if there is English present in the room, this will aid their learning. The JTA began by asking in English "are you ready?" and then switching to Japanese. If a student was successful, she would say "good". Aside from the target sentences this was the extent of the spoken English during this class.

Discussion of effectiveness of observation task:

The JTA only comes in once a week, and so doesn't know the students well. This reflects an often similar situation with many ALTs in Japan. This may explain why the students didn't seem to follow her instructions. The teacher has a huge influence on how students respond. If the instructor is not familiar with their learners, this can make learners less comfortable and enthusiastic in class (Hess, 2001, p16). The homeroom teacher also does not speak much English aside from these lessons and was not comfortable speaking it when he had to, relying on the JTA.

There wasn't much English spoken during the class. In addition, the learners didn't seem to have much access to English. Rather, the lesson was quite segmented. First was the video, then the textbook sentences, then practice on the tablets and finally writing the target sentences in the notebooks. The non-native (Japanese homeroom) teacher in this class was not a cultural model of the target language (Wajnryb, 1992, p41). A native presence during an English lesson perhaps would be more advantageous (Cohen, 1975).

Regarding culture, the opening song would have been a good opportunity to get students familiar with a culture different to their own. However, the students weren't engaged with this part of the class, and spent more class time using their tablets and writing. The tablets had an auto-correct function. Some students took advantage of this and used it to correct sentence errors. They are broadly familiar with how the sentence should sound and can read the English alphabet. This signals that spelling uptake may not be taking place, as they often didn't notice errors themselves. They responded well when errors were pointed out to them. This is in keeping with prompts being effective for young learners (Lyster et al., 2013, p20), and younger learner's sensitivity to correction (Hattie and Timperley, 2007, p97, Lyster et al., 2013, p27, 30). Students took great care when writing in the textbook, with minimal errors and generally neat writing.

Possible further research:

This class emphasized how important teacher-training in the target language is. If this is not available, a native speaking teacher could assist with English classes. Many researchers have emphasized the need for intervention, including teacher scaffolding, for young learners who would otherwise have difficulty with linguistic features in classroom input (Lyster et al., 2013, p26, 28). This research needs to be further applied to public elementary schools in Japan.

Part 2: The Teacher's Meta-Language

This section of the report observed the teacher's meta-language in an all-English class of Japanese young learners aged 6 years old. While 'meta-language' can mean different things,

here it is used to mean teacher talk which is not related to the language being presented in class. This teacher talk includes explanations, responses to questions, instructions, praise, and correction. To summarise, it is the language of organising the classroom (Wajnryb, 1992, p43). Since this class was held entirely using English, there should be plenty of opportunities to look at meta-language.

Young learners respond well to task-based classes with a lot of content variety (Parrott 1993, p122, 255). This class featured different activities which were task-based, and so largely met this. The time spent on each activity was relatively short – not more than ten minutes per session.

This observation task monitored the teacher’s classroom language. It focused on the immediate context of the language and considered how the same meaning might be delivered to a native speaker (Wajnryb, 1992, p44). Many native teachers are in an environment where they aim to reduce teacher talking time (TTT) and encourage student talking time (STT). How can this be applied to young learners who require more instruction, or don’t have enough lexis to speak?

Brief class profile:

This class was held in Misuzu International School, in Kumamoto, Japan. It is a private international school with up to 10-20 students per grade. It is an international school, which caters for Japanese children of foreign parents, or Japanese children whose parents wish for them to have an English-based education. Their teacher is Tino, an American man who, while fluent in Japanese, conducts his classes in English. He is also the head of the school. The class time is 45 minutes. Tino posts his lesson tasks and homework on YouTube, under the name “Eigo Papa” and occasionally does teacher training in Japan. The author observed this class using Skype, on February 8th, 2022. While the audio can be unclear at times, the recorded class is available upon request.

Results of observation:

Much of this discussion answers the ‘after the lesson’ questions posed by Wajnryb (1992, p44, 45). Considering the communicative purpose of the various teacher utterances, as can be seen from the data, the communication was all purposeful. The students seemed to understand nearly everything that Tino said to them. The class flowed smoothly and while structured, the utterances were natural and conversation-like. In fact, one of the aspects of this observation task was considering how the meta-language’s meaning might be delivered to a native speaker. It became very apparent that that didn’t necessarily apply to this class. Tino’s words were not too simplified, but they were clear. He would often re-word questions for clarification, and he never used Japanese keywords, which is a strategy that native teachers often use. This is presumably because students often get intimidated or

become anxious when a native speaker communicates with them due to the presumed great difference in language ability. This may be heightened with children, who have even less lexis generally than adult learners (Adams, 2018, p7).

Looking at the chunks of teacher language that was scripted, the meta-language was not 'formal'. In fact, Tino spoke to the students using casual American English, using phrases and idioms like 'huh', 'gonna' and more. Again, the meta-language was not adjusted downwards noticeably.

Patterns were not noticeably evident, but Tino did concept check instructions regularly, using expressions like "got it?", "what's this?" and there was a lot of repetition of certain questions. Much like the conversations that arose during the class, the teachers' utterances generally occurred as situations happened. There were no specific chunks that were observed that could become 'pattern drills'. However, this class demonstrated that while the young learners here were enthusiastic and seemed to understand Tino, concept checking instructions are important.

Tino signaled what the next activity would be by telling the students directly and by using the whiteboard. While this was not clear during the class, and with subsequent conversations with Tino, it seems that the students have done these type of activities before. Tino said that the content is different for every class, but often follows previous class topics. For example, there was conversation about *onigiri* (Japanese rice balls) in this class. Last week students happened to mention that they like them, and so Tino created writing to expand on this for the observed class. When students know the class structure, this can greatly aid context, even if the content is different each day.

Possible further research:

This was an extremely successful class overall. It would be interesting to compare other teachers of young learners who simplify their language compared to those who encourage natural "authentic" speech. This could also extend to gathering data on the effectiveness of teachers who use native language keywords to explain more complicated target language items (Widdowson, 1990, p67). For instance, foreign teachers in Japan often use Japanese keywords and this does tend to relax students somewhat. A possible research topic could be to see how effective this actually is – whether it is a false sense of reassurance or whether a sole English approach would encourage learners to work harder. The distinction between younger and older learners is also important regarding this (Rixon 1999: v).

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