Teaching English to the Higher Graders: 
A Practical Approach at Private Primary School

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Abstract

This study examines how reading and writing activities can be adopted into English teaching to the higher gragers of primary school, and further evaluates how the combinations of listening, speaking, reading and writing are significant for teaching English to this particular age group. In this study, I present various activities taking advantage of the students’ listening and speaking skills which they have gained in the lower grades. Such practical examples demonstrate that this integrative approach is intended to enhance the students’ English ability and to promote their motivation towards English learning. Throughout, the study is based on a review of relevant literature and an examination of the students’ performance in English classes at a private primary school. This study will encourage English teachers to open up new perspectives and effectively adapt them to English teaching to the higher gragers who are at different levels concerning proficiencies, needs, interests, preferences and motivations.

1. Background

In most private primary schools in Japan, English is taught from the first grade for six years. The teaching curricula are designed based on the students’ developmental stages in order to effectively improve their abilities of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Especially, teachers become more selective in choosing an activity for children aged between 10 and 12 of the higher grades. This is because several problems are getting unveiled while teaching the higher grades i.e. fifth and sixth grades. The major problems are;

- The differences in English achievement level is widening among students in the higher grades. When English classes are conducted at the average level, students who returned from English speaking countries or have learned English from their early childhood become bored. On the
other hand, students whose achievements are below average start having an uncomfortable feeling to English.
- The complexity of their needs, interests and preferences makes it more difficult to choose an activity which attracts all the students. Some students still love activities including movement in childlike fashion, but some students no longer love them. They cannot enjoy every activity all together any more, although they welcomed everything in the lower grades.
- They have already acquired limited learning strategies, but they are less receptive to learning than the lower graders. The liveliness in language learning which is seen at younger age is beginning to vanish due to the emotional constraints of adolescence.

Yamauchi (2002) also emphasizes the difficulties in English teaching for the higher graders, based on the survey of nine private primary schools located in Kobe and Hanshin area. In order to cope with these problems of this particular age group, this study examines how reading and writing activities can be effectively adopted into ordinary classes, taking advantage of their listening and speaking skills which they have gained in the lower grades, and further discusses how the combination of listening, speaking, reading and writing helps the higher graders to enhance their English ability and develop their motivation towards English learning.

2. Participants

2.1. Participants

The study involved the fifth and sixth graders aged between 10 and 12 at a private primary school in Aichi prefecture. The subjects are 112 students in four classes (5A, 5B, 6A, and 6B). Each class is homogeneous and consists of 28 students. In this school, the students have 40 minute-English classes twice a week taught by both a Japanese English teacher and a native speaker teacher. The native speaker teacher is employed full time and takes part in each class once a week in the form of team-teaching. In this regard, the students in this school have more exposure to English compared to those who attend public elementary schools.

2.2. The developmental feature of the target age group

Children aged between 10 and 12 have a number of advantages in language learning. They have an ability to transfer some of the skills and strategies used in their first language learning to foreign language learning. Scott and Ytreberg (1990) point out that they are competent users of their mother tongue and they are aware of the main rules of syntax in their own language. Corson (1988) states that by the time children reach eleven years, they know a great deal about using language for collaborative thinking, for encouraging one another, for dealing with disagreement and for rational persuasion. He adds that by thirteen years they can initiate, elicit,
extend and qualify in a range of ways in group discussion. From these points, students at this age will develop their abilities to appreciate other viewpoints by working in pairs or groups.

Moreover, the children begin to turn their eyes to other cultures. Brumfit (1984) mentions that they have fewer negative attitudes to foreign language cultures than adults, and that consequently they are better motivated than adults. In this respect, it is the best time to introduce other cultures as a part of language learning.

Furthermore, their interests in writing and reading activities emerge at this age, and their intellectual development promotes the growth of these skills. Since the students are willing to practice reading and writing, teachers can give them a chance to read storybooks and to write about their friends, families or famous people.

3. Pre-Reading Activity

In 2003, a project was conducted using the whole year. The project attempted to explore how an English storybook helped the fourth graders to naturally introduce to literal study. Therefore, the current fifth graders already practiced listening, speaking and reading skills through an English storybook when they were in the fourth grade.

In the first term of school year, using a large version of the storybook, *Poppet* by Dick King-Smith, the teacher gave storytelling several times by making the most of gestures, facial expressions, intonation and mime. Such nonverbal manners were helpful to attract the students to the story and encourage them to understand the story. The students themselves used their prior knowledge for understanding and sympathized with story characters. The students’ mother tongue was used in a selective and controlled fashion. The questionnaire was also conducted to grasp the students’ comprehension level. The result showed that most students had deepened their understanding gradually while proceeding from the pre-reading through the while-reading to the post-reading activities.

In the second term, the students participated in a play based on the storybook, *Poppet*. The students autonomously practiced in groups how to speak English, how to use gestures and how to perform nicely. The teachers helped them to activate their practices. In order to take more responsibility for their learning through the further practices, the students were sometimes required to fill out a self-evaluation worksheet. The students, who were even 9 or 10 years old, could evaluate themselves appropriately and objectively. This procedure was followed to avoid overtiring them and losing their confidence in English.

In the third term, each student was provided a copy of *Poppet*. The students began to associate sounds and meaning with written symbols without any hesitation or anxiety. The students had been repeatedly listening to the story and speaking out in the play, and therefore they could smoothly read the storylines by connecting sounds and words of English. A storybook activated the students’ listening and speaking skills, and naturally led them into reading activities.
4. Reading and Writing Activities

The students in the higher grades begin to think about language as language. They begin to be more selective in choosing words for use, more thinking about their meanings, and try to give definitions for words and recognize subtle differences between them. They recognize that there are many different ways to pronounce the sounds of vowels and consonants, because they learned the rules governing the sound and symbol relationship through ‘phonics’ in the lower grades. It appears that they have been intellectually developed enough to learn English reading and writing.

4.1. Writing a caption for a picture

In general, it is best to introduce English through listening and speaking first, then reading, and writing last. Pictures are very important for young children. As suggested by Phillips (1993), it is good to ask them to draw a picture first and then to write a short caption for it. It is also usual to ask them to copy words and short sentences first and to practice their handwriting as much as possible. These short sentences and words should reflect themes connected with the children’s schoolwork or daily lives, and be linked with pictures and posters around the room.

The following activity is sometimes carried out for the higher graders, when the students are requested to draw a picture based on a song, and to write a short caption for the picture.

Procedure:
1) Practicing the song
2) Copying words and phrases of the song and practicing handwriting.
3) Drawing a picture based on the song
4) Writing a short caption for the picture
5) Presenting the short caption with the picture in the classroom

4.2. Using a computer

In this school, computers are equipped for IT education. This environment provides a good opportunity to adopt a computer into English teaching. Advantages of using a computer in English teaching particularly for the higher graders are that 1) it can meet individual student’s achievement level, 2) it supports the student-centered learning, and 3) it revitalizes the students’ motivation towards English learning.

The higher graders who had learned English for four years already at school have been getting dissatisfied with ‘activities only to familiarize with English’ using songs, rhymes, chants and games. For example, some students feel bored with or embarrassed about moving their bodies
or clapping their hands to the beat or to underline stressed words in a song. Some students skip their work on English learning because English is neither a compulsory subject in primary school nor a required subject for their junior high school entrance examination. In this situation, a computer is a good tool for attracting their interests, regaining their liveliness in English learning which was seen at younger age, and improving their English skills.

For reading and writing activity, computers can be effectively used. In the beginning, students learn mainly how to operate word-processing software such as how to type, how to save sentences, how to change a font size and so on. Then, they practice typing according to their teacher’s instructions.

1) Practice typing the alphabet:
   e.g. fff, ijj, ddd, kkk, sss, lll, ggg, hhh

2) Practice typing short sentences:
   e.g. I am (name). I am (age). My birthday is (date).

When typing a short sentence, the teacher carefully tells them to space out between words and to put a period in the end of the sentence. Finally, the students are encouraged to create their own writing (for instance a caption of a picture based on their favorite English song – See 4-1).

From the beginning, the students practice typing with interests. They are also careful with keeping the right position of their fingers on the keyboard. It is convenient to use a computer in writing activity, because immediately after the students mistype or forget to space, the computer indicates their mistakes. Thus, they can easily notice and correct by themselves. The use of computers for writing draws individual student’s creativity and positive attitude. Even shy students who cannot speak English in front of other people can display their great courage in producing their best work. The students are very pleased about this productive activity.

4.3. Cursive writing and Calligraphy

The students have a great interest in English writing activity, especially some of the students are keen to write their names in cursive. At the affiliated junior high school, cursive writing is introduced in the first year. Taking account of these facts, the practice of writing small letters in cursive is carried out in the higher grades. The teachers introduce only two or three letters every time as well as showing the relation between spelling and pronunciation. Capital letters are taught if necessary. Small letters are not introduced one by one in the alphabetical order, but chosen intentionally so as to build up three-letter words or four-letter words afterwards. Before Christmas day, they make a Christmas card by means of cursive writing and calligraphy. Many students voluntarily practice at home as well as at school. These activities largely arouse their curiosity and raise their motivation for writing.
4.4. Vocabulary Test and Junior STEP Test *(Jidou-Eiken)*

A vocabulary test is carried out in the beginning of English class (Appendix 1). Student leaders organize the test and guide other students to finish within five minutes. It helps the students to remind the sound and alphabet relationship which they have learned through ‘phonics’. It also helps them to gradually change their awareness towards English learning before entering junior high school.

Moreover, Junior STEP test is carried out every autumn. The sixth graders take the first grade test called ‘gold’ and the fifth graders take the second grade test called ‘silver’. This English proficiency test targets primary school children and has three grades, and therefore teachers can choose the most appropriate grade according to their students’ proficiency level. A test is a means of knowing the student’s progress, but also it is a means of highly motivating the higher graders.

4.5. An integrative approach with a textbook

English teaching at primary school should be flexible. Making good combinations of listening, speaking, reading, and writing is a crucial part of teaching English to the higher graders. Teachers can make the content more interesting by introducing new tasks or improving the way in which the textbook is presented (Nolasco and Arthur, 1988). The following example is a reading activity using a short story extracted from the textbook. The example combines listening, speaking or writing activities in different stages.

Pre-Reading

1) Students in pairs are given six picture cards (See Chart 1) indicating the scenes of the story and encouraged to put them in order.

2) They describe each picture to build their own story, and present their story in class.
3) The teacher reads the story. The students just listen to the story while looking at the six pictures and then put them in the correct order.
4) The teacher tells the answer and asks some questions in English.
   e.g. Which picture comes first? How about the second one?
       What animals are in the first picture? What are they doing?
       What is on the elephant? Where is the monkey?
       Are they hungry or full? Are they sad or happy?

While-Reading
1) The students are given six sentence strips (See Chart 2) and encouraged to read them silently.
2) They are asked to match each sentence strip to each picture card while the teacher is reading the story again.
3) The teacher tells the answer and explains key words, grammar and structure if necessary.
4) The students are asked to read aloud with the teacher. At this stage, the teacher clarifies if they roughly understand the content.
5) They are asked to pay close attention to rhythm, stress, and intonation when reading the sentences. Also, the teacher reads aloud repeatedly to let the students notice English phonetic features, and sometimes asks the students to clap their hands to the rhythm.

An elephant is walking.
He is hungry

An apple is in the tree.
"What a big apple!"

I want the apple, but I can't climb the tree.

A monkey is in the tree.
"Please pass me the apple."
"All right."

"Thank you. Let's eat together."
That sounds great.

The monkey is now on the elephant.
The elephant and the monkey are eating the apple. They are happy.


Post-Reading
1) The students are asked to make groups of two or three and encouraged to make their own story based on the short story above.
2) They write a new story by adding more characters and sentences. They can ask their teacher anytime if they have questions about English.
3) After making a story, they remember the sentences and give a presentation in front of other students and evaluate their presentation (Appendix 2).
In the reading activity, the proper production of rhythm, stress and intonation by the teacher will play an important role in the students’ pronunciation learning process. Amer (1997) suggests that reading aloud by the teacher helps the students to see reading as a continuous, meaningful process of building larger semantic units rather than as that of focusing on individual units. In the final stage of this reading activity, they created a new story by making use of their experience and prior knowledge.

4.6. An integrative approach with an English play

In 2002, the school started the Australia home-stay program for the higher graders. The last time, 21 students took part in the program and experienced home-staying about for two weeks in the summer vacation. They communicated using some English, introduced their culture and language, and deepened their understanding of different cultures by living with Australian families. In order to share such valuable experience with other students, the sixth graders decided to adapt it into an English play for the ‘English Day’. The ‘English Day’ is annually held as one of the school events, when each class presents an English performance on the stage to show their families. They named the play ‘Discover Australia’, and cooperated with each other to write the script in English and Japanese.

Presenting an English play provides a number of communicative language possibilities. For example, when writing the script, the students can exchange their ideas with their classmates and consolidate their reading and writing skills. They can elicit and extend their knowledge in a range of ways in group discussion, and develop their abilities to appreciate other viewpoints by working in class. When practicing the play, they can learn how to speak clearly, how to use body language effectively, and how to act their roles dramatically. They read aloud their lines many times to memorize their lines and to speak English fluently. The native speaker teacher corrected their pronunciation. Every student is highly motivated to speak English in front of the audience.

Nevertheless, there is a disapproving comment about adopting a play in English teaching that it is time-consuming and inefficient. It might be true that students speak only a few lines individually in a play, but they unconsciously remember the whole script while listening to the other students’ lines. This is an outstanding ability of young learners. The whole process from writing the script until showing to the audience takes a long time and is too responsible, but really challenging for both students and teachers. It is important how teachers can elicit and extend their students’ special abilities.

In addition, when choosing an activity, advantages and shortcomings of large classes should be taken into account. For a large class consisting of 28 students, English play is a good means for stimulating the class and enhancing the students’ solidarity for developing their class performance further.
Conclusion

Students’ ages and their characteristics are crucial aspects to decide an activity. Primary school students can learn English from their pure motives without being influenced by social aspects such as entrance examinations. In this situation, English teaching is sometimes very difficult. Especially when teaching the higher graders who are at different levels concerning proficiencies, needs, interests and preferences, teachers may feel nervous about ideas and techniques for English teaching. Since the students at this age begin to turn their eyes to other cultures, it is the best time to expose students to an understanding of foreign cultures as a part of language learning. However, no matter what the topic looks like, it is significant to make good combinations of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. This approach can help the teachers to bridge the gap among the higher graders in English learning.

This study has attempted to provide a practical approach for teaching English to the higher graders at private primary school. It is certain that there must be other aspects, but by considering the ideas presented here and adopting some of them, teachers will have more confidence and flexibility in their teaching. Their students too, will gain more confidence and pride in being able to use English, and more motivation for further English learning.

References


Appendices

Appendix 1 Vocabulary Test

Appendix 2 Judging Sheet for evaluating the students' presentation

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