

The Necessity of English Education Training for Japanese Primary School Teachers

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Introduction

In April 2008, Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Science and Technology (MEXT) announced that "English activities" would be introduced as a compulsory subject from 2011 in primary schools. Prior to 2008, there have been long and considerable controversies with respect to teaching English in primary schools. The full implementation of the new Course of Study starts in 2011 after transitional periods. Several issues have to be discussed regarding the implementation of teaching English in the primary school.

The most critical problem is the teachers' challenges for teaching English. Primary school teachers do not know how to formally teach English because they did not take courses for the language teaching pedagogy at university, as there was not language teaching in the curriculum in primary schools. According to Obunsha's 2009 survey, 53% of primary school teachers (500 primary school teachers participated in the survey) answered, "there remain problems which have to be solved, and teachers are anxious about the introduction of English" (*Asahi*). The survey shows that teachers feel uneasy about what they teach and how to teach English in classes. Until now, schools have been hiring Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) and asking for help from people who are experienced retired teachers in the community to assist teachers.

However, we have to consider English education in primary schools in the long term. To succeed the full implementation of English as a compulsory subject, the urgent task is to think about improving the quality of teachers' training for teaching English. In British Columbia (BC), Canada, general home-room teachers teach French, and like Japanese primary school teachers, they also do not have the background knowledge for teaching a foreign language. However, BC universities offer optional courses for in-service teachers to learn how to formally teach French to their students. In this paper, I offer a suggestion of in-service teachers' education in Japan by referring to the optional French courses for in-service teachers in BC.

Current situation in primary schools in Japan

Since the introduction of "English activities" in primary schools, schools have been hiring ALTs to help Japanese teachers to instruct English classes. However, the problem is that some

schools cannot hire ALTs because of financial difficulties (*Yomiuri*, 2009a), as the financial budget varies, depending on autonomy in the prefectures or in the cities. In another case, schools in the peripheral regions or on an isolated island cannot call for ALT's support. Furthermore, the recent problem is the quality of ALTs (*Yomiuri*, 2009b). As the Japanese government or MEXT is not concerned in hiring ALTs, the board of education in the prefecture or the city is responsible for it. However, the board of education cannot check all ALTs' educational backgrounds in the present state of affairs.

As another solution for assisting teachers, schools ask people for help in the community. People who studied English but do not have a teacher's licence or retired English teachers can support the school. However, the best solution for in-service teachers is to acquire their language proficiency as well as language teaching pedagogy. Teachers also feel the necessity of acquiring language skills and pedagogy in teaching, which is shown in the following survey.

Benesse conducted a survey in 2008 and 275 teachers answered the following question: what are the important issues in teaching English as a compulsory subject? According to the survey, teachers think that they need "the concrete curriculum for instruction" (40.7%); "teachers' English proficiency" (38.2%); "time for studying the textbook and preparation for the English classes" (38.2%); and "the courses or the workshops for English education" (31.3%) (Benesse, 2008a). These responses indicate teachers' positive attitude toward preparing for teaching English by themselves instead of not relying on ALTs. In addition, it is important to note that the main instructor in teaching English activities has changed. In 2007, 36.8 % of homeroom teachers and 32.8 % of ALTs evenly taught English; on the other hand, in 2009, 69.3 % of homeroom teachers and 8.8 % of ALTs taught English (Benesse, 2008b). This decreasing percentage of ALTs' assistance also shows that teachers desire to teach classes on their own.

Some private enterprises like ALC and Oxford University Press offer one-day workshops in the major cities in Japan for in-service teachers to give them ideas for effective English teaching. The board of education in the prefecture and the city also offer workshops or seminars. However, the frequency of workshops and seminars vary according to the places where teachers reside. MEXT, the board of education in the prefecture, or the city has to consider offering concrete and regular courses for teachers. MEXT has to support in-service teachers wholly by providing courses because "to prepare effective language teachers, it is necessary to have a theory of effective language teaching – a statement of the general principles that account for effective teaching" (Richards, p.4).

It has to be specified that MEXT took action for pre-service teachers. MEXT enacted the amendment of the teachers' licence for pre-service teachers. It says that starting April 2009 students who are teacher candidates have to take an "English communication" course (it is 2 units) at university. They will be accredited to teach English in primary schools (Obunsha).

To overcome the difficulties faced by teachers who have not had formal language-teaching

classes for instructing English in primary schools, it is worth referring to the language policy in BC, Canada.

History of core French and current situation in BC

The first Official Languages Act was enacted in 1969 (Raptis & Fleming, 2004) in which English and French were recognized as the official languages of all federal institutions in Canada. Carr mentions that French has been as a required subject in high schools and as an option in the primary levels since 1977 (Carr, 2007b). The status of core French instruction continued until the mid-1990s. However, in 1994, the BC Language Education Policy was enacted and all students from grade 5 to 8 have to study a second language, French. (Carr, 2007b). The following year, Ministry of Education in BC issued the Core French Integrated Resource Package (IRP).

In 1997, the full implementation of the BC Language Education Policy was introduced and French instruction was now based on IRP. It contains 211 pages and includes topics from rationale, learning outcomes to assessment and evaluation samples. IRP mainly focuses on communicative competence and comprise of four components: “Communicating”, “Acquiring Information”, Experiencing Creative Works – to experience creative works for linguistic and cultural exposure”, and “Understanding Cultural Influences – to interact with and appreciate another culture” (Ministry of Education, 2001, p. 4). Although each component includes listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills, the IRP does not focus on “the mastery of grammar for its own sake” (Ministry of Education, 2001, p.2). However, time allocation for French instruction is not specified. Each school in the province has initiative and has to take responsibility for time allocation. In the case of Japanese primary schools, the issue of time allocation for English instruction is specified: teachers teach English once a week (one lesson has 45 minutes), 35 lessons in a year.

In addition to the issue of time allocation, there remains a critical problem: who teaches French? In BC, home-room teachers have to teach French from grades 5 to 8 in schools. These teachers are called “generalists” who teach a second language but have not “taken a university methodology course, language course, or summer institute and [are] not in proficient in the language” (Carr, 1999, p.158). Teaching French is a big challenge for these kinds of teachers. Japanese primary school teachers who teach English also face the same challenge. The current problems in “generalists” have to be mentioned.

After ten years of the full implementation of core French, Carr did a survey. More than 800 core French teachers in BC participated in the survey. Carr points out that these teachers realize the difficulties in how they “achieve provincial learning outcomes with the lack of time and valuing allocated to French instruction and how to teach a language when many lack proficiency and methodological background” (Carr, 2007a). Considering the critical problem in core French

instruction, we will anticipate the same problem in Japan, for only 3% of primary school teachers have teaching certificate of English for middle school and secondary school (Sankei, 2009).

In spite of the fact that teachers in BC have concrete curriculum, IRP, they still have difficulties in teaching French; Japanese primary school teachers, without that kind of concrete guideline except the Course of Study issued in 1998 and “English notebook” for English activities drawn up by MEXT, undoubtedly face great challenges.

Practical courses for generalists in BC

Three BC universities offer courses for generalist teachers who teach core French based on “a multidimensional curriculum” (Carr, 1999, p.157), and who want to enhance their language proficiency. The University of British Columbia’s (UBC) Department of Language Education has been providing teachers with “theoretical and practical training in core French methodology” (Carr, 1999, p.157) since 1991. The concrete contents of this course is that “teaching strategies such as using authentic documents, incorporating action and songs, facilitating student-student interaction, incorporating technology, and evaluating communicatively are demonstrated and practiced in each class” (Carr, 1999, p.157). Besides that, Simon Fraser University and UBC collaborate on an online course, and the University of Victoria (UVic) in collaboration with the Greater Victoria School District offers “two credentials for French teachers: one for French immersion teachers and one for middle-year core French teachers” (Carr, 2007a).

In addition, UBC offers a three-week program that runs from 9 am to 3:30 pm with a one hour lunch break and UVic also offers a five-week non-credit French immersion program. In both UBC and UVic courses subsidies are provided. Although these courses are optional, as various kinds of courses are offered by major universities, teachers have opportunities to take any courses if they desire to. In BC, teachers’ courses are designed in the district and the provincial level.

Implications

As I discussed above, teachers’ tasks with respect to teaching English are formidable. I also believe that primary school teachers have a great number of duties besides teaching various kinds of subjects. It may be impossible for in-service teachers to participate in the courses as extra work. However, if we consider English education in primary schools as the basic education for children’s later English education, teachers need to have more specific training in the long-term which aims at language teaching for teachers. It goes without saying that language teaching is a difficult task because teachers have to plan a program in detail to teach a language effectively. For the language program to be successful, it should contain “a number of levels of planning, development, and

implementation” and “goals and objectives for the program have to be developed as well as syllabuses and instructional materials” (Richards, p.1). It is time to consider teachers’ training supported by the board of education in the prefecture or in the city and MEXT.

To conclude, it may be the time to consider offering summer courses, intensive courses or online courses in the long-term for in-service teachers so that teachers will have much confidence in teaching and they will have ideas and discretion in devising English activities in their classes. Participating in the courses for language teaching will become a burden for teachers practically and mentally, but they need to have the concrete background knowledge and practices for teaching English to succeed the daring plan issued by MEXT: English will be a compulsory subject in primary schools.

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