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ENGLISH in Elementary Schools

Tom Merner interviews Makoto So, researcher and trainer for the Ministry of Education specializing in Elementary School English Activities

Tom Merner: *It has been reported that English has been included in the elementary school curriculum. Has English been added as a subject or is it more like an extracurricular activity?*

Makoto So: The Elementary School Course of Study was revised and implemented in April, 2002 and a new class period called *Sogotekina Gakushu no Jikan (Sogo)* was established. In order to fill this slot, which is allotted three class hours a week, schools can choose from options such as international understanding, information technology, environmental studies, health, and welfare according to their own goals. The aims of the

Sogo options are to encourage children to involve themselves actively in learning, to develop their problem solving skills, and also to get them to think about their own way of life.

English in elementary school, in its current state called 'English Activities' (EA), is not a formal subject but is placed within the framework of *Sogo* and falls under the theme of international understanding. As a result, elementary schools are not required to offer EA — it is one option among many.

Individual schools and districts can plan their schedules according to their local circumstances. According to a survey conducted by the Ministry of Education among all elementary

schools in Japan, 88.3% of schools conducted EA during the 2003 school year (it must be noted that these schools included a wide range of schools from those that conducted EA once in the school year to those that had lessons twice a week). For grades 3 to 6, 90% of these schools conducted EA within the allotted time for *Sogo*. For grades 1 and 2, which do not have the *Sogo* period in their curriculum, 43% scheduled EA in time allotted for special activities, such as homeroom and club activities, and the remaining 57% of schools placed EA in extracurricular hours.

TM: *What is the aim/goal of elementary school English? Isn't it to develop children's English conversational competence?*

MS: When EA is part of the educational program at a normal public elementary school, the school is required to follow the guidelines stated in *Shogakko Gakushu Shidou Youryo* (Elementary School Course of Study—only available in Japanese [1998]) and *Shogakko Eigo Katsudo Jissen no Tebiki* (Practical Handbook for Elementary School English Activities—bilingual publication [2001]), both issued by the Ministry of Education.

The *Course of Study* states that 'when foreign language conversation activities are conducted within international understanding, experiential learning appropriate for the elementary school level, with aims such as exposing children to foreign languages and familiarizing them with foreign living customs and cultures should be provided, according to the circumstances of each school.'

In addition, the *Handbook* states that '...international understanding is not limited to the notion of students becoming familiar with other cultures, but also includes allowing students to better understand their own culture by understanding other cultures.' Furthermore, 'English Activities amount to experiences that expose students to other cultures and as a media for promoting contact with people from other countries or contact with other cultures, they encourage a desire to use English. Their primary purpose is to foster interest and desire—not to teach a language.'

As these statements suggest, the goals of EA are not limited to English acquisition but are also to develop the students' willingness to involve themselves with others (interest, curiosity, and a positive attitude towards communica-

tion) and to discover differences and similarities between their own culture and other cultures, and to nurture an attitude of acceptance and respect for other people and cultures. Of course, children will be exposed to English, and it is likely that they will develop some basic skills such as being able to listen to and understand easy English and to respond. However, this should not be the main objective and lessons where children are expected to learn English by repeating words and sentences should be avoided.

TM: *Is there a national curriculum for EA? Are textbooks available? How are the curriculum and lesson plans being prepared?*

MS: Within the framework of the aims described above, each school can set its own goals for the *Sogo* period. The curriculum is then designed in accordance with these decisions made at the local level. As a result, a unified national curriculum does not exist for EA. Each school must design its curriculum to fulfil its own goals and to enable children to reach the goals set for *Sogo*.

However, EA is a totally new field for elementary school teachers and it is no easy task for them to design original curricula on their own. It is probably necessary for many schools to refer to the Practical Examples section of the Handbook or to access EA related websites such as the NHK Eigorian website (<http://www.nhk.or.jp/eigorian/>) (Japanese only). Schools need to test the many ideas they come up with in their lesson plans in the classroom, and refine their curricula from year to year based on experience. It must be noted that it is important for the curriculum and lesson plans to be prepared according to the goals of EA set by the school rather than lessons being conducted at random with no guiding principles.

TM: *According to the MEXT guidelines, homeroom teachers (HRTs) are supposed to play the main role in conducting EA classes in elementary school. Is it all right to leave EA in the hands of HRTs, many of whom cannot speak English or have little or no experience of teaching English?*

MS: Since the main goal of EA in elementary school is not to develop children's language skills, but to nurture their



interest in a foreign language and their desire to communicate and to expose them to foreign cultures, it follows that those in charge need not be specialists in English. Needless to say, it would be an advantage if teachers had knowledge of phonology or experience in teaching a foreign language, but these are not necessities.

If a foreign guest such as an assistant language teacher (ALT) were to visit an elementary school classroom, and the HRT was able to communicate with this guest in fluent English, the children would probably be surprised and might admire their teacher. However, it is possible that the children would think that they could not become friendly with a foreigner unless they spoke English well.

On the other hand, if the HRT were to try to communicate with the limited English he or she had using gestures and other methods, children might see more possibility of being able to communicate in English themselves. In other words, it is important for the HRT to be a model for communication rather than a model English speaker.

In the context of EA in elementary schools, if a choice has to be made between an elementary school teaching license or an English teaching license, an elementary school teaching license is more useful. It is not a good idea to leave the lessons in the hands of an English teacher with no experience of teaching elementary school children.

One advantage elementary school teachers have is their ability to incorporate arts and crafts, cooking, and elements taken from other content areas such as math, science, and social studies into EA rather than simply teaching with games and songs.

TM: *It is also stated in the guidelines that reading and writing skills should not be taught in elementary school English classes. Would it not be more effective to balance the four skills in the instruction?*

MS: As I said before, language acquisition is not the main aim, although it is natural that the children will acquire some language as a result of their participation in activities dealing with foreign language communication. However, if the four skills (reading, writing, speaking, and listening) were included simultaneously, it would increase the pressure on the children. When I was a junior high school teacher I was able to observe the effect of this first-hand—a large number of first year students appeared to start to dislike English at this point. Just as children learn their mother tongue by first listening, then speaking, reading and writing in that order, EA at the elementary school level should be centered around aural/oral skills.

Moreover, it is natural that listening should take priority over speaking. There is so much emphasis put on children speaking out, and as a result the question of input tends to be overlooked. It is important to realise that when children are able to listen to instructions or questions and follow or answer them, these are situations where communication has been successful.

TM: *Are elementary school teachers receiving teacher training for EA?*

MS: Elementary School English Activities Training

Seminars, co-hosted by the Ministry of Education and the National Center for Teacher Development, started in 2001 and since then 600 to 800 elementary school and junior high school teachers have taken part each year. The seminar takes place over 5 days and sessions include EA workshops, where small groups of 20 teachers can take part in mock teaching situations. From this year the same seminar will be held in 10 different areas across the country with approximately 600 teachers participating in each area.

There are also training seminars provided at the prefectural and city levels, hosted by local education boards and educational centers. The length and contents of such seminars vary. In addition, there are many training seminars held by private organizations. However, many of these private seminars do not follow the aims of EA discussed above, and participants need to use their own judgement.

However, the number of hours of training provided for elementary teachers in Japan is much less than the 120 hours of training that was provided for elementary school teachers in Korea when English was first implemented in all elementary schools.

TM: *What are the roles of native speaking teachers such as ALTs and other guest teachers (GTs) visiting from outside the schools?*

MS: Since the main aims for EA in elementary school are to nurture the children's desire to communicate and to develop their understanding of different cultures, GTs have two roles with regard to communication and foreign culture.

Where communication is concerned, the GT's first and foremost role is as a model user of English. GTs are expected to speak to the children and expose them to fluent English. Since it is still difficult for children to fully understand what the teacher is saying, it is important to provide support with gestures, flashcards, realia, and so on.

In some cases, the GT's participation in lessons leads to children mechanically practicing English words or sentences. We must remember that GTs are not present in the classroom to replace tape recorders. It is expected that they take part in lessons to provide children with meaningful communication and to interact with the HRT in English and act as a model of communication. This also means that ALTs and other GTs do not necessarily have to be from an English speaking country. As long as the person has communicative competence in English and is an attractive person as a human being, the teacher can be from a country where English is spoken as a second or foreign language.

The GT's role with regard to culture is also very important. Children are normally not interested in the culture of a particular country from the beginning. They first become interested in the *person* who brings the foreign culture into the classroom, and then feel that they want to know more about that person's cultural background. Therefore, an ALT/GT should not be in the classroom simply as a fluent English speaker, but also as a person who brings in and

introduces the culture of a certain country. Although a single teacher may only be able to introduce one culture to the children, the interest and curiosity nurtured in the children can later be expanded to other cultures.

TM: *Do you have any advice for teachers going around several schools to conduct English Activities about how to build a better relationship with the teachers at each of the schools?*

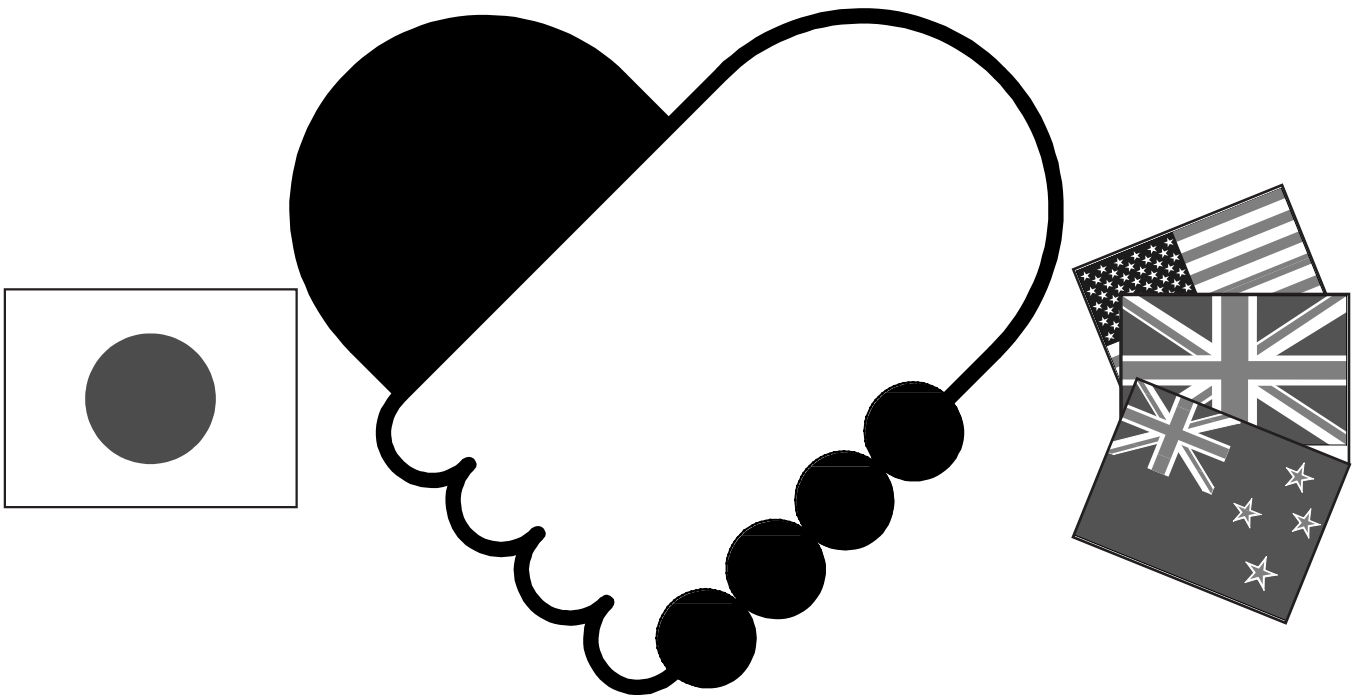
MS: 'Elementary school teachers suddenly start working hard when ALTs come into the teachers' room.' This is a joke I once heard from someone. It is a cynical description of how elementary school teachers suddenly act like they are busy to avoid being talked to by ALTs coming into the teachers' room.

This is probably an extreme case, but many elementary school teachers feel insecure about their English competence saying they cannot speak English or cannot talk with foreigners. Elementary school teachers may not be specialists in teaching English, but they have all had at least 8 years of English from junior high school to college, and can often manage to communicate in English once they get used to doing so. They often try to avoid speaking because they are worried about making grammatical mistakes or about not being able to speak fluently. If ALTs can understand the feelings of these teachers and try to be friendly with them, it would be a step towards improved communication between them. If time and budgets allow, it might be a good idea to try and have informal gatherings such as parties. If ALTs could try to use whatever Japanese they have to talk with the teachers, I am sure this would reduce the load on both sides and improve mutual understanding.

TM: *English is already being taught as a subject in Korea and China. Is Japan heading in the same direction? Will English become a formal subject at the elementary school level in the near future?*

MS: In Korea, English was implemented as a once a week subject in the 3rd grade in 1997, and has since been extended into the higher grades with 5th and 6th graders currently having English lessons twice a week. In Taiwan, 5th and 6th graders have English lessons twice a week, and 3rd graders started having English lessons from this school year. In China, 3rd graders and above have 20-minute English lessons four times a week, and 5th and 6th graders have an additional two 40-minute lessons a week.

In each of these countries, clear targets for all four skills have been set and English is a formal subject in the elementary school curriculum. Opinions are divided about the results such measures are bringing about. For example, competition in English education has intensified in Korea and has led to fierce rivalry among cram schools and English conversation schools. There have also been news reports of Korean parents so keen for their children to acquire good



English pronunciation that they have had their children's tongues cut to improve their L and R pronunciation.

In Taiwan, there is a policy stating that early childhood education should promote the development of the whole child and education must not place inappropriate importance on English education. (*Kurashi-Kyoiku/Ikuji* column, Saga Shinbun, 2004). It has been reported that this policy has led to the government prohibiting kindergartens from advertising English or bilingual education, employing foreign instructors, or making English a subject.

Japan has not yet made English a formal subject at the elementary school level, and is in a position to evaluate the programs of these countries moving ahead of Japan. It is important to assess the merits and demerits of early English education carefully.

Tomita (2001) warns that elementary school English education in Korea is fueled by competitive principles based on national interests. In other words, the aim of English education there is to educate citizens to be competent in English in order to allow the nation to survive in international competition. On a personal level, this promotes competitive ideas such as 'those who can speak English can succeed in life/become wealthy, but those who cannot will not succeed/will not become wealthy' or 'it is cool to be able to speak English, and embarrassing not to be able to.' Tomita argues that elementary school English education should have mutualistic principles based on internationalism. This means that English education should allow children to experience becoming friends with people from around the world and notice that English is useful for this, and to nurture qualities in children that will help them to live together with others.

Further research into lessons conducted in Japan and more discussion is necessary in order to decide which course Japan should take in the future.

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Tom Merner

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