

Reaching Young Learners of English: Richly Contexted Communication in a Japanese Elementary School Classroom

Stan PEDERSON

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Abstract

Japanese elementary school teachers are tasked with teaching the newly implemented English Activity classes “experientially,” necessitating a considerable amount of communication in English. Given the generally low level of English proficiency, the question arises as to how teachers are using English and how they are managing to get their messages across. This study investigated the use of English in a class conducted by a Japanese classroom teacher and an ALT. It was found that the classroom teacher used English primarily for management purposes, with solicits and reactions dominating communicative moves. Results show that messages in English, from either teacher, were most often clarified with the addition of an additional medium, usually gestures.

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Project leader: Miyako Kobayashi

Introduction

In Japan, English became part of the elementary school curriculum for grades five and six in 2011 as English Activity. The goals of English Activity encompass three broad areas: deepening understanding of foreign language and culture experientially; fostering a willingness to communicate, and; developing a familiarity with the fundamental sounds, words, and expressions of English as a foundation for communicative ability (MEXT 2009). The teachers in charge of these classes are regular elementary school teachers who, with rare exceptions, are not trained in EFL teaching methodology. According to Goto-Butler (2004) teachers themselves perceive a wide gap between their own ability and what they believe is required of them in the classroom. More recently, Fennelly and Luxton (2011), in a survey of 147 elementary school teachers, found only 9% were confident in their ability to teach English while 72% felt their ability was not up to the task.

The present study seeks to go beyond perceptions and to describe the real situation in one classroom when teaching English in line with the goals of English Activity. Specifically, in line with the experiential emphasis in the guidelines, it is necessary to expose the children to English in interaction. This requires the teacher to use English in a communicative way, rather than, as is traditionally done, in and through translation and explicit comparison to Japanese. The main question addressed is how teachers, in this case a regular classroom teacher and an ALT, manage to communicate with the children directly in English. While the primary interest is with the classroom teacher, the communicative patterns of the ALT were also analyzed for purposes of comparison and contrast.

One complete lesson was fully transcribed and coded according to the FOCUS system of interaction analysis (Fanslow, 1987) then analyzed by grouping the relevant coded categories with the aid of MS Excel. After obtaining counts and percentages for relevant codes, the data was looked at more closely from a qualitative perspective to get a clearer idea of how English was being used and how meaning was being conveyed.

It was found that the classroom teacher used English primarily for management purposes, with solicits and reactions dominating communicative moves. Results showed that messages in English, from either teacher, were most often clarified with the addition of a second medium, usually gestures. While reactions, and to a lesser extent structuring moves, were common, these demanded relatively low ability in English. In contrast, solicits were more elaborate and required more detailed semantic explication to make the meaning clear. Implications for teacher training and directions

for further research are given at the end of the paper.

Literature review

It is widely recognized under sociocultural learning theory that classroom interaction is central to learning. According to Walsh (2011) teaching is “as much about the decisions teachers take while they teach as it is about the planning that goes on before teaching” (loc. 2062-68). Many systems have been devised to analyze classroom interaction. One such system, FOCUS (Fanslow 1987), is what Walsh (2011) referred to as a system based approach, meaning it is characterized by “fixed categories that have been pre-determined by extensive trialling [sic] in different classroom contexts” (loc. 3081-88). It is designed to describe, as opposed to evaluate communication. Many other systems, such as the Flanders Interaction Analysis Categories (FIAC) with categories including: accepts feelings and criticizes or uses authority, have an evaluative, or judgmental bent. FOCUS attempts to get away from such evaluation. According to Fanslow (1987) “Using a coding system—a set of operationally defined descriptive terms—to describe communication, in place of general words that imply judgments, can provide distance from what we do to help us see differently” (p. 9). Not only does description free teachers from some of the defensive reactions to evaluation, it can also allow them to grasp some teaching behaviors that may be unconscious or that, due to processing constraints, are out of awareness. Lazaraton and Ishihara (2005), for example, demonstrated the effectiveness of description, that of a discourse analyst, combined with the focused reflections of a classroom teacher in developing insights into what is mostly unconscious, non-verbal teaching behavior. They write: “This understanding gained through collaboration and reflection stimulated and finally enabled T to analyze and articulate her beliefs about nonverbal behavior in L2 teaching” (p. 537).

Since FOCUS describes interaction, and not teaching behaviors specifically, it can be used flexibly to explore a variety of questions. It addresses two broad questions: What is being done? and; How is it being done? Regarding what is being done, we code for two things: the source and target of the message, and the move type. The move type reflects the earlier work of Bellack, Kliebard, Hyman, and Smith (1966) with the four moves: solicit, respond, react, and structure as well as the later Initiation, Response, Feedback (IRF) classification of Sinclair and Coulthard (1975). Under the broad scope of how something is being done, we have the medium, comprising: linguistic, non-linguistic, paralinguistic, and silence. This is augmented by two additional categories: use and content.

Since the system is descriptive, it need not be used in its entirety. Those elements of the description that can inform a question under consideration are sufficient. Likewise, subcategories showing finer detail can be inserted as needed. In this study, the question of English versus Japanese use, for example, was of central concern, so this subcategory was inserted into the broader category of medium to give a finer-grained, more relevant description.

Research questions

The following research questions were addressed:

- RQ1: How do teachers get the meaning of English across in the classroom?
- RQ2: How did language use differ between the classroom teacher and the ALT?
- RQ3: How often did each teacher use English?
- RQ4: For what purposes did the classroom teacher use English?

Method

One complete 45-minute lesson was videotaped. In order to get a clear audio record, a remote microphone was affixed to the classroom teacher and the camera adjusted to record the audio from only this microphone. Data was

then uploaded to a computer. Two research assistants transcribed all audible speech along with gestures and other information relevant to communication from the classroom teacher, and the ALT. They also recorded such information regarding students, when available, when they were responding to, or addressing one or other of the teachers.

Research assistants received training in the FOCUS system before beginning transcription and coding. Further training and consultation took place during coding. Coding was reviewed with the main researcher to assure consistency. Instances of disagreement or confusion were discussed and resolved, with coding decisions recorded for future reference. Coding was for source/target, move type, medium (with a sub-code for language) and mode: audio, visual, and haptic.

Excel filtering was used to assemble codes of interest, which were then subjected to more detailed analysis. In one case, another layer of coding was added, to further clarify how English was being used by the classroom teacher. Counts and percentages for relevant categories were calculated, then messages within categories were analyzed qualitatively.

Numerical results

Data was arranged by source, with all communication from the Japanese classroom teacher and from the native English-speaking teacher (ALT) separated for further sorting into: use of either English or Japanese alone, using the two languages together, and using language in combination with another medium, either paralinguistic (including facial expression, voice qualities and gestures), or non-linguistic (including reference to pictures or objects).

First of all, there was not a large difference in the number of messages delivered by each teacher: of 546 messages, the ALT delivered 56 percent while the classroom teacher delivered 44 percent. However, there was a substantial difference in the ratio of English to Japanese used by each teacher. English dominated language use by the ALT at 95 percent (see Table 1), while the classroom teacher used each language in about equal portions.

Table 1

*Language Use: by Teacher and Language**

	<u>Eng.</u>	<u>Jpn.</u>
ALT	95%	5%
T	53%	47%

*N=546

The classroom teacher used the language medium exclusively in 148 messages while the ALT used language alone just 75 times. Both teachers used the single medium most often for English (Table 2). The classroom teacher used English 48 percent of the time and Japanese 40 percent of the time with the remaining 12 percent accounted for by using both languages, either mixing them to make a message, or repeating part or all of a message. The ALT used English 89 percent of the time when using language by itself, and used the languages together just 4 percent of the time.

Table 2

*Linguistic Medium Used Alone**

	<u>Eng. only</u>	<u>Jpn. only</u>	<u>Eng. w. jpn.</u>
ALT	89%	7%	4%
T	48%	40%	12%

*N=223

The ALT used dual media, that is, language plus either paralinguistic or non-linguistic support to convey meaning 77 percent of the time overall. The classroom teacher used dual media 51% of the time.

Table 3 shows dual media use by language. When the ALT used English, he paired this with another medium 93 percent of the time. He used a second medium less often with Japanese for 67 percent. The classroom teacher used an additional medium evenly across languages, with English at 44 percent and Japanese at 47 percent.

Table 3

Dual Media as proportion of all use in each language

	<u>Eng</u>	<u>Jpn</u>
ALT	93%	67%
T	44%	47%

Qualitative results

As mentioned above, when he used English, the ALT added another medium 93 percent of the time to clarify meaning. But how was this second medium actually used? We find an extended example of dual media use in what is referred to as a "short story", in which the ALT relates an anecdote completely in English. See Table 4.

Table 4

The ALT's Short Story with Paralinguistic Support

<u>Language and support</u>
1 short story (holds up thumb and forefinger to show distance)
2 please listen (cups an ear)
3 okay (rising intonation) (thumbs up)
4 I like (points at himself)
5 aaaall food (points at pictures of foods while drawing a circle in the air)
6 I like all food (holds all fingers up with palms up)
7 but (forefinger up)
8 ten years ago (holds up ten fingers)
9 I had a home stay (makes peak and square to show the house)
10 in Kumamoto City (points at the floor)
11 my home stay father said (points at himself) (points at the pictures of food) Arthur, what food do you like (waves arms in the air and speaks in deep father's voice)
12 I said (points at himself with his thumb)
13 Ummmn (crossed his arms and stroking his beard)
14 I like chicken (holds up one thumb) and fish (adds forefinger) and beef (adds middle finger) and pork (adds ring finger) (thoughtful face)
15 he said (points towards side)
16 you like all meat (extends his arms widely with palms up in deep father's voice)
17 I said (points at himself)
18 yes, I like all meats (points at himself and nods)
19 But (points at himself) I like salad too (extends his arms widely with palms up)
20 I like capsicum (crooks little finger with thumb crooked and palms up) and cucumber (crooks ring finger) and lettuce (crooks middle finger) and tomato (crooks forefinger) and onion (crooks thumb of other hand, palm down)

- 21 I like salad
 22 I said (points at himself) to my homestay mother, (holds out his hand as if home stay mother stood by him)
 23 what food do you like (points at himself and points at a whiteboard)
 24 she said (points at himself)
 25 I like Udon noodles and miso soup (describes chopsticks and a bowl with his hands)
 26 I said (points at someone as if host mother stood by him) very healthy (holds up his thumb)
 27 do you like meat (holds out his hand with palms up as if host mother stood by him)
 28 she said (shakes his fore finger and middle finger)
 29 no (waves his hand)
 30 I like fish (points at his chest with his thumbs)
 31 so (points at something), next (points at a whiteboard)
 32 my homestay family (describes a house with his hands), their son (palm down to show the height of the son),
 he was twelve years old (nods)
 33 he said to me (points at himself), Arthur-san, what sports do you like (in the son's voice)
 34 I said (points at himself) I like rugby (holds up his thumb) and tennis (adds his forefinger), and swimming
 (describes circles to show the act of crawl)
 35 he said, oooooh, (points at himself with his thumb) I like swimming too (points at himself with his thumb)
 36 now (points at the floor with his forefinger) that homestay boy (points at someone as if the boy stood by him
 and puts down his finger) is swimming champion (moves arms in circles to show the act of crawl)
 37 it's great (holds up his thumbs)
 38 but (holds up his forefinger) I can't say his name, it's secret (holds up his forefinger in front of his mouth)
 39 okay, thank you (bows with his hands on his knees)
-

We can see him using gestures, deixis, and changes in voice to elucidate the meaning of his words. Furthermore, he uses the additional media for three different purposes: to explicate meanings, to specify meanings of ambiguous words according to function, and to help students follow the flow of discourse.

In moves one and two, the ALT uses gestures to illustrate the meaning of *short* and *listen*. He illustrates *short* with a small space between thumb and forefinger, and *listen* by cupping his ear. Moves 9 and 32 provide vivid examples where he draws the shape of a house, a peak then a square below to describe the home in *homestay*. The use of gesture in this way is evident throughout the story in moves 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 29, 32, 34, 37 and 38.

Techniques other than gestures were also utilized for semantic explication. In move five, he points at pictures of food (deixis) and moves his finger in a circle encompassing the food flashcards on the whiteboard to indicate *all*. In addition, he adds within-stimulus vocal support by extending the duration of *all* to illustrate its meaning in yet another way.

Another interesting use of gesture is seen in moves 2 and 39 where the meaning of an ambiguous word is specified by function. In move two, he says "okay" with a thumbs up sign, meaning he is asking for approval to proceed, but in move 39 he says "okay thank you" with a bow, showing that *okay* functions here as a structuring move, closing an event. Without the bow, it is hard to tell if he is making an evaluative comment (That was fine.), doing a comprehension check (Did you understand?), begging permission to close (Shall we stop here?), or closing the event (That's all.).

Furthermore, he also uses other media support for purposes other than explicating meaning. In move four, for example, he uses gesture to designate which of the speakers is addressing the audience. I will call this discursive support. This is found in moves: 11, 12, 15, 16, 17, 18, 22, 24, 26, 27, 33, 34, 35, and 36. Students often have difficulty following multiple characters in stories, so he helps them keep track in two ways. One is by using a sort of deixis, where he points beside himself to designate a new speaker, or at his chest to indicate himself as the main speaker. The second way is by giving a within-stimulus clue; he changes his voice to match the character, as in move 11 (father's voice) and move 33 (son's voice).

As noted in the numerical results, the classroom teacher used a second medium 44 percent of the time when using English and 47 percent when using Japanese. First of all, let's sample some of his dual media use when using Japanese. In each example in Table 5, the classroom teacher is managing the class, not delivering content. In example one, he raises his hand to his ear to indicate the act of listening. In example 2 he brings his hands together in a square to indicate that students should get together. In example 3 he uses deixis to indicate the objects on the white board when he instructs students that they may use other words as suited to what they want to express. In the same message he holds his hand in front of himself when he asks them to say what they really want to say. The hand is thought to indicate, metaphorically, what you feel in your heart.

Table 5

Examples of the classroom teacher using a medium in addition to Japanese

Japanese with support

- 1 *donna kotoba ga kikoetekimashita ka* [What words were you able to hear] (raises his hand to his ear)
- 2 *chikaku no hito to zutto hasnashimasho* [Have a long discussion with someone near you] (makes square with his hands, twice)
- 3 *koko ni naino demo ii node* [You can use things aside from these] (draws a circle with finger over the whiteboard) *,ee jibun no omoitsuitano wo itte kudasai* [say what you really want to say] (moves his hand in front of himself)

In the case of English, there were 56 instances of the classroom teacher using a second medium. A closer look reveals that most of these, 43 instances, were related to classroom management. Table 6 gives some representative examples.

Table 6

Examples of Dual Media Use with English: Classroom Teacher

	<u>Communication</u>	<u>Source/Target</u>	<u>Move type</u>
1	okay, good job, good job (claps his hands)	T*, S4	REA
2	face each other (makes some distance with his hands), practice three times (shows his forefinger, middle finger, and ring finger), and sit down (palms down)	T, SC**	SOL
3	let's review last week's English (chops his hand)	T, SC	STR

* Student 4

** Whole class

In example one, the teacher gave a reaction to an individual student backed up with a physical clap of the hands. He engages in a total of 15 reactions to individuals and two additional reactions of the same type aimed at the whole class.

Example two is the most extended instance of a solicit accompanied by support of another medium. Here, he is speaking to the whole class, as he is in all but 2 of 17 instances. He issues three separate instructions, each with a clarifying gesture.

The third most common move was structuring, in which the teacher says something about beginnings and ends of activities: setting up what we are going to do, or looking back at what we have done. Example three is a typical situation, introducing an end of lesson summary, and is accompanied by a typical gesture. He chops with his hand, metaphorically separating this new activity from the previous one. There are seven such instances in all.

Discussion and conclusions

First of all, results showed that the two teachers delivered a similar number of messages, 56 percent to 44 percent in favor of the ALT. This shows neither teacher dominating. Yet further analysis revealed that the classroom teacher used English primarily for classroom coordination and management, indicating more of a leadership role.

In terms of the language used, the ALT used English almost all the time while the classroom teacher used English about half the time. Further breaking down English use by the classroom teacher, it was found that he used English for solicits, 17 times, reactions, 15 times, and structuring moves, seven times. While the solicits were sometimes elaborate, reactions and structuring moves tended to be short and of a general nature. Structuring moves, for example, often use formulaic language, such as "Right. Let's begin", in which case a gesture may be unnecessary. But in many other cases, the meaning may be unclear, as in "Okay", "Right", or "So", in which case a gesture, such as a hand chop, clarifies the function of the word. While structuring moves can be an extended turn, no such examples were found in this lesson. Likewise, reactions can include detailed feedback or explanations but again, no examples were found expressing anything beyond non-specific praise. Therefore, at least in this lesson, reactions and structuring moves posed no great challenges to the classroom teacher's English ability. Only giving instructions (solicits) required close attention to meaning necessitating the creative use of additional means to get the message across.

Messages in English, from either teacher, were most often clarified with the addition of the paralinguistic medium, usually gestures. One use of gestures was to draw pictures in the air, as the ALT did when drawing the outline of a house to elucidate *homestay*. Another use was to show actions that were requested as in cupping the ear to illustrate the word *listen*, or in raising a hand when asking for volunteers. Gestures were also used discursively, to indicate a change in speaker within a story. The non-linguistic medium was also engaged by referring to pictures.

The classroom teacher also used other media support to supplement Japanese, passing his hand in front of him (over his heart), for example, when asking students to express their true thoughts. The example is not unique. Results showed him to use a second medium with Japanese about as often as with English: 47 percent to 44 percent. This may indicate a general tendency, when teaching, to augment spoken language with another medium, in which case it might be hypothesized that he transferred the behavior to English teaching, rather than having created new behavior to meet the demands of English teaching.

If this class represents a more general tendency among elementary school teachers, one might suggest that teacher training concentrate on improving ability to deliver soliciting moves for classroom management purposes. It might further be suggested that, if successful communication strategies are already being used to clarify instruction in Japanese, that the training emphasis for in-service teachers be placed on exchange of knowledge among teachers and transfer of successful behaviors to the English teaching situation.

However, further research is needed to identify whether the patterns in this lesson are applicable to other teachers and teaching situations. In particular, research should be conducted as to the patterns of communication and English use of classroom teachers teaching alone.

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