

Japanese Elementary School Teachers' Perceptions About English Teaching

上原明子

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Abstract

Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) will upgrade English to an official subject from 2020. The purpose of this paper is to investigate elementary school teachers' perceptions about English teaching qualitatively during this period of moving into a new stage. The participants are six homeroom teachers (HRTs) in a public elementary school. Some of them have never taught English or taken any teacher development. Each teacher was requested to answer the open-ended questionnaire and was interviewed in order to better understand the questionnaire. Analysis was carried out by Modified Grounded Theory Approach (M-GTA). Results indicate that although homeroom teachers have negative opinions about teaching English at elementary schools, they also have understood the necessities of teaching English in this era of internationalization. The study found that regarding their teaching, help from ALTs and resources such as manuals to assist in carrying out the curriculum, forming lesson plans and designing materials are essential.

1. Background of this study

Foreign Language Activities became a compulsory part of the curriculum for 5th and 6th grade students from fiscal 2011 (Davies, Otani and Tsuido, 2010). The objective of Foreign Language Activities written in Course of Study is stated below. It emphasizes communication, not grammar or skills.

To form the foundation of pupils' communication abilities through foreign languages while developing the understanding of languages and cultures through various experiences, fostering a positive attitude toward communication, and familiarizing pupils with the sounds and basic expressions of foreign languages (MEXT, 2010).

English should be treated in Foreign Language Activities (MEXT, 2010), and Foreign Language Activities mainly focused on speaking and listening. The annual number of lessons is 35 (once a week), with each lasting 45 minutes. The total number is 70 for two years (5th and 6th grade). Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has distributed to elementary school pupils supplemental textbooks named "Eigo

Note” (fiscal 2009-2011) and “Hi, friends” (fiscal 2012-), and to teachers teacher’s manuals with CDs and DVD-ROMs (Nakajima and Okazaki, 2013).

Foreign Language Activities are compulsory, but are not treated as an official subject. MEXT revealed “Execution Plan for the Reform of English Education in Response to Globalization” in December, 2013. Under the proposal, MEXT will upgrade English to an official subject in the 5th and 6th grades in three classes per week from 2020. Not only listening and speaking but also reading, writing, grammar would be treated. In addition, English teaching would start in the 3rd grade of elementary school conducted one or two times a week. The author thinks that investigating elementary school teachers’ perceptions about English teaching during this period of moving into a new stage of curriculum reform would be significant.

2. Literature review

Benesse’s survey (2010) asked 5,883 elementary school teachers who are in charge of 5th and 6th graders to answer a questionnaire. One question is about the confidence of teaching Foreign Language Activities. More than two-thirds (68.1%) of teachers answered they don’t have confidence. Another question is about the level of English competence to teach Foreign Language Activities. Again, more than two-thirds (68.0%) of teachers think that they don’t have enough English competence. The survey reveals that 89.2% of teachers don’t have enough time for preparing English classes and 74.0% of teachers don’t have enough time to talk with an assistant language teacher (ALT, the native English speakers introduced through government-sponsored JET programs or by privately run dispatch companies) about classes. It also reveals that 62.1% of teachers feel overloaded in teaching English. Time is a great concern for them. Elementary school teachers teach all subjects and don’t have any planning time in the daytime.

Elementary school teachers have anxiety of their English competence, making lesson plans, finding ideas of topics and activities, and preparing materials. (Matsuhata, et al. 2006, Inoi, 2009). Matsumiya (2013) investigated elementary school teachers’ anxiety. The result showed that they felt anxiety of their English competence and it caused anxiety of teaching. Hojo and Matsuzaki (2008) reveal that elementary school teachers need ALTs and teacher development. English is taught mostly by homeroom teachers who have not had proper training at elementary schools. It is a reason that they feel anxiety.

All studies above are quantitative. On the other hand, Nakajima and Okazaki (2013) investigated Japanese elementary school teachers’ perceptions about ways for smooth transition of pupils’ English learning from elementary school to junior high school in qualitative analysis using questionnaires (open-ended questions) of 10 public elementary school homeroom teachers. They found three categories “improving instruction”, “improving instructor’s abilities” and “establishing an English environment outside Foreign Language Activities.” Shinato (2012) interviewed three elementary school teachers and found

categories of “Anxiety” and “become familiar with teaching English.”

Although, all studies above are investigations of elementary school teachers who attend a training seminar or have experiences of teaching English, there are many teachers who have never attended a seminar and taught English. The author would like to investigate those teachers' perceptions, too, qualitatively during this period of moving into a new stage meeting curriculum requirements.

3. Method

3.1 Participants

The participants are six homeroom teachers (HRTs) in a public elementary school (A, B, C, D, E, F). This school became Curriculum Special School for Foreign Language Activities in April, 2015. Curriculum Special School is specified by MEXT and carried out to organize a curriculum that does not depend on the Course of Study. This school suits this study to investigate teachers' perceptions for English teaching, because it is going to conduct original curriculum before the new Course of Study is in effect. It decided to teach English 35 hours per year (once a week) for 1st - 4th grade students and 70 hours per year (twice a week) for 5th and 6th grade students. English classes are conducted in team-teaching (T.T.) of an ALT and a homeroom teacher. The homeroom teachers are not specialized in teaching English. Some of them have never taught English or taken any teacher development. Table 1 shows their background.

Table 1 Background of participants

Participant	Gender	Teaching years	Teaching years for Foreign Language Activities	Grade of which HRT is in charge	Experience of taking teacher development for Foreign Language Activities
A	F	10 years	One year	5 th grade	One time
B	F	26 years	11 years	1 st grade	None
C	F	4 years	4 years	3 rd grade	None
D	F	4 years	None	2 nd grade	None
E	M	27 years	4 years	6 th grade	One time
F	M	30 years	4 years	4 th grade	None

3.2 Data collection

Each teacher was requested to answer the open-ended questionnaire after the author gave a lecture about purpose of Foreign Language Activities and proposed a curriculum for this school on April 15th, 2015. The questionnaire includes four items as follows:

1. What do you think about English teaching at elementary schools?

2. What do you think about your teaching English?
3. What is your ideal English class?
4. What do you think about participating in a research lesson?

After receiving their questionnaire responses, the author conducted one-on-one interviews in order to better understand the responses to the questionnaires or seek more detailed explanations as follows:

May 27th, 2015 Participants A, B, C

June 5th, 2015 Participants D, E

June 24th, 2015 Participant F

The interviews were electronically recorded with the consent of the participants and transcribed in full in Japanese.

3.3 Data analysis

Analysis was carried out by Modified Grounded Theory Approach (M-GTA) developed by Kinoshita (2003, 2007). M-GTA is a variation of the grounded theory approach (GTA). Glaser and Strauss (1967) proposed grounded theory as a way of strengthening qualitative research. However, they do not prescribe how to conduct research using the grounded theory method. Strauss and Corbin (1998) elaborate on the original work and outline some steps for conducting research using grounded theory: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. M-GTA is different from the classic grounded theory in the strict coding procedure.

In M-GTA, all of the teachers' written responses and the recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim. Examining sentences that seems to have similar patterns were gathered and then given a concept name to them. On an analysis worksheet, a concept name, its definition, examples and theoretical notes were recorded. One analysis worksheet is created for each concept (Okazaki, 2012). Several concepts were integrated into a category. A chart was developed according to the results.

4. Result and discussion

4.1 Emerged categories and concepts

All categories and concepts were summarized in a chart (Figure 1). The chart shows three categories: (1) Objection, (2) Assistance, and (3) Implementation. The category (1) Objection consists of three concepts: "Really needed?", "Anxiety" and "Research lesson as a burden." The category (2) Assistance consists of two concepts: "ALTs are needed" and "Manuals are needed." The category (3) Implementation consists of three concepts: "Internationalization," "Ideal class" and "HRT's role in T.T."



Figure 1 Categories and concepts

4.2 Category (1) Objection

Discussion will be started with a concept “Really needed?” Teacher E stated that teachers don’t have enough time to discuss why English education is needed at elementary schools. Teacher F stated that government is nurturing people who can play an active role amid intensifying international competition. He also insisted that special needs education is more important than English education. Teacher C stated that Japanese education is more important than English education. She complained that she doesn’t want to take much time to prepare English classes, because teachers are busy to teach other subjects. They opposed English teaching at elementary schools. There are new problems in education, for example, special education and decline in academic ability, so teachers think those issues are more important than English teaching.

Next concept is “Anxiety.” Teachers A, C, D and E stated that they are not good at pronunciation of English. Teachers A and C states that they can’t listen and speak in English. Teacher D stated that she doesn’t have enough competence of grammar and vocabulary. Teacher F stated that he feels difficulty dealing with foreigners. They were worried about their English competence, especially pronunciation. Although MEXT doesn’t expect that they speak English fluently, the emphasis on communication, pronunciation, languages and cultures in Course of Study are challenging for elementary school teachers. It is because of that, they have had little chance to use English practically. They learned English through direct deductive explanations of grammar and remembering words one by one in a junior and a senior high school.

The last concept in this category is “Research lesson as a burden.” Teachers usually conduct research lessons in school based teacher development (Stigler and Hiebert, 1999). Teacher E stated that he would like to conduct research lessons efficiently, because he

doesn't like taking a long time to make a lesson plan. Teacher B also stated that it is hard to write a lesson plan. Teacher A stated that she doesn't know how to write a lesson plan for Foreign Language Activities because it is a new concept. Teacher D stated that it needs a lot of time to discuss a research lesson. Teachers A, B and C stated that they think they should show a good lesson, so they don't want to do it voluntarily. Teacher B stated that a person who is in charge of research lesson feels hard. Although Teachers A and D stated that they could get effective ideas from other teachers in a research lesson, all teachers feel that a research lesson overloads teachers.

4.3 Category (2) Assistance

The first concept to discuss in this category is "ALTs are needed." Teacher D stated that it is good to listen to native English. Teachers E and F stated an ALT is essential, homeroom teachers should not teach English, because they don't know how to teach English and their English pronunciation is not good. Teacher C stated that an ALT can teach English by himself without her. They think that they can't teach English by themselves, so ALTs are essential.

The next concept is "Manuals are needed." Teachers A and B stated that they don't have images of English classes, so they want to watch an English class. It is because that they have had little chance to have teacher development. The author recommended watching a sample lesson video distributed by MEXT in the first step. Teachers B, C, E and F stated that they need manuals, otherwise they can't meet curriculum demands. The teachers have conducted English classes along to "Hi, friends!" until last year, so they don't have any original ideas. They need a curriculum with lesson plans in detail and materials. This category reveals that homeroom teachers need ALTs and manuals to conduct English classes.

4.4 Category (3) Implementation

The first concept to discuss in this category is "Internationalization." Teachers A, B and C mentioned that they need to use English in the age of internationalization. Teacher E mentioned that improvement of English education in Japan is needed. He thinks that practical English teaching is needed instead of grammar-translation method in which he has learned. Although they have opinions to oppose English teaching at elementary schools, they also think its necessity.

The next concept is "Ideal class." Teachers A and E mentioned that they want students to communicate with an ALT. They also stated that they would like to teach that English is interesting. Teacher B mentioned that daily English is important, not teaching grammar, translation, reading or writing. All of them have understood the purpose of Foreign Language Activities in Course of Study. They mentioned that they would like to try speaking English in classes with an ALT. Although they feel anxiety for their teaching, they want to improve their classes of English.

The last concept in this category is "HRT's role in T.T." Teachers C and E mentioned

that homeroom teachers are not needed, because an ALT teaches English well enough and there is no time to talk with ALTs. However, MEXT states the roles of homeroom teachers as:

Even if they do not speak English fluently, their positive attitude toward interaction through English will serve as an extremely important catalyst to enhance pupils' interest in foreign languages. Thus, homeroom teachers are indispensable in Foreign Language Activities (MEXT, 2010).

The teachers A, B, D and F mentioned that they don't know what roles they should perform in team-teaching. In their thinking for improving their classes of English, the first concern is "HRT's role in T.T."

Regarding reducing their anxiety of English competence, playing good roles in T.T., and conducting their ideal classes, the author thinks that a research lesson is good for teacher development. They watch lessons with each other and can learn from the reality of their classrooms, rather than a seminar headed by someone outside their classroom environment. Considering the element of being busy, if a research lesson in this school could be refined not to take a long time, it may be effective them.

5. Conclusion

Although homeroom teachers have negative opinions about teaching English at elementary schools, they have understood the necessity of English teaching in the age of internationalization. They have an image of an ideal class and concern for the HRT's role in T. T. For their teaching, ALTs and manuals are essential. In this period for preparing to upgrade English to be an official subject, arranging ALTs and making manuals, for example, a detailed curriculum, lesson plans and materials are needed in addition to teacher development. In the next step of this study, the author would like to investigate what the teachers think about what they need to learn.

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Analysis worksheet 1

概念 (Concept)	研究授業 Research lesson as a burden	
定義 (Definition)	研究授業を負担だと思理由	
ヴァリエーション (Examples)	A	<p>事前に検討してもらって、自分では気付かないことを教えてもらいました。一学期には研究授業はできないことになりました。2学期に低中学年、3学期に6年生がします。6月に指導案を書くのが負担のようです。指導案の書き方がわかりません。他の教科なら分かるのですが。研究授業となると、良いものを見せなきゃという意識があります。</p>
	B	<p>全校で協力はするけど、最終的には授業者に負担があります。勉強にはなりますが、大変じゃないと言ったら嘘になります。指導案を文章で作るのが大変です。積極的にやろうとは思いません。見せる授業となると普通の授業というわけにはいきませんから。1年生は学校生活に慣れるのが精一杯ですから、たとえみんなで考えるとしても指導案を書くのは無理です。夏休みにじっくり考えてやりたいです。</p>
	C	<p>この学校は全員が授業をして全員が見ますので、一人で指導案を作ります。前の学校では、授業をするのは全員ではなくブロックで一人でした。授業前にみんなで指導案を作ります。</p>
	D	<p>授業者になったとき、若かったので自分の力にしたかったです。子どもに反映されるのでやって良かったと思います。先生方の知恵をもらいました。でも、話し合いが多く大変で、夜遅くに帰っていたので、次の日の教材研究ができませんでした。40人くらいがそれぞれ意見を言ったら時間がかかります。それに、良い姿を見せなきゃという思いがあります。教員だったらそうです。素のままは無理です。子どもも普段とは違いますし。</p>
	E	<p>研究授業は効率的に行いたいです。指導案を作るのがかなりのエネルギーを使うので端折っても良いと思います。普段はとても忙しいので、夏休みに作りたいです。Hi, friends! など、もともになるものが何もないので、先生に原案を出してもらわないと自分たちではできません。</p>
	F	<p>小規模校だから協力体制はあります。研究主任が場を設定して、授業者が指導案をもってきてみんなで検討をします。</p>
理論的メモ (Theoretical notes)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ・学習指導案の書き方がわからない ・良いものを見せなきゃ ・授業者に負担 ・話し合いの時間が長い ・効率的に行いたい 	

Analysis worksheet 2

概念 (Concept)	T.T.での HRT の役割 HRT's roles in T.T.
定義 (Definition)	T.T.の授業でどのようにふるまえばよいかという HRT の疑問
ヴァリエーション (Examples)	<p>A 担任は T1 だと言われていますが、ALT が自分でやってくれているので、私たちは出ていきません。子どもたちと一緒に勉強している立ち場です。自分が前に立ってはやってないので、これでよいのかという思いはあります。自分たちが前に行かなくてはと悩んでいます。ALT とやり取りを見せるとか、デモンストレーションを見せるとか、自分ももっとしゃべらなきゃと思います。新研究主任研修で実践発表をしたときに、違う市の先生から T1 は担任だと市で周知徹底されているという話を聞きました。</p> <p>B ALT と HRT の立ち位置がわかりません。ALT が進めている授業に担任としてどう関わっていったらよいのかがわかりません。</p> <p>C みんな T1 として自分がやらなきゃと思っていると思うけど、実際は ALT のみの授業になっていて、私はかかわっていません。私がいなくても進んでいます。デジタル教材もあるので、デモンストレーションを二人でする必要もなく私は全く出番がありません。</p> <p>D 自分が授業にどう参加したらいいかがわかりません。子どもと同じように参加するのはできますが、それでよいのかがわかりません。</p> <p>E 授業は ALT に丸投げです。</p> <p>F 担任の立ち位置がわかりません。</p>
理論的メモ (Theoretical notes)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ・ 立ち位置がわからない ・ ALT に丸投げ