A Study of Some Issues Associated with the Introduction of Reading and Writing English in Japanese Elementary Schools from a Teacher’s Perspective.

John THURLOW*

Introduction

Following the introduction of the new study guidelines in 2018, elementary school teachers have begun to express new concerns about the teaching of Foreign Language Activities (FLA), which have been taught on a compulsory basis to fifth and sixth grade students at all elementary schools in Japan since 2011. In most schools, English is the only foreign language taught, although as the name suggests, the teaching of other languages is permitted.

They also feel overwhelmed by the recent appearance of terms such as Active Learning, CAN-DO List, Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) as well as Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), terms with which they are unfamiliar, and whose meaning and use they do not fully understand.

Under these new guidelines, English will become a regular subject from 2020. There are two major changes in the teaching of English, the first is that the classes now begin with the third grade instead of the fifth grade, and the second is that reading and writing will now be taught at the elementary school level for the first time.

The concerns that the teachers express can be divided into two types, the first is the theoretical issue of whether foreign languages should be taught to young children, and the second is the actual teaching of reading and writing. It has been thought that learning a foreign language before the L1 linguistic competence had been perfectly formed would lead to the inability to use either language fluently. (江利川(2014)) This idea is often found in monolingual cultures such as Japan and Korea, yet in multilingual cultures, the learning of two or more languages at the same time is seen as a necessary social skill, and the students learn them all without any noticeable drop in ability. This paper will examine the second concern, namely the teaching of reading and writing for fifth and sixth grade students.

From the time that the introduction of FLA into elementary schools was first announced, many teachers expressed concerns about their ability to teach a subject they had not majored in at

* 本学講師
university, were not licenced to teach and had no experience of teaching. Although the minimum level of English language skills required by elementary school teachers has never been stated, the target is for 50% of teachers at JHS and 75% at high school to possess EIKEN-step pre-level 1. As of April 2018, the actual figures reached were 33.6% and 65.4% respectively (Mainichi Newspaper).

After undergoing the training offered at the city and prefectural levels, and gaining some experience, most teachers realised that they were able to teach their students. However, now that reading and writing are being introduced into the lessons, they are again faced with the issue of a perceived lack of linguistic skills.

Following a consideration of the reasons for the changes in the study guidelines, this paper will examine the objectives and contents of the reading and writing classes, and see how they compare with the issues as perceived by the teachers.

The new Study Guidelines

Two main reasons may be given for the changes found in the new guidelines, the first concerns the process of second language acquisition (SLA), and the second concerns the links between education at the elementary and JHS levels. As for the first, students in the fifth and sixth grades had reached the stage a mental development where they were able to perform abstract linguistic tasks, yet were not given the opportunity to learn how to read and write in English. (卯城 (2018)) Their preferred learning style had evolved from an aural style to a visual style, and they were frustrated by not being allowed to transfer their L1 literary skills to the L2 environment.

Amongst the problems identified about the second were that, emphasis had been placed on spoken English in elementary schools, so that students found it difficult to make the change from speaking English to writing it at JHS. From the JHS point of view, problems were found in the students’ knowledge of the differences between the sounds of English and Japanese, the connection between English sounds and their corresponding letters, as well as the study of basic sentence constructions.

It had been noted in the years prior to 2011, that students who entered JHS had a negative attitude towards learning English, and so one of the aims behind FLA was for the students to enjoy English and form a positive attitude towards it. However, Krashen (1982) pointed out the existence of what he called “affective filters”, which cause learners to feel that the subject matter is difficult and that they cannot master it. These filters can be overcome by reducing the feeling of pressure to succeed by making the subject more interesting and enjoyable, or by introducing FLA at an earlier age, as affective filters become more pronounced with age. These are some of the rationales for beginning FLA from elementary schools.

It was noticed that when students who had learned English at elementary schools entered JHS,
they had a more positive attitude towards it, and enjoyed the subject, indicating that the FLA aims had been achieved. Yet the fact that the main focus of the activities had been on enjoying it meant that many students had difficulty in adapting to the more formalised educational methods of JHS, in particular repeated pronunciation practice and rote memorization. In other words, English, which had been an “activity” to be enjoyed, had now become “education” to be undergone. There is a saying that “Drilling is another word for boring,” meaning that repeated practice is not interesting, and this shows one discrepancy between the educational aims and methods at the elementary and JHS levels. Little effort appears to have been made into making JHS English education as interesting as elementary school English activities.

When these two factors are taken into consideration, it can be seen that introducing FLA from the third grade might reduce the development of affective filters, while the time now made available in the fifth and sixth grades could be used to introduce reading and writing which had previously only been taught at the JHS level, as well as to allow the students to become used to a new and unfamiliar method of teaching while still in a familiar environment, thus bridging the gap between elementary schools and JHS. One more factor to be taken into account is that it has been the aim of successive Japanese governments since 2002 for all Japanese to be able to use English, so the new objectives may also be seen as another step towards the accomplishment of this goal.

The Relationships between the Four Basic Language Skills

The four basic language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing may be divided into the following two patterns, the first of which are the passive or receptive skills of listening and reading, in which information is received and processed, sometimes called Linguistic Input. The second pair are the active skills of speaking and writing, or Linguistic Output, where the students express their needs or opinions. In a natural setting, input happens throughout the students' waking hours, yet with FLA, input is restricted solely to class hours, so that, in theory, the teachers have complete control over the input.

The second pattern consists of the so-called “natural” listening and speaking skills, which are mastered by people who do not have disabilities. Reading and writing are “taught” skills, in that they are not acquired in a natural way, but have to be taught in an educational setting. Ball (2015) points out that,

“It is important to emphasize here that each skill makes different language demands on the learners, and so teachers then need a wide range of techniques and strategies to help learners manage these challenges.”

Although there are many different scripts in use in the world, Shin and Crandall (2014) claim that,
“When there is sufficient English language development, many of the child’s skills and strategies used in reading and writing in the first language will transfer to another language. One only has to become “literate” once.”

However, Hiyoshi (2005) claims that the learners’ L1 may have an adverse effect on their acquisition of L2 literacy skills.

The task of developing L1 reading and writing skills is no easy task, requiring years to master, yet to develop the same skills in an L2 setting is even more challenging, as the student lacks the necessary linguistic competence to be able to perform the task.

Before a child learns to read their L1, they already have a working knowledge of its vocabulary and grammar, enabling them to make informed guesses about the correct pronunciation of unfamiliar written forms, as they are able to think of a word which would fit in with the context of the sentence. In the same way, when writing, they already know what they want to say and have sufficient language skills to enable them to write their thoughts down. In this view of things, reading and writing are simply seen as ways to transfer written symbols into spoken sounds and vice versa.

However, with regard to L2 reading and writing, the situation is different. The students are faced with trying to match unfamiliar written forms with pronunciations. The task of writing is even more difficult, as they have to write down their thoughts using an insufficient knowledge of vocabulary and grammar. With this in mind, and given the apprehension of teachers towards teaching reading and writing, it might be helpful to examine the actual objectives and contents of the classes, in order to discover how the assumptions and concerns of the teachers are reflected in the study guidelines.

On the Introduction of Reading and Writing

Under the latest guidelines, reading and writing are introduced in a two stage process. Reading begins when the letters of the alphabet are introduced in the third and fourth grades, with upper case letters being introduced in the third grade and lower case letters in the fourth grade. Of course, this does not mean that the students will not have seen letters of the alphabet before. The use of written English has become a common sight in Japan in recent times. Forms such as AM, ATM, P, PM and so on are familiar sights in Japanese streets, so that although the children might not know or understand the meaning of the symbols, they are familiar with their actual shapes. Any child who has ever used a computer keyboard will also have seen and used Roman letters.

Writing is introduced from the fifth grade, and aims at enabling the students to copy simple sentences using familiar words, and then modify them to produce their own sentences. It is often believed that a person who has become able to speak a language should be able to write it without difficulty. However, as Raimes (1983) points out,
“Learning to write is not just a ‘natural’ extension of learning to speak a language. We learned to speak our first language at home—most of us had to be taught in school how to write the same language. The two processes, speaking and writing, are not identical.”

The Objectives for Reading and Writing English

The objectives for FLA state that the students are to become accustomed to English letters through experiential activities, and will not be required to remember all of the possible ways of pronouncing the letters. (安彦 (2017)) This is a good thing, as the pronunciation of English words is quite difficult, for although there are only 26 letters, these letters represent 44 different sounds or phonemes. The actual number of phonemes used varying according to the variety of English being spoken.

Other objectives are given as: to recognise that many English words are in use in their everyday lives, and to become used to seeing and reading upper and lower case letters. They will also use the letters in quiz settings, for example, the students would be asked to hand over a card with a given letter on it. Learning how to read English begins with the recognition of individual letters, first in upper case form, and then in lower case form, then the letters are combined into words, and the words into sentences. It might be argued that in a natural setting, upper and lower case letters are learned at the same time, but the system in Japan is to introduce them in a sequential pattern, again showing how input is controlled.

With regard to the teaching of reading and writing skills, the objectives are as follows. The students will become able to recognise and pronounce written letters. They will also become able to pronounce simple words and basic expressions whose meaning they already understand. With regards to writing, the students are expected to become able to write both upper and lower case letters, and become able to copy simple words and basic expressions which they are already known, while paying attention to the English word order. (安彦 (2017))

From this it may be seen that some of the concerns associated with the teaching of reading and writing are without foundation, and also that a high level of linguistic production is not required of the students. Having seen what is expected of the students, we will now turn our attention to how the skills of reading and writing are to be taught and acquired, for it is important to remember that what is taught by the teachers, and what is learned by the students, might not always be the same.

The Teaching of Reading and Writing English

Following the introduction of the letters of the alphabet (both upper and lower case) in the 3rd and 4th grades, grades 5 and 6 introduce reading and writing. In unit 1 of “We Can 1,” students learn the basic pronunciation of the letters and in unit 5 they learn that the name of the letters and their pronunciation are two different things. One innovation in the new course materials is the introduction of “jingles” activities, where the name of a letter as well as its pronunciation
are introduced and practiced. This activity was not included in either the English Note or “Hi, Friends!”, and it is believed that this, together with the introduction of phonics, will enable the students to acquire a more natural pronunciation. Phonics uses a basic set of 28 rules (今井 (2007) to teach the relationship between letters and sounds. These rules also enable students to make educated guesses about the pronunciation of words they have never seen before.

For writing, the students practice copying out a number of basic sentence patterns using the 600~700 words they will be taught. This task is designed to enable them to realise that the word orders of English and Japanese are different. Once the basic patterns have been mastered, the students then start to re-write the sentences using their own words and ideas. In this task, the teachers are required to place less emphasis on grammatical accuracy than on the free expression of ideas.

Summary

The introduction of FLA from the third grade should enable the children to become used to English without experiencing the affective filters which become more pronounced from around the fifth grade. The extra two years of education provide a chance to introduce reading and writing skills which had not been taught before. Given the changes in language learning styles and development in literacy skills as the students become older, many felt uneasy about only using the spoken language, and this had become an affective filter which slowed down their acquisition of the English language, as well as leading to a loss of interest in the subject matter.

Lacking an English teaching licence, several teachers had expressed concerns about the teaching of reading and writing, as well as the level of performance which would be required. However, a close reading of the new study guidelines show these concerns to be misplaced, as the students are already familiar with written English and their L1 literacy skills could be transferred to the L2 setting without too much difficulty, especially given the level of skills required and the four years given to acquire them.

The issue of opposition of teaching foreign languages to young learners is one that will not easily be solved, and is more commonly to be found in monolingual societies. For people in a multilingual society, becoming proficient in two or more languages is a necessary skill for daily life, though in Japan, the chances for a student to use English outside of the classroom are still limited in scope. However, given the movement towards a more global society, the linguistic needs of a future generation need to be thought about now, and ways to achieve them established and brought into effect. This may also be seen as a step forwards in the accomplishment of the aim of the Japanese government for all Japanese to become able to speak English.

Bibliography

安彦 忠彦 (2017) 小学校学習指導要領 明治書店
卯城 祐司 (2018) 小等外国語教育 ミネルヴァ書房
江利川 春雄 他（2014）小学校英語教育は何のため？ ひつじ書房
菅 正隆（2018a）“Let's try! 1&2”の授業と評価プラン 明治書店
（2018b）“We Can! 1”授業と評価プラン 明治図書
（2018c）“We Can! 2”授業と評価プラン 明治図書
金森 強 他（2017）主体的な学びを目指す主学校英語教育 教育出版
兼重 昇（2018）“Let's Try!”指導案・評価完全ガイド 学陽所
斎藤 留美子（2011）書いて覚える楽しいフォニックス Magazine Land
ジュミック今井（2007）ママとキッズの初めてのフォニックス すばる舎
上智大学 （2014）コミュニケーションテイクな英語教育を考える アルク
投野 由紀夫（2013）英語達成度指標 CEFR-J ガイドブック 大修館書店
畑江 美佳 他（2016）外国語活動におけるサイト・ワード・リーディングの試み JES Journal Vol. 16
畑江 美佳 他（2017）小学校におけるアルファベット指導の再考 JES Journal Vol. 17
植口 忠彦（2017）Q&A 小学指導法事典 教育出版
村野井 仁（2006）第二言語習得研究から見た効果的な英語学習法・指導法 大修館書店
望月 昭彦 他（2015）英語4機能評価の理論と実践 大修館書店
文部科学省（2018a）Let’s Try! 1 & 2 東京書籍
（2018b）We Can! 1 & 2 東京書籍
山本 玲子 他（2017）英語学習につながるヘボン式ローマ字学習のための教材開発 JES Journal Vol. 17
湯川 笑子（2018）初等外国語教育 ミネルヴァ
吉田 研作（2017a）小学校新学習指導要領の展開外国語活動 明治図書
（2017b）小学校新学習指導要領の展開外国語 明治図書
渡邉 時夫 他（2013）小中連携を意識した中学校英語の改善 三省堂

Ball, P. et al（2015）Putting CLIL into Practice OUP
Elliot, A.J.（1981）Child Language CUP
Ellis, R.（1997）Second Language Acquisition OUP
Hiyoshi, N.（2005）The Effects of First Language Orthographic Background on Word Recognition Processing（MA Thesis）Joetsu University of Education
Krashen, S.D.（1982）Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition Pergamon
Raimes, A.（1983）Techniques in Teaching Writing OUP
Shin, J.K. and Crandall, J.（2014）Teaching Young Learners English Heinle
Tribble, C.（1996）Writing OUP