

English in Sendai Primary Schools: What is the current situation?

by John Wiltshier

In many presentations by children’s teachers at the JALT conference last November, participants used the words “Sogo English” to describe what they were doing at their schools, but it was obvious from the outset that different schools were doing different things in terms of both time and content. This view was supported by Tom Merner in the 2002 winter issue of *Snakes and Ladders*.

“Sogo” here refers to *sogo teki na gakushu*, a study period introduced by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology in April 2002. English activity classes taught in time designated for *Sogo* led to the name “Sogo English”.

In one featured-speaker workshop at the conference, a variety of guesses regarding the number of schools teaching English ranged from an initial “all schools” to 40%, before reaching some agreement at 60%. This apparent lack of clarity led me to visit the offices of the Sendai and Miyagi Boards of Education to find out the facts about how many elementary schools were offering English education in this area. During these data-gathering visits it became clear that “Sogo English” was interpreted in many different ways by individual schools.

This article will firstly present the overall facts about

how many primary schools in the Sendai area are teaching English and how many hours of class time these schools offer per year. Secondly, data from 5 schools in central Sendai will be compared and a summary of the findings will be presented. The final section will discuss the implications of the findings in terms of the pros and cons of current practice.

The number of English activity classes in Miyagi and Sendai

The situation in Miyagi and Sendai is summarized in the table below (*fig.1*). This table shows the number and percentage of schools doing “International Understanding” classes and the number and percentage of schools holding “English activity” classes. “International Understanding” is a broad term applied to any class that aims to teach the children about other countries. English activity classes are just one part of the International Understanding option: not all International Understanding classes are English activity classes. This is an important point and the two terms should be used accurately to avoid confusion.

Looking at the data from Sendai City, it can be seen that last school year, 24% of Sendai primary schools were

Figure 1: How many schools are teaching English in Sendai & Miyagi?

School	International Understanding		English Activities	
	2002/3	2003/4	2002/3	2003/4
Primary schools belonging to Miyagi’s 7 boards of education (327 schools)	233 schools 71%	197 schools 60%	163 schools 50%	135 schools 41%
Sendai City’s primary schools (122 schools)	76 schools 62%	To Be Announced	29 schools 24%	88 schools 72%
Total (449 schools)	309 schools 69%	To Be Announced	192 schools 43%	223 schools 50%

doing English activities, but this year the figure has risen to 72%. This is a surprising change. A Sendai City official later expressed some doubt over the 24% figure and suggested the true percentage was closer to 50. The Miyagi data shows that 50% of primary schools in Miyagi were doing English activities last year, dropping to 41% this year. An official at the prefectural board office did not offer any reasons for this change, but pointed out that *Sogo* has many areas of study, not only International Understanding, and perhaps schools are focusing on different areas this year.

In summary, there seems to be a sharp increase in the number of schools doing English activities in Sendai City, but a decrease in Miyagi Prefecture as a whole.

Time, teachers and syllabus

Looking at the number of hours of English at each of the 5 schools, two points are clear: not all schools have the same number of classes—in fact, there are big differences between schools; and generally grades 3 to 6 receive more classes than grades 1 and 2. In the table below (fig.2), 10 hours translates to one English class a month and 30 to approximately one English class a week.

Figure 2: Number of English class hours at 5 schools in central Sendai

School	Class hours	
	Grades 1/2	Grades 3/6
A	17	27/28
B	30	30
C	4/6	6/8
D	10/15	20
E	5/10	10

Since April this year, School A has started using the 15 minutes before 5th period as “English challenge time” on as many days as possible rather than having a 45-minute class once every two weeks. School E has 5 classes for the 1st grade and doubles it to 10 for the second grade.

School B has the most classes, especially in the lower grades. A possible reason for this is that School B has been designated by Sendai City to focus on English teaching and will hold a demonstration day in February next year.

It was mentioned in the introduction to this article that English activities fall under *Sogo*. However, this is only partly true as the *Sogo* timeslot is solely for grades 3 to 6. Any English classes in grades 1 or 2 must use extra time that is available after all other subjects have been taught. From grade 3 upwards, schools can use curriculum time designated for *Sogo*. This may be a major reason why more English classes are held in the higher grades.

Four out of the five schools I studied use curriculum

time designated as *Sogo* time to hold English classes. School B is the exception and does not use any *Sogo* time for English lessons. The reason for this may be that the school is small (one or two classes per grade, with approximately 20 children currently in grade 1) so less time is needed for practicing for school events (sports day etc.) hence more time is free for use as the school pleases.

School D also said some English is incorporated into *seikatsu* or “life study” classes. Examples from the school included learning English based on the themes of Halloween and Christmas.

All schools have assistant English teacher (ALT) visits with ALTs involved in the planning of classes to some degree. Teaching of the English classes is shared between the Japanese class teacher (JT) and the ALT. School A said that grades 1 and 2 are usually taught solely by the JT and the higher grades are sometimes, but not always, taught as team-teaching classes (JT and ALT together). School B has an ALT based at the school and so, although not specifically stated in the data I received, most classes are presumably team-taught. School C and E said that all classes were team-taught with the ALT leading the classes.

School D is a little unusual as half the classes are team-taught and half are taught by the JT alone. A possible reason for this is that one of School D’s teachers used to be a junior high school English teacher, but has now moved to teach at primary school level. Hence he has the confidence and know-how to teach alone. The fact that this teacher is used to working with ALTs and can speak English well may also make it possible to invite ALTs who do not speak good Japanese to his school—School D had visits from 7 different ALTs, which was high compared to other schools. However, it should be noted that the team-taught classes are taught by the class teacher with the assistance of the visiting ALT. The former junior high English teacher does not teach any class other than his own.

All 5 schools have some sort of syllabus and lesson plans. School A has the most detailed plans, compiled into a 150-page booklet. This booklet includes a year-long syllabus and 28 lesson plans for each grade plus a summary of all language items covered over the 6 years in the school. Each lesson plan includes some or all of the following sections: “greeting”; “warm-up”; “introduce”; “familiarize”; “apply”; and “songs” (the labels here are as listed in the syllabus booklet). The main body of most lessons is split into three sections: “introduce”; “familiarize”; and “apply”. From looking at the lesson plans, it appears that the labels could be interchanged with “presentation”, “practice” and “production”, for readers familiar with the PPP model of ELT. The “familiarize” section uses drill or chant activities with the emphasis on repetition of the correct form of the language. The “apply” section of the lesson follows and usually takes the form of a game aimed at encouraging the students to use the language pattern they have learnt in a more communicative way.

School A’s booklet was compiled with the intention of

providing an example of an English syllabus that could be used by other primary schools. It was produced by School A because this school was the model school with regard to English teaching in Sendai in 2001 and 2002 and has held an English class demonstration day for each of the past two years. From this year, School B is the model school and is currently compiling a similar booklet (not quite finished yet) of its syllabus and lesson plans in preparation for a demonstration day in February next year.

School D also has detailed lesson plans that usually have 4 sections. The lessons are organized around themes: colours; sports; shapes; jobs; months of the year etc. Activities in the lessons include interviews with the ALT, games, songs and story telling. School D also showed me a summary booklet they had made of last year's classes. This booklet included written details of what each grade did when the ALT visited plus photographs showing the children taking part in class activities. The addition of the photographs helps show the activities clearly and is likely to inspire other teachers to try the same activities.

School C has 3 lesson plans that are repeated three times. The aim of the lesson plans is for the students to form a good relationship with the visiting ALT and have some English pronunciation practice. The lesson plans include lots of songs, especially well known seasonal songs, such as "We wish you a merry Christmas", and a variety of games. Each plan is easy to understand and considering the limited number of classes, the three plans together form an appropriate syllabus.

School E gave me a year-long syllabus but as they said themselves, it is a little brief. The skeleton outline of each class includes a song, a game and a list of some language aims—numbers, and vocabulary items such as "please", "pardon" and "delicious". This on its own lacks sufficient detail, but could provide the basis for more detailed lesson plans.

Summary

On the positive side, ALTs are actively being invited to primary schools, and those who teach in the elementary schools seem to be enthusiastic about working with younger children. From my own observation, I have also noted the ALTs visiting primary schools tend to be the ones with proven experience teaching in junior high schools and those who can speak Japanese.

Lesson plans are generally in evidence and consist of a variety of activities appropriate to the age range being taught. Another encouraging sign is that at least one junior high school teacher has successfully moved to teach at the primary level and appears to be creatively and enthusiastically constructing a syllabus suited to younger children.

The Sendai City and Miyagi Prefecture Boards of Education are very supportive of English teaching in primary schools. They have designated certain schools as models of English teaching and these schools hold demonstration days and are documenting their experiences,

which will help other schools to plan coherent curriculums.

In addition to this, the Boards of Education run in-service courses and Sendai City has produced a booklet called *English For Everyone* with 20 model lesson plans and activities for all schools to use. Both the City and Prefectural Boards of Education seem to be enthusiastic about English education in their schools and very open and willing to discuss their ideas and plans with any interested party.

On the negative side, the current bottom-up style system leads to differences among schools which is leading to some parents questioning why one school is doing so much more than another school.

There is a lack of teachers trained in English working in primary schools, which may lead to an over-reliance on ALTs who themselves may lack suitable qualifications and training. Also there may be a lack of JTs who speak English well enough to work with non-Japanese-speaking ALTs.

Despite schools making syllabuses or at least lesson plans outlining what is to be taught, I have found no evidence of any form of evaluation of how much learning is actually taking place.

Conclusion

This article has shown that despite the fact that it is not yet a required school subject, English is being taught in Japanese primary schools. In my experience, the schools that are most enthusiastic and active about their English classes tend to be the ones designated as model schools or where a specific teacher or teachers in the school have both the ability and desire to teach English. This mix of both a top-down and a bottom-up approach to development should be continued and encouraged.

Japan is in the exploratory stages of introducing English teaching into primary schools. As teachers explore further, it is natural that they will become critical of previous practice and strive to improve. More detailed curriculum design including clear aims and methods of evaluation should naturally follow in model schools, and with the continued support and encouragement from Boards of Education these should spread to other primary schools.

I would like to thank both the Sendai City Board of Education and the Miyagi Prefecture Board of Education as well as all the teachers in Sendai City Primary Schools who have volunteered so much data and information about current practice in their schools.

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