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English in “Sogo”: What's it all about?

by Tom Merner

It has been widely reported that English instruction has been introduced in Japanese public elementary schools. However, due to the manner in which this has been reported and the fact that schools have included English in their curriculum in a variety of different ways, there still seems to be a misunderstanding or lack of understanding of the position of English in public elementary schools. This article will outline the position of English in the Japanese public elementary school curriculum and also introduce what can be considered the guidelines provided by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT).

The implementation of “Sogotekina Gakushu no Jikan” and English as an option

A new timeslot called *Sogotekina*

Gakushu no Jikan (Period for Integrated Studies [*Sogo*]) was implemented in elementary schools at the beginning of the new school year in April, 2002. Third to sixth graders have been provided with three class hours per week for this timeslot and schools are free to choose from four options (Communication/computers, Environment, Health and Welfare, and International Understanding) to fill this timeslot. English activities (EA)—note, not lessons—are an option falling under the International Understanding option.

What must be clearly understood is that unlike Korea, Taiwan, and many other countries that have recently introduced English in elementary schools, Japan has not yet introduced English as a formal school subject at elementary school level. Ministry-approved textbooks are used for formal school subjects, such as mathematics and social

studies. This means that the content of such subjects is clearly stipulated by MEXT and evaluation and grading is conducted according to set guidelines. In contrast to this, the design of each school's EA program is left to the schools and teachers in charge, and grading based on the children's achievement is not conducted. However, since EA comes under *Sogo*, the aims and procedures must fall within the aims of *Sogo* set out by MEXT. In addition, the 'Practical Handbook for Elementary School English Activities' (*Shogakko Eigokatsudo Jissen no Tebiki*, MEXT, 2001) provides what can be considered guidelines for EA in elementary schools.

The aims of “Sogotekina Gakushu no Jikan”

According to the Elementary School Course of Study (*Shogakkou Gakushu Shido Yoryo*; MEXT, 1998), educational activities within the *Sogo* timeslot are to be cross-curricular, integrated activities based on the children's interests and designed to arouse their curiosity. Two objectives are provided for the *Sogo* timeslot:

- (1) Developing children's ability to think and learn independently and to become actively involved in problem solving.
- (2) Encouraging children to acquire methods of thinking and learning, and nurturing attitudes that will encourage the

students to involve themselves in problem solving and learning activities actively and creatively.

From these aims, it can be understood that the purpose of *Sogo* is to encourage students to become active rather than passive learners by providing lesson content that interests children and stimulates their curiosity. In the case of EA, this means that the content should not simply be language practice activities aimed at children learning or memorizing target language items.

In addition to the aims above, the Course of Study states that the goal of foreign language programs should be to expose children to foreign languages and cultures through experiential learning in order to familiarize them with foreign languages and foreign lifestyles. Again, the content of the English course should provide children with exposure to English in order to nurture the children's interest in English. This is expected to lead to their becoming open-minded towards English and developing a positive attitude towards trying to communicate in English.

Key points found in the ‘Handbook for Elementary School English Activities’

Key points, which can be considered guidelines setting out the expected characteristics of EA can also be found in the first chapter of the 'Handbook for Elementary School

English Activities'. Teachers are expected to design and carry out their lessons in accordance with these guidelines in order to fulfil the expected aims of EA and *Sogo*. The key points follow.

Activities should be based on children's interests and curiosity

As clearly stated in the aims of *Sogo*, lessons are to be planned around the children's interests and topics that are likely to stimulate their curiosity. Children in the lower grades, who have just started EA, may be satisfied with simply being able to say some phrases in English, act out role-plays, or use English in games and activities. However, as the children reach the upper grades and experience more English they may become uninterested and demotivated if the activities are merely aimed at the short term result of getting the children to produce English mechanically. Research results at Amano Elementary School, one of the MEXT-appointed pilot program schools, show that 4th graders who have experienced English for three years actually start losing interest in games and language practice activities and express more desire to take part in activities such as cooking and sports, where English is used in more meaningful ways.

Activities should be based on language found in children's daily lives

When a curriculum or lesson is designed around grammatical structures and vocabulary items only, it is easy to overlook the question of whether the learners actually use such language in their daily lives. Along with the importance of paying attention to the kind of English the children actually want to learn, it is essential to discover whether such language or topics actually come up in the children's daily interactions. An easy way of finding out what children actually talk about is to listen to the conversations children have between themselves in Japanese. It is thought that the homeroom teachers in elementary schools have the best chance of doing this, which is a good reason why they should always be involved in lesson preparation and possibly instruction.

Care should be taken not to lead children into a dislike of English

It is a well known fact that many junior and senior high school students in Japan lose interest in English as they get left behind in lessons. The lack of a sense of purpose and/or achievement may also be reasons for their disliking English. It must be clearly understood that the aim of introducing English at elementary school level is not simply to start such English instruction early, and it is important to avoid applying methods used in the high schools, such as gram-

mar instruction and translation.

Avoiding monotonous lessons, which place students in rote learning situations in order to get language out of the children's mouths, is another point of consideration. Unless language is used in meaningful ways, children will soon lose a sense of achievement and become uninterested in the activities they are expected to take part in. Simply using so-called "fun" activities, such as games and songs, may not maintain the interest and motivation of children participating in EA. Unfortunately, it is already evident that some elementary schools are using practice activities that cannot be called meaningful but simply aim to get children to reproduce language items.

The focus should be on the spoken form

It is clearly stated that EA in *Sogo* should focus on aural and oral skills. While it is a commonly-held belief that it is effective to balance the four skills in English instruction, the fact that available time is limited and that instruction in reading and writing might add a burden to the children, has led to *Sogo* discouraging the instruction of these skills in EA. Emphasis must be placed on oral and aural skills especially in the early stages in order to nurture basic communicative skills in the spoken form. It has been reported that many children in the middle grades and above show an interest in being able to read and write in English. In order to respond to such interests, it has been suggested that children be exposed to the written

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forms of English through the use of flash cards with words added to pictures, and items such as signs and posters in classrooms rather than starting formal reading instruction, such as a phonics program.

It is hoped that children will develop a positive attitude towards English through EA if attention is paid to the above points when teachers are preparing and conducting lessons. If students feel open towards English they will not simply reject the idea of trying to understand spoken English, and will also try to express themselves as best they can when the need arises.

The current state of EA in elementary school

Over six months have passed since the official implementation of *Sogo* and it is said that more than half of the approximately 24,000 public elementary schools in Japan have introduced English in one way or another, and many more are expected to start in the near future. However, this does not mean that all these schools currently have EA once a week throughout the year. There are many schools that have decided to offer EA once a month or a few times a



term. There are also schools where EA is held only once or twice a year when native English-speaking assistant language teachers are available to the school.

Most teachers who have started EA have not had any prior experience in English teaching and are still confused about curriculum design and lesson planning, as well as instructional methods. Many teachers suffer from a lack of confidence and/or competence to lead lessons in English.

Unfortunately, very little teacher training is available to these teachers. Last year MEXT started providing 20-hour intensive training seminars and many local education boards also hold workshops and seminars introducing teaching ideas. However, these courses only offer a limited number of teachers a minimal amount of training. Many teachers can be found taking part in training seminars held by publishers, teachers' groups, and other organizations. These groups offer training in various teaching methods based on diverse beliefs about language learning and teaching.

The future of English in Japanese public elementary schools

It is being rumored that English will become a formal subject in public elementary schools in the near future. The types of research the five current MEXT-appointed pilot program schools are conducting (For example, reading/writing instruction, twice-a-week lessons, small classes) can be considered evidence supporting this rumor. Taking this into account, EA in *Sogo* can be seen as offering the opportunity for trial and error in an effort to seek effective instructional methods for this subject, as well as affording teachers valuable classroom experience. The development of elementary school English programs cannot be expected without such experimentation, preparation, and nurturing of skills.

If the improvement of communicative skills in English is the true goal of English instruction at the elementary level and beyond, further research in child second language acquisition in EFL contexts, specifically in the Japanese context, must be conducted and pedagogical development based on such research is crucial. The current models for schools that have just started EA derive from work done at MEXT-appointed pilot program schools over the past 10 years. However, further assessment and evaluation of the effectiveness of these models is necessary and it is hoped that many, including specialists in teaching English to children, will be involved in this process.

If English does actually become a formal subject in elementary school, it is expected that MEXT will specify clear targets, outline the content, prepare a curriculum, and introduce methods facilitating the achievement of these goals. It could be said that Japan is not yet ready for this step and it is hoped that adequate time will be allowed with opportunities for sufficient research and discussion, contrary to what has happened in the implementation of EA in *Sogo*.

English in elementary school must aim to build the foundations children need for the development of communicative competence throughout their school life. Given the reality that only one or two class hours is available for English even once it becomes a subject, the goals must be kept at achievable levels so that children are not forced to cram in order to attain impractical objectives. The key points outlined earlier are important checks that have the potential to keep elementary school English on the right track and to prevent traditional methods from entering the elementary level.

Teacher training is another very important issue that must not be overlooked. What is currently available is vastly inadequate to the task of developing the teaching skills and English competence of teachers. Lessons can be learned from Korea, Taiwan, and other neighboring countries that have already established extensive teacher training programs. However, these countries also face various problems in their English and teacher training programs and caution is required when seeking models from these. In this sense, cooperation with these countries could bring about fruitful results.

Although there are many problems that need to be solved, introducing English at elementary school level has the potential both to develop the basic communicative English skills of the Japanese people and to improve the current English education system. It is therefore worthwhile putting effort into the development of an effective program. What is truly hoped is that enough discussion and preparation will take place to develop an elementary English program that is genuinely beneficial to the students and does not simply become yet another burden for children. ■

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