

Issues and Progress in Studies of English Education in Elementary School

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Abstract

This article reviews the topical trends in the past six years of studies and research on English education in elementary school. The first focus is on investigations into the social background and issues raised by Japanese critics, which include discussions in terms of young children's amazing ability to learn English, difficulties to teach English in the framework of international understanding, the reason of choosing English as a target language, and the criticism against the half-measured approach of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology. After reviewing topical trends, the attention is shifted on case studies, which are categorized into four approaches: activity-centered, international understanding centered, input centered, and information disseminating. In the third section, I suggest that English language teachers should actively engage in critical pedagogy as well as in a communicative approach to deal with the current confusion in teaching English in elementary school. After reviewing recent developments of research in the field, some implications and suggestions are provided.

Introduction

Since the school year 2002, some elementary schools in Japan have started teaching English as a program of international understanding in "comprehensive studies" classes. The classes have been organized at the discretion of individual schools under a new curriculum introduced by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MECSST). This means elementary schools are allowed to teach English on a noncompulsory basis. According to MECSST, about 40 percent of the total number of elementary schools have reported they included English classes in

their curricula on a trial base in the school year 2001 before the comprehensive studies were formally launched (Inoue, 2002).

The way English is taught in elementary school and whether the subject should be compulsory are still matters of heated debate, while elementary school teachers who have never taught English before are struggling to do so without sufficient training and support. The purpose of this paper is fourfold: to review the social background and issues raised recently by critics in Japan regarding teaching English in elementary school; to show some typical examples of English classes under the pilot project carried out by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology; to suggest that English language teachers should actively engage in critical pedagogy and in development of communicative skills; and to review recent developments of research in elementary school English education. Implications and suggestions will be provided as a conclusion.

Social background and issues in teaching English in elementary school: Pros and cons

Most Japanese students start studying English at age 13, when they enter junior high school. By the time they graduate from high school, they will have learned English for six years. But the course load does not seem to be effective, since it has not produced many proficient English speakers. The importance of enhancing the Japanese people's ability to speak English has been emphasized, and it has been urged that the language be taught at an early age. Elementary school English classes were hastily introduced at a time when boosting proficiency in the language was widely considered an urgent task to help Japan recover its economic power. Some people even say, "If Japan does not improve its English communication ability, it will be left behind by other countries." Most parents apparently welcome the introduction of English education. Japanese parents hold high expectations that an early start will lead their young children to master English, since it is gaining more values as the *de facto* international language.

From an academic side, there are several articles that support the movement of introducing the language when children are younger. Yatsugi (1998), for instance, emphasizes the benefits of starting English earlier. From

her observations as an English teacher at an elementary school, she claims children learn English very quickly just by playing, eating and through other daily activities. Younger children especially have quick response to spoken language, and they are good at discriminating and imitating foreign sounds. She also states that there is little gap between learning contents and the mental developmental stage of elementary school pupils than of junior high school students. Elementary school children enjoy repeating activities such as singing and dancing, while adolescents are hesitant in similar activities and they easily get bored if there is any simple repetition. In terms of maintaining what was taught, however, Yatsugi mentions that junior high school pupils hold learned contents as knowledge better in the long run. Elementary school students can not be expected to gain communicating skills as much as junior high school pupils do, since the limitation of knowledge about the world can constrain elementary school children from acquiring the skills. In spite of these points, however, Yatsugi says the possible outcome from English education in elementary school has a big impact. Children's pleasant experiences in encountering a foreign language and feelings of accomplishment in communicating with foreign people will surely nurture positive attitudes and interests towards foreign languages. "The younger their ages are, the more they can listen, imagine, act, and enjoy. On the other hand, older elementary students require more intellectual learning contents. As students are getting older, the objectives of curricula must be alternated according to children's developmental stages" (Yatsugi, 1998, p.18).

Higuchi (1999) also emphasizes on how advantageous it is if English is taught at an early age. In his article, he claims the merits of introducing English to younger learners in the following terms:

- 1) Elementary school students are able to enjoy learning English through listening and speaking activities;
- 2) They are good at imitating what they have heard and acquiring pronunciation naturally;
- 3) They easily build up the whole meaning from gestures, facial expressions and keywords;
- 4) They enjoy listening to the same phrases repeatedly, do not show reluctance in imitating others and are able to acquire phrasal expressions

- unconsciously;
- 5) They are less shy, less afraid of making mistakes, and they are positive and imaginative when communicating with others;
 - 6) They are interested in foreign cultures and less hesitant contacting with foreign people;
 - 7) They value the importance of speaking out their own thoughts and ideas and letting other people know about themselves, as well as trying to deepen their understanding about their friends.

From Higuchi's point of view, the ultimate goal of English education in elementary school is "to let students notice that they are all different, and it is fun to be different" (p.9). Higuchi says, "This is the first step towards establishing their self-identity and understanding other people, and this first step is the foundation of international and intercultural understanding" (p.9). Higuchi's argument on the goal of English education in elementary school is quite similar to the first report of *Chuo Kyoiku Shingikai*, the Central Committee for Educational Reform, which was released in 1996. It includes a section on 'Education policy for adapting to societal changes including *kokusaika* (internationalization), and the development of information and science technology.' The report recommends introducing English instruction in elementary school in order to enhance international understanding. But why in English? We now need to consider why it can not be other languages but English.

An explanation of the reason of teaching English other than any other languages comes from an article by Hattori (1999). In his article, "Learning activities in comprehensive studies in elementary school," Hattori admits that the language taught in elementary school to promote international understanding needs not be English. However, he says, English should be prioritized as a target foreign language before any other languages as it is *de facto* the tool of international communication. Although Hattori recognizes the possibility of over-concentrating on American and British cultures and perspectives through the instruction, he argues that students can treat the cultures as mere examples of many other distinct cultures, and they can apply the way used in understanding American and British cultures when they encounter other diverse cultures. Hattori concludes, "In this way, English

teaching can be treated from the aspect of international understanding education” (p.21). As for classroom activities, Hattori recommends to place more emphasis on listening and speaking than on reading and writing. He adds that it is important for children not to worry about making mistakes or using accurate expressions. “I would like to give weight to how much fun they have through enjoyable activities in English classes rather than how much they have achieved” (Hattori, 1999, p.22). Having foreign language classes aimed at broadening interest in other cultures sounds just fine, in theory. So does offering English language education in an enjoyable way. But how can this be achieved?

In the midst of the heightened zeal to teach young children English, however, many elementary school teachers are in the dark regarding English language teaching techniques, and are struggling to prepare for the start of the curriculum. For example, according to an article in *The Japan Times*, an elementary school teacher, who underwent English lesson pilot projects carried out by the Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology Ministry, says she has experienced ‘a labor pain’ creating something from scratch (Arita, 2002). Many teachers seeking to promote English education hope assistant language teachers can come more frequently to their schools. While there are local governments that entrust native English speakers with language classes, many other public schools are promoting their own teaching methods, since it is based on the financial situation of each local government. The shortage of native speakers has led many school teachers faced with having to provide English lessons to individually seek help from the private sector to accomplish their new task. Some have attended training courses at their own expense. Others utilize ready-made lesson plans and teaching material sold by publishing houses.

Many critics have come forward to say such classes in elementary school were launched before a support system was in place. There are also critics who question the benefit of English instruction at public elementary schools, as well as the heated desire to learn the language at such an early age. Some experts, such as Shirahata (1998), have questioned efficacy of English instruction conducted in elementary school and voiced concern over the ministry’s half-measure approach. He argues in his article, “*Shogakko e no*

Eigo donyu ga kakaeru kadai” (“Problems of introducing English instruction to elementary schools”), that there are a number of problems to be solved before we can expect benefit from English education at the elementary school level. We often hear that Japanese families temporarily residing in English-speaking countries are invariably amazed at how quickly their youngest members pick up the local language and correct pronunciation. Although Shirahata, too, admits the capacity of children under ten to effortlessly learn a new language, he argues that such a level of mastery could occur only when children have been exposed to an environment where English is a part of everyday life. The same level of language acquisition would not likely be achieved by just one or two English lessons a week. He also clearly dismisses the concerns for a critical period, since the study is only applicable to a child who has ample input and contact with the language. Furthermore, he adds there are several definitions about the critical period, and it is not clear exactly when it is.

Otsu and Torikai (2002), in their book “Shogakko de naze eigo?” (“Why should English be taught at elementary schools?”), claim there is a drawback from studying the language under untrained teachers. According to them, if children learn from a teacher who is eager to teach English but lacks a good command of the language, they would inherit the teacher’s mistakes. They say, “Once they learn the wrong thing, it is difficult to unlearn it”(Otsu & Torikai, 2002, p.26). Instead of promoting English education in elementary school, Otsu and Torikai said it would be more efficient to concentrate the limited budget on starting such classes at the junior high school level if the government wants to increase the number of Japanese proficient in English.

There are also many critics who have questioned the co-existence of English instruction and international understanding in “comprehensive studies” classes. Kawai (1998), for instance, argues international understanding should be nurtured through all opportunities of school education, not just through English instructions. He says, “If Japanese people want children to enhance global awareness, they have to make children learn Japanese culture and tradition, acquire basic academic skills, as well as use correct Japanese language before anything” (p.13). He questions the legitimacy of introducing international understanding exclusively in English classes, saying “it is contradictory with the word ‘international’ because the

language is spoken only in a few countries” (p.12). Shirahata (1999) also opposes to use English for the aim because children’s interests, as well as the discovery of fun and wonders of a language, can be fostered through any other languages, not to mention a native or a sign language. Otsu and Torikai (2002) argue that children can achieve a better understanding of the world’s different cultures and societies if they are taught such topics in their first language, instead of through English lessons, many of which have little relationship with international understanding. Similar opinions are also heard from teachers of elementary schools. According to an article in *The Japan Times*, a teacher in charge of English lessons at an elementary school in Chiba also suggests that English classes should be separated from international understanding education.

There are some discussions in comparison with the way early English education has been introduced in other countries. For instance, Kawai (1999) says, “In EU nations and Asian countries, the goals of early English education is clearly shown” (p.12). He continues, “...and the goals are to improve their people’s English skills and to strengthen their competitive position in world markets” (p.13). Kawai criticizes the absence of such clear philosophy as a base of introducing English in Japanese elementary schools, saying “the goals of English education at elementary schools in Japan has become obscure, since it has been included as a part of international understanding” (p.13).

While there are strong opposites against introducing English exclusively in elementary school, especially in the framework under international understanding, there are some studies that support the idea of teaching English as a tool to enhance such understanding. For example, Kuno (1999) emphasizes the importance of teaching English in elementary school since it is becoming an indispensable communication tool for people in the world. She supports her claim by reasons such as: the spread of early English education in neighboring Asian countries, the movement of the EU adapting English as the official language, and the dominant position of English in cyberspace. The spread of English is today commonly justified by this kind of functionalist perspective, which stresses choice and usefulness of English and suggests that global spread of English is natural, neutral and beneficial. Such view seems to hold sway for many people more directly involved in

English language teaching. Pennycook (1995) suggests that "With extent of the debate on the role of English in the world being between a conservative view on standards and a more liberal pluralist concept of variety, and with the primary concerns being those of intelligibility and description, most people in English language teaching have been poorly served by academic work that fails to address a far more diverse range of questions that might encourage a reassessment of our role as teachers of English in the world" (p.38). What I think is lacking from the most studies of English language teaching in elementary school in Japan is a broad range of social, historical, and political relationships. First of all, for instance, it lacks the view that the prevalence of English can easily lead to disregarding one or more other languages, as in the study of Day (1985, cited in Pennycook, 1995), which reports the gradual replacement of Chamorro in Guam and the North Marianas. Second, it lacks the awareness about the issue such as English as a gatekeeper to positions of prestige in society, as Ngugi (1985, cited in Pennycook, 1995) describes his experiences in Kenya, where not only was his native language proscribed with humiliating punishments but English became "the main determinant of a child's progress up the ladder of formal education" (p.115). Although the influence of English can not come this far in Japan, we always have to be conscious about ideologies behind the language teaching and learning.

Prior to the official start of English lessons in elementary school, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology previously conducted a pilot project. Under the project, 65 elementary schools implemented English classes for three years. According to the National Institute for Educational Policy, the project was successful in nurturing children's attitudes toward communicating in English and in making them accustomed to English sounds. Contradictory, however, as mentioned earlier in this paper, there are still many issues raised by critics, and they require thorough discussion. At most elementary schools, there are teachers who never taught English before, and they are struggling while teaching without sufficient training and support. Some painful complaints have passed some teachers' lips. Regardless of these situations, elementary school English education has been started by the ministry without apparent method, curriculum and material development nor a teacher training program. Out of

this chaos, though, some schools have created their own English class curricula for the pupils. In the next section, I will review some case studies and reports of these schools. It is amazing to see how varied the lessons are, and how creative and imaginative they can be.

Case studies

The approaches used in elementary schools providing English lessons could be categorized roughly into four groups: (1) activity-centered, (2) international understanding, (3) input-centered, and (4) information disseminating. The activity-centered approach is the most frequently adopted approach among English curricula in elementary school, since the ministry recommends that primary English education be provided to familiarize pupils with the language through music, games and other engaging methods. On the other hand, the international understanding approach is the most idealistic one, as English teaching is integrated into a program of international understanding in “comprehensive studies” classes. In this case, the language teaching receives less attention. The latter two approaches, on the other hand, are relatively rare and unique examples in comparison with the first two approaches. In this section, I will introduce a typical example from each of four categories.

Activity-centered approach

The activity-centered approach is the most often-adopted approach among the others as an English curriculum in elementary school. Ishihama (1999) reports about these English lessons in his article, “*Tanoshisa o motomete*” (“Seeking for fun”). Prior to actual curriculum creation, teachers who appear in the article have conducted a survey on their students about their needs and desires about the English lesson. Based on the analysis of the survey, the school created a conversation-oriented English class curriculum with the goal of teaching the children basic English expressions, and animal and food names through familiar topics, games and songs. The classes were conducted in the style of team-teaching, which consisted of two Japanese teachers and one native-speaker. Ishihama argues that it is ideal for children to learn English from native speakers. Although Japanese teachers play a crucial role

in the classes, he adds, "Team-teaching with a native speaker stimulates children's interests as well as deepens background and cultural knowledge of the language and it also creates a positive learning atmosphere" (p.23). Ishihama also suggests it is important not to put pressure on children to study English because such pressure may develop a dislike for the language. Although it sounds a little extreme, Ishihama says it is all right to have an entire class consisting of only songs and games in which children can have fun in learning. Seeking for fun is fine, but when concerning the children's developmental stages, some limitation to this approach could be supposed. Kuno (1999), in her article "*Soki eigo no Dos & Don'ts*" ("Dos and Don'ts in early English education"), shows her concerns on the contents of English lessons at some public schools. At such schools, games or activities using short and easy English phrases under the situations such as shopping or showing the way are the main features of curriculum. According to Kuno's observation, by the time students reach fifth grade, they begin to feel frustrated if they only have playing and dancing to the music, childish games or unchallenging activities. Wada (2002) argues that such fun-seeking approaches are the results of pushing most of the responsibility of the instruction to homeroom teachers. He adds, except in some special cases, it is almost impossible for homeroom teachers to teach English by themselves. Therefore it is understandable to set the objectives, not on "teaching English," but on "having fun with English." On the other hand, according to Wada, the majority of teachers at so-called "*senshin-ko*" ("schools which have started English instructions earlier than other schools in general") adopt practical objectives for their curricula. They expect children to be able to "communicate" in English rather than to merely enjoy or to have fun through occasional contacts with English. Thus the curriculum reported by Ishihama may be still in the start of curriculum development. Some years later, we may find the same school shifting its approach from fun-seeking activity-centered to a more communicative one.

International understanding centered approach

An example of the highly idealistic approach is reported by Goto (1999). In his article, he writes about curricula at Yokohama Municipal Elementary

Schools. The goals of the curricula have been established on firm principles of international understanding. Ms. Kubota, who has been involved in the project as a key figure from scratch, introduces the objectives of their curriculum as in the following terms:

- 1) To nurture necessary openness and positiveness to live together with people from multicultural backgrounds and variant cultures.
- 2) To develop a sense of identity as a member of a society and to raise interests and awareness of what is happening in the world.
- 3) To acquire appropriate behavior, communication skills and an open-minded attitude to coexist with people in a multicultural environment.

(Okubo, 1997)

According to Goto, the classes are carried out in the style of team-teaching consisting of a Japanese classroom teacher and an International Understanding Instructor (IUI). At the moment there are 87 IUIs from 37 different countries registered in the program. An IUI is invited to a class and asked to talk about the culture of his or her own country using easy English expressions. IUIs are asked to focus their lecture on children's lives and culture in their countries so that their story can easily provoke the students' interests. During the class, students are encouraged to use imagination and to compare what they have learned from the class with their own Japanese culture. By doing so, children can learn and recognize characteristics and aspects of each culture which are sometimes common with, and other times different from, their own culture. Then they start to value such similarities and differences. It is important to notice that teachers put emphasis on the promotion of the intercultural understanding rather than on English teaching. Since there is no translation into Japanese, IUIs use relatively easy and limited English expressions. In addition to such easily understandable English use, they highly utilize gestures, actual objects, photos, pictures, and mock-ups with their talk. They also include songs, dances, and games to make the class enjoyable. Although Goto points out there are some challenging problems such as how to improve all of their curricula to the certain levels of standard, how to systematically implement them, and how to evaluate such programs, still the curricula carried out in Yokohama Municipal Schools seem to be one of the rare examples of an international understanding class with

great success. But we have to remember the success of the curricula like this is not possible elsewhere in Japan. The elementary schools in Yokohama City are fortunate to have financial support by their municipal office, to be located at the advantageous place close to the capital city of Japan, and to have a large foreign population in comparison with other cities.

Input centered approach

A curriculum at Shinso Elementary School in Saitama Prefecture, reported in *Nihon Kyoiku Shinbun* (Japan Educational Newspaper) (2003a), is an example of programs that were developed based on teachers' creativity and enthusiasm. According to the article, teachers of the schools suggest English taught in elementary school should be mainly focused on input. Thus the aim of the English lessons of the school is to instill English sounds and rhythm into students. Using a 15-minute module in the morning three times a week, the school transmits video programs of English lessons to each classroom. Their ultimate goal is to make the pupils acquire 96 basic expressions by the end of six years of elementary school curriculum. They recommend that children should be provided necessary input repeatedly in phrases or chunks that are used by naive speakers in daily lives. They say it is inappropriate to provide input word by word because with this method children start using broken English just by connecting the words. One of their main activities is chanting phrases along with rap music. Children learn correct rhythm and intonation by putting melody and gesture to English phrases. During mid and lunch breaks, English songs and chants are transmitted via the school broadcasting system as background music. Each homeroom is provided with teaching materials such as CDs, audio cassette tapes, and picture books. In addition to the input module in the morning and at break times, students are provided the language lesson once a week through a special activity using a book called "In a People House." The style of the class consists of team-teaching of a Japanese homeroom teacher and an Assistant Language Teacher (ALT). The ALT talks about objects, such as animals, kitchen utensils, furniture, and food that appear in the story. In addition to the story telling, there are singing and dancing along with music played by their homeroom teacher as well.

Information disseminating approach

Unlike the majority of elementary school English classes that mainly focus on receiving or understanding different cultures using English, students at Tsuchisaki Elementary School study English to introduce their own culture to the world (Nihon Kyoiku Shinbun, 2003b). The project has been built up based on the local festival. Engaging in the project, students learn necessary vocabularies and expressions to explain and dispatch the information of the festival. Although the framework or theoretical tenet are not discussed in the report, behind this approach is clearly a new direction called "*Hasshin-gata no eigo*" ("Information disseminating approach" or "Japan-centered approach") advocated by Suzuki (1999). Suzuki argues that Japanese should use English to disseminate explicit aspects of Japanese culture to other world citizens. It is now high time to recognize that Japan and the Japanese have the right to express their opinions and be themselves as members of the world community. This new approach of English to send the positive images of Japanese culture with outside observers appears to be gaining wider acceptance in Japan. Furthermore, what is new in the definition is that instead of learning American or British English for understanding the world, a form of English that complements Japanese thought and discourse patterns is beginning to be advocated so that the world can better understand Japan. English curriculum implemented at Tsuchisaki Elementary School is an example of the "*Hasshin-gata*" approach applied to English instruction in elementary school. Although the immediate objectives of teachers of Tsuchisaki Elementary School is to enable students to let other people know about their local festival, their ultimate goal is to help students develop an ability to express themselves in a true sense by using English expressions they have internalized, as well as eventually disseminating the correct image of Japanese citizens.

Critical pedagogy and communicative skills

A question for many people in this national effort is how English should be taught in elementary school. Although it seems that for a while teaching English in elementary school will continue to be torn between pros and cons, it has already begun and undoubtedly it will keep going. While most issues of

English instruction in elementary school still need thorough discussion and time to settle, there are proposals and trends that might help and solve the current confusion.

The first solution comes from Suzuki's work who, in the previous section, appears as an advocator of the "*Hasshin-gata*" approach. In his early study, Suzuki (2000) suggests using a variety of English that is dissociated from the thought and culture of the UK and the US. This variety, named *Englic* by Suzuki, would enable Japanese to communicate with other English speakers without sacrificing their own cultural identity. In other words, the language instruction should not emulate the discourse used by American or British native speakers, but rather promote Japanese ownership of English.

The second solution for the confusion, and perhaps the most powerful method in English teaching at the elementary school level, seems to be the promotion of critical awareness about English domination, construction of identities, and ethnic, cultural and linguistic equality. The problems related with English domination in Japan are fortified because the general people accept the present situation uncritically and unconsciously. Solutions might be started by facilitating awareness that these problems do exist, and that particular values and beliefs are associated with English.

Yoshimura (2003), who advocates global awareness education in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) setting, uses thematic units in areas such as human rights education, peace education, environmental education, and cross cultural communication. She believes global awareness is "studies which promote the knowledge, attitudes and skills that are relevant to living responsibly in a multicultural and interdependent world" (Fisher and Hicks, cited in Yoshimura, 2003). Yoshimura also believes English education should help students become effective communicators in sharing and accepting diverse values and ways of living and thinking.

Teachers such as Yoshimura engaging in critical pedagogy question the knowledge that is taken for granted and try to build new knowledge. As in Tsuda's (1990, 1993 cited in Kubota 1998) stimulating and thought-provoking proposals, teachers must include in their curriculum of English the following ideas: rejecting the value judgements such as the superiority of the English language and English-speaking foreigners; becoming aware that

Japan is a country that treats Westerners favorably and discriminates against non-Westerners; establishing a positive self-image as a Japanese, and recognizing that internationalizing consciousness involves developing attitudes that promote equality among people, languages, and cultures. In this sense, the English program in Yokohama City Municipal Elementary Schools, which was introduced in the previous section, is successful to help students develop such attitudes.

While fostering critical awareness is an essential condition for achieving ethnic, cultural and linguistic equality, it is also important, realizing the fact that English is in fact an international lingua franca, to develop communicative skills in English and to use appropriate English for expressing cultural identity and advocating global equality. These two directions have to complement mutually in critical pedagogy for social change. As in Kubota (1998), "To only study the ideological aspect of English without developing communicative skills may disadvantage and alienate learners, since English does play a role of gate keeper, and it is influencing various aspects of Japanese language, culture, and society. Also, it would be difficult for a Japanese person with critical awareness without English skills to communicate with English speakers to voice his/her opinion. On the other hand, developing only communication skills without understanding how a language of power oppresses other languages, cultures and societies would further reinforce global inequality and a biased view of language, race, and culture" (p.304). Yoshimura writes in her article about her experience being frequently asked why the language has to be English to achieve her objectives of global awareness. She argues that Japanese people have to face up to the reality and recognize English as an indispensable medium in international business and cooperation. Based on her experiences living in developing countries, Yoshimura refers to cases in which English functions as a communication tool for people with many regional dialects. She says English is essential for such people to understand mutually. Then she urges Japanese people to accept English as an international language (EIL) used not only by its native speakers but by many other people in the world.

While elementary school teachers of English need to help their pupils develop both critical awareness and communicative skills, it is also necessary

for them to help students broaden their cultural/linguistic perspectives through recognizing many varieties in World Englishes. English curriculum needs to include varieties of English and literature from many parts of the world.

Recent developments of research in elementary school English education

As shown in the second section in the current paper, English education at the elementary school level has been claimed to be beneficial in several studies. But, in fact, most of such studies are written based on observations or the intuition of authors, and few are verified empirically. Although we need rich volume of research to investigate the effect of English instruction in elementary school, there are only a small number of works done since it was started.

There are two oft-cited empirical studies. The first one is an article written by Shirahata (2001). In his paper "Follow-up evaluation: English proficiency of the children after they received English instruction at the elementary school level under the Ministry's pilot project" ("*Tsuiseki: Kenkyu kaihatsu ko de eigo ni sesshita jido no sono go no eigo noryoku*"), he compares two groups of students (a group of children who received English instruction in elementary school and a group who did not) based on their ability to discriminate and pronounce English phonemes, and their proficiency to speak in English. Results indicate no significant difference between two groups in all analytical aspects. As Shirahata admits to himself, although there is a methodological problem of validity to measure speaking ability by the number of words used in the child's five-minute talk, the results of non-significant difference in both discrimination and pronunciation of the phonemes are indeed noteworthy.

The other interesting and well-cited work is a study called "Foreign Language Education from the Elementary School level" ("*Shogakko kara no gaikokugo kyoiku*") by Higuchi *et al.* It is based on the result of surveys conducted by JASTEC (The Japan Association for the Study of Teaching English to Children). This study is also a comparison between those who have experienced English education at the elementary school level and those who have not. The surveys are conducted three times: at one year, three years, and

five years after leaving elementary school. Investigation is made in the aspects of pronunciation, knowledge about English, and the language use. According to the results, although students who received English education perform slightly better than students who did not in the aspect of pronunciation at all three times, the difference is not statistically significant. As for knowledge about English, those who have studied English in elementary school outperform those who have not in the investigation held a year after they left elementary school; however, in the investigations at three and five years after they leave elementary school, there is little difference found between the two groups. About language use, the investigation shows students who have experienced English instruction in the elementary schools perform better than students who have not in the survey conducted a year after they left their elementary schools. The difference becomes narrower in the survey conducted after three years, but again in the last survey, those who studied English outperformed those who did not. As Higuchi himself admits, the effect of English instruction is relatively small than what has been expected by many interested parties. Kanjiro (2002) investigates the ability of children at different ages for their mechanical repetition of English words. Although it is an interesting inquiry, no significant differences among the age groups are claimed in this study because of low inter-rater reliability. As we have seen so far, a positive effect from English education at the elementary school level is not yet proved empirically regardless of being expected greatly by many people. In addition to the unsatisfactory results of these studies, there is definitely a shortage in the amount of research. Both quantitative as well as qualitative studies will be needed for the future development of this area.

Conclusion

In the last section, I would like to provide implications and suggestions based on what has been discussed in this paper.

First, I would like to give a suggestion on what kind of English elementary school English should aim for. As English is becoming an indispensable communication tool for people around the world, there will be problems to be faced when promoting English as a second/foreign language. Perhaps our

immediate interest would be related to finding a “standard English,” and it will definitely be the next anticipated issue in elementary school English. I think we should not bother much about standard English. It would be better for people to speak intelligibly in their own accent than speak with British or American accents because it reflects their identities. Thus it is important for teachers of English in elementary school to enable their students to present their own identities in English while “injecting” their own cultures and tradition into the language. Second, I would like to make a suggestion regarding the contents of English lessons in elementary school. MECSST calls for English to be taught to children in an enjoyable way, through the use of songs and games. At many schools, teachers say they should start with easy and familiar topics to foster comprehension. But I think self-expression should be also an important target in English education in elementary school. When students can make themselves understood in English, it generates a fresh excitement that strengthens their desire to improve their communicative ability in English. I suggest the ultimate goal of English instruction in elementary school should be to help students develop an ability to express themselves in a true sense by using English expressions they have internalized, rather than by singing and playing games. To achieve such advanced objectives to enable students to communicate in English, it is natural to seek support from ALTs or volunteers who have a good command of English. But systems such as an ALT’s participation in class are not institutionalized in most cases. Prompt and expeditious financial support is expected from the government side. My third proposal for English education in elementary school is to make it a compulsory subject. Many expect that English will become a compulsory subject in elementary school in the near future. If English continues to be taught on a noncompulsory basis in elementary school, it will be difficult to produce qualified teachers (Kato, cited in Hani, 2001). Although we should be careful not to stimulate unnecessary competition among parents to give their children English lessons from an early age, if there were a system for training teachers and English were taught effectively in elementary school, it would be so successful that children would be able to engage in communicative English and use it to exchange their own thoughts with other speakers of English all over the world.

The fourth suggestion is about curriculum development of English education in elementary school. Regardless of some critique in which English curricula in public elementary schools are all the same, Matsukawa (1998) claims that such school based or community based curricula are significant because they are created by the teachers from scratch without any guidelines. They are also meaningful in the way they are developed through the cooperation between teachers and the whole school or PTA. The involvement of homeroom teachers, whose expertise is not English but elementary school education, is worthy of notice, since the fresh views were added to the contents of curricula. As Matsukawa points out, the main activities of most of the curricula are related with international understanding or cross-cultural understanding. Matsukawa claims that these two concepts have been also aimed for in the curricula of junior and senior high school education. While such goals are subordinate to language learning in junior and senior high schools, international understanding education has become the main goal instead of the language learning in elementary school. It is indeed valuable since teachers created practical objectives and lessons in contents of international understanding rather than to just set ideal objectives that aim for change in attitudes. I think this movement can be connected to the promotion of raising critical awareness in English education in elementary school. As applied linguists and English language teachers who are closely involved with the spread of English, I think educators should keep watching the direction of English education in elementary school, as well as become positively engaged in a critical pedagogy and address such issues that take the current position of English for granted. We should include varieties of English and literature from various parts of the world into our teaching material and get involved into the project to use English to oppose the dominant discourses.

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