Does Teaching Reading and Writing in Elementary School Make a Difference in Junior High School Language Development?

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Abstract

This study quantitatively and qualitatively compares junior high school (JHS) students who were taught English including some reading and writing in elementary school with their counterparts who had no exposure to English in ES in their performance of oral reading at two times: in the 4th (Time 1) and the 12th months (Time 2) after their entrance to JHS. The quantitative analysis indicates that the experienced group outperformed the inexperienced counterpart at Time 1. At Time 2, however, no statistical difference was found between the two groups. The qualitative analysis showed that the experienced learners had a better understanding of letter-sound association at Time 1. At the same time, however, both groups committed similar errors at both times, mispronouncing the words they would never mispronounce in conversations and mispronouncing inflectional endings.

1. Introduction

No agreement has been reached regarding whether reading and writing should be included in English instruction in elementary school (ES) in Japanese educational settings. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) maintains that reading and writing English are too demanding for ES children and that literacy-related activities can create aversion to learning English. Tsuido (1998) criticizes this proposition for lacking evidence for the causal relationship between introduction of literacy-related activities and children’s aversion to learning English. Opposition to the MEXT’s proposition is also expressed by some ES teachers, who report success in teaching basic reading and writing in ES (Amano ES and Nishi JHS, 2003; Imako, 2002; Naoshima ES 2003; Naoyama, 2001). Although these studies provide valuable data collected from teachers’ observations or learners’ self-reports, no study has provided evidence yet to support the benefits of teaching reading and writing in ES. The present study attempts to fill this
gap and to provide data that may contribute to stimulating constructive discussions on this issue.

The research question is formulated as follows: Do veteran learners understand letter-sound association better than novice learners at two times of the first year in JHS? Veteran learners are operationally defined as students who were taught English speaking, listening, reading, and writing as part of the school curriculum for three years in ES. Novice learners had took no regular English classes for an extended period in ES.

2. Review of the Literature

2.1 Opponents of Literacy-Related Activities

As mentioned above, MEXT (2001) opposes teaching reading and writing in ES. It insists that spoken English together with paralanguage including gestures and facial expressions is enough for ES children to communicate. Their claim is supported by Nishinaka (1996), the then-principal of one of the pilot schools for research purposes designated by the then-Ministry of Education. He contends that focusing on spoken language rather than on written language has beneficial effects on forming the foundation of future learning, and that exposure to English sounds can help learners unconsciously get the whole picture of the English language. Unfortunately, neither MEXT nor Nishinaka provides theoretical underpinnings for their claims.

2.2 Supporters of Literacy-Related Activities

Proponents of teaching reading and writing in ES are classified into two groups: a strong position and a weak position. The strong position insists that literacy is an important part of English language teaching in ES that should be introduced from the outset of the learning process. Tsuruta (1980), based on her experience of teaching lower-grade children how to read and write, reports its beneficial effects as follows: (a) learning reading and writing helps them pay attention to the differences between each phoneme, (b) it motivates them to read English words they happen to see, and (c) it raises their awareness about loan words in Japanese. Tsuruta further emphasizes the positive effects of oral reading, saying that it (a) encourages children to learn for themselves, (b) helps them understand the difference between English and Japanese in their phonological systems and sentence structures, and (c) boosts children’s class participation, because their attentive listening to their teacher’s model reading enables them to read independently at home.

Matano (1994) is another teacher who holds the strong position. In inaugurating a new English program for ES children at a private language school, she set three objectives: (a) literacy development, (b) vocabulary building, and (c) acquisition of grammar. These objectives were established based on her extensive review of English textbooks used in American school systems. Matano maintains that the three objectives are indispensable elements to survive in an English speaking community. It deserves special notice that she emphasizes literacy.

The weak position is presented by Higuchi (1997), Higuchi, Kunikata, and Hirasawa (1997),
Kuno (1999), and Yatsugi (2000). They recommend familiarizing ES children with reading and writing step by step, while prioritizing listening and speaking. Higuchi (1997) contends that reading and writing enhance learning of listening and speaking. Kuno (1999) states that literacy is an advantage for children especially when they have access to computers in the classroom. Yatsugi (2000) argues that a long-term goal of English teaching in ES is the development of basic skills, including reading and writing, in preparation for English learning in JHS.

A few MEXT-designated pilot schools have introduced reading and writing activities despite the caution of the MEXT. Amano ES in Kawachi-Nagano City, Osaka, teaches reading and writing because children show interest in them (Umemoto, 2000). Naoshima ES in Naoshima Town, Kagawa (2003), did likewise in 2002 based on the survey results that 1st-year JHS students who were exposed exclusively to aural-oral activities in ES have difficulty in learning reading and writing in JHS and that they wish they had learned them in ES. Whereas MEXT does not recommend literacy-related activities in ES because it is difficult for learners, Naoshima ES dares to introduce them in ES because that may alleviate the possible burden learners may have in JHS.

2.3 Learners’ Attitude toward Learning Reading and Writing

Some classroom research suggests that ES children are interested in reading and writing (Naoyama, 2001; Onodera, 2001; Umemoto, 2000). Naoshima ES (2003) reports a survey result that 45% of the JHS students who experienced literacy-related activities in Naoshima ES felt that these activities helped them learn English in JHS. Imai, Asai, & Mihara (1999) conducted a fact-finding survey in the form of class observations, questionnaires, and interviews at Nagahara ES in Itano, Tokushima, one of the MEXT-designated pilot schools. They conclude that teaching reading and writing helps learners develop positive attitudes toward reading unfamiliar words, which, in turn, leads to building confidence and to promoting their learning process.

Although the above studies suggest that literacy-related activities in ES are helpful for later learning in JHS, these activities are not necessarily enjoyed by upper-grade children. Imai et al. (1999) found that the percentage of the upper-grade ES children who enjoyed writing and those who enjoyed reading were 34.78% and 39.13% respectively, whereas the percentage of their lower-grade counterparts who enjoyed each activity were 90.48% and 80.95%. Takada (2004a) supports their findings. She investigated the effectiveness and enjoyableness of eight ES English activities perceived by 39 veteran learners. She found that only 13 of them enjoyed reading and writing basic words in ES. In contrast, 32 of them felt these activities were effective for English learning in JHS. Takada speculates that these findings reflect the degree of cognitive abilities demanded for literacy-related activities, which are not much required for children’s favorite activities such as games and songs.

2.4 Summary

In sum, more studies support the proponents of teaching reading and writing in ES than the
3. Method

3.1 Participants

The participants were 43 veteran and 50 novice female learners enrolled in the first year at a private JHS in the Tokyo metropolitan area. Sampling was conducted as follows. Out of the intact first-year student body of 201, 29 students who had lived in English-speaking countries were excluded. Out of the remaining 172, 23 students were excluded for missing one of the tests or not following directions. Out of the remaining 149, 43 students, who were exposed to English in the affiliated ES, were labeled veteran learners. Out of the other 106, 56 students were eliminated because they had studied English regularly for more than one year with tutors or at language schools. That left 50 students, who were labeled novice learners.

The veteran group was exposed to English from Grade 4 to Grade 6. They had one 40-minute lesson weekly in Grades 4 and 5, and two 40-minute lessons weekly in Grade 6. The total exposure in the ES was 80 hours. The purpose of instruction was basically in line with MEXT (2001) objectives: to let children have fun through aural-oral activities so that they will cultivate positive attitudes toward the English language and the culture behind it. In addition to these activities, however, the school taught the alphabet and spellings of some basic words.

The amounts of time the participants were taught English in JHS at Time 1 and Time 2 were 45 and 125 hours, respectively. With 30-minute daily homework added to them, the hours of studying English in JHS were 78 and 215, respectively.

For the qualitative analysis, 13 participants were selected from each group. The selected 13 veteran learners, unlike the rest of their group, had no extra English lessons outside the classroom while in ES. The 13 novice learners were randomly selected because they were homogeneous in terms of taking no regular English lessons either in or out of the classroom.

3.2 Test Instruments

Two English passages were prepared for oral reading by this researcher. The 82-word passage for Time 1 and the 90-word passage for Time 2 consisted of words and sentence structures that had been introduced to the participants before the administration of each test.

3.3 Data Collection Procedures

Each participant was called in a small classroom in turn and was asked to read the given text
aloud. Their reading was tape-recorded. Data were first collected in early July. The second data collection was conducted from late February to early March.

3.4 Data Analysis

Fifteen words that cover a variety of letter-sound relations were selected from each text. The pronunciation of these words was evaluated on a three-point scale by two raters. The raters were a Japanese college lecturer of English and this researcher. Correct pronunciation was given two points, unclear but not totally incorrect pronunciation was given one point, and wrong pronunciation or skipping a word was given zero points. Possible total scores ranged from 0 to 30. Descriptive statistics for each group were calculated, followed by Welch tests for Time 1 and Time 2 to compare the scores obtained by the two groups. The alpha level was set at .05. Qualitative analysis was conducted to find any linguistic features found in the participants’ performance.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Quantitative Analysis

The inter-rater reliability between the two raters was .87 at Time 1, and .98 at Time 2. The descriptive statistics, which is shown in Table 1, indicated that the scores of the veteran group were negatively skewed to the point where normal distribution assumption was not met. Therefore, Welch tests were run instead of t-tests. As Table 2 shows, the veteran group outperformed their novice counterparts toward the end of the 1st term. No statistical difference was found at Time 2. We may safely say that novice learners lag behind veteran learners in oral reading in the 4th month of the first year of JHS, but that they catch up with them by the 12th month.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Skew</th>
<th>SE Skew</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Skew</th>
<th>SE Skew</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Veteran</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>22.01</td>
<td>6.27</td>
<td>-1.05</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>22.59</td>
<td>5.03</td>
<td>0.851</td>
<td>0.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Novice</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>18.42</td>
<td>5.95</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>23.09</td>
<td>3.78</td>
<td>0.63</td>
<td>0.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>20.08</td>
<td>6.33</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>22.86</td>
<td>4.38</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>0.25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Comparison of Veteran and Novice Learners in their Oral Reading

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Time 1</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Time 2</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SS</td>
<td>df</td>
<td>MS</td>
<td>F</td>
<td></td>
<td>SS</td>
<td>df</td>
<td>MS</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between Groups</td>
<td>298.22</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>298.22</td>
<td>8.01*</td>
<td></td>
<td>5.71</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.71</td>
<td>0.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>3388.92</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>37.24</td>
<td></td>
<td>1762.97</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>19.37</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3687.15</td>
<td>92</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1768.68</td>
<td>92</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .01
4.2 Qualitative Analysis

All the cases in which each of the 26 selected participants did not pronounce a word correctly were counted and classified into two major categories: (a) mispronunciation that can interfere with communication, and (b) mispronunciation that may not seriously interfere with communication. Each category was further sub-grouped based on types of mispronunciation.

Table 3. Numbers of Cases in which Words Were Not Pronounced Correctly

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Time 1</th>
<th>Time 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Veteran</td>
<td>Novice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a-1 Skip a word</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a-2 Mispronounce all or part of a word</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a-3 Replacing a word with a different one</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b-1 Stress a wrong syllable</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b-2 Skip a short function word</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b-3 Drop an inflectional ending</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b-4 Replace an inflectional ending with a different one</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b-5 Mispronounce an inflectional ending</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>210</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As Table 3 shows, a noticeable difference between the two groups at Time 1 is that the novice group committed more errors that may hamper communication than the veteran group. Some mispronounced or skipped words were school, wife’s, Mike, high, breakfast, and junior. The numbers of these cases found in veteran learners’ and novice learners’ performances are shown in this order as follows: school (0, 9); wife’s (5, 12); Mike (3, 7); high (6, 11); breakfast (6, 11); junior (6, 10). Closer examination revealed that wife of wife’s was pronounced [wif] by six novice learners, but by only one veteran learner. Similarly, the [ai] sound in Mike was pronounced [i] by five novice learners, while only one veteran learner made this error. These results suggest that more veteran learners understand the function of the “silent e”.

The veteran learners’ better understanding of letter-sound association was also identified in the pronunciation of junior. Among type a-2 cases, more novice learners failed to read the second syllable, whereas most of the veteran learners who mispronounced this word barely read part of the second syllable, though not perfectly correctly. A similar phenomenon was observed in the pronunciation of breakfast.

Hence, the quantitative analysis result that shows veteran learners’ superiority at Time 1 was confirmed by the qualitative analysis. That the novice group caught up with the veteran group at Time 2 was also confirmed by the qualitative analysis. Twelve out of thirteen novice learners...
pronounced *wife* correctly at Time 2, whereas only one of them successfully pronounced this word at Time 1. A similar example is the silent *gh*. While *gh in high* was a trouble spot at Time 1 for 11 novice learners, *night* was correctly pronounced at Time 2 by every novice learner. These examples show that the novice group had a better grasp of letter-sound relations at Time 2 than they had been at Time 1.

The qualitative analysis also uncovered pronunciation errors that are common to both groups. At Time 1, six veteran and eight novice learners failed to read *does* correctly. Given that rules of letter-sound relations of the English language are not simple, this result may not be surprising. However, it was rather an unexpected result because this researcher, as their teacher, had never heard them pronounce this auxiliary verb incorrectly when they had oral practice repeatedly in class. This finding implies that mastery of a word in the oral form does not necessarily guarantee its mastery in the written form.

Another common feature was that their awareness of inflectional endings developed in a similar way. As Table 3 shows, Type b-3 (dropping an inflectional ending), which was observed 14 and 16 times in veteran and novice groups' performances respectively at Time 1, was found only once at Time 2. The text used for Time 1 contained three plural words (*students, books, friends*). Five students in each group did not pronounce the plural -*s*. In contrast, there was only one similar error although the text used for Time 2 also contained two plural words (*things, videos*) with *videos* appearing twice. Both groups seem to have become familiarized with the plural ending towards the end of the first year in JHS. According to the ES teacher who taught English to the veteran group, they were exposed to plural nouns in ES. These data imply that a limited amount of input in ES may not bring about discernible benefit for the acquisition of the plural inflection.

It should be noted that type b-5 cases observed at Time 2 were all related with past tense verb endings, which had not been introduced at Time 1. A few examples are *watched, helped, talked*, whose endings were mistakenly pronounced [ -d]. Another example is *rested*, which was pronounced [rested] without a vowel sound between [t] and [d]. Both groups had difficulty reading verbs in past tense because it was soon after regular conjugation was introduced when this oral reading test was administered. However, there was not a single case in which the past tense ending was not uttered. A possible interpretation is that past tense endings look more distinctive than plural endings, which both groups often failed to pronounce at Time 1. Another speculative interpretation would be that the mastery of plural endings facilitates the acquisition of another type of inflection. It is also possible that tense inflection is easier to acquire because it exists in the learners' first language whereas the singular/plural distinction does not.

Readers should be cautioned that the interpretations advanced here are tentative. They are based on a qualitative analysis of a limited number of samples. Further research is needed to find how veteran and novice learners acquire language after they are enrolled in JHS.
5. Implications

The present study has provided evidence regarding the benefits of teaching reading and writing in ES. Veteran learners have a better understanding of letter-sound association in the 4th month after their enrollment in JHS, but their superiority disappears by the 12th month, when the rules of letter-sound relations are no longer new learning items for both groups. Although late starters eventually catch up with early starters, we should not disregard the difficulty they have in oral reading because it can demotivate learners. As Aizawa (1996) and Tsuido (1996) point out, oral reading can become a hurdle in learning English at the beginners’ level. Some learners confuse the alphabet with the Roman alphabet, which poses another source of difficulty (Tsuido, 1996). Indeed, oral reading is an essential part of JHS classroom activities in Japan, and therefore, committing errors in oral reading frequently, particularly in the presence of classmates, can be discouraging. If some exposure to written English in ES lowers this hurdle, as this study suggests, there seems to be no reason to bar literacy-related activities from ES English instruction. Nakajima (2004), based on the theory and practice of bilingual education, maintains that well-balanced language learning experience including the basics of reading and writing is needed in Japanese ES settings in order to develop foreign language learning ability.

In addition, learners themselves are pleased they learned reading and writing in ES. As mentioned in the literature review section, Takada (2004a) found that 32 out of 39 JHS students felt that literacy-related activities they experienced in ES were effective for English learning in JHS. These 39 participants were identical with the veteran learners who participated in the present study. (The sample size of the 2004a study was smaller because four participants either were transferred or were absent from school when the survey was conducted.) With the results of these two studies combined, we may say that literacy-related activities in ES contribute to actual gain in language learning as well as to learners’ satisfaction with instruction.

The findings of this study also suggest that oral reading is a demanding language activity for beginners even if they were exposed to some reading and writing in ES. Not only are letter-sound associations of the English language not simple, but also many words assigned to the first year of JHS tend to deviate from the rules of letter-sound relations. JHS teachers should understand that even experienced learners need time and patience to read aloud successfully. The students who were exposed only to aural-oral activities in ES, as is the case in many public ESs, would have much more difficulty in reading and writing, not to mention those who had no exposure. JHS teachers should take time to help them grasp letter-sound relations of the English language in the first term of the first year, using, for example, phonics.

This researcher is well aware of the argument that teaching English in ES is not necessary because novice learners eventually catch up with veteran learners. Indeed, some studies have found that the two groups are not different in listening (Shirahata, 2002; Takada, 2004b), pronunciation (Shirahata, 2002), grammar (Takada, 2003a), and motivation (Takada, 2003b) in the
first year in JHS. However, with 88.3% of public ESs nationwide introducing English language activities in 2003 (MEXT, 2004), it would be counter-productive to suggest that English teaching, in any form, should be started at JHS instead of ES. A more constructive approach would be to restructure the English education system in Japan within a framework of consistent education ES through JHS. It should be from this standpoint that when and how reading and writing should be taught is discussed.

Acknowledgements

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