

# Crucial Issues for Implementing “English Activities” to Acquire Communication Competence in Primary Schools

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## Section 1: Introduction

This paper focuses on crucial issues for introducing English instruction in “Foreign Language Activities” in primary schools in Japan. In the past, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) has been reformed and has already changed school curricula to improve English education in both middle and high schools. However, in 2008, MEXT announced a further mandate so that by 2011 English (a Foreign Language Activity) would be a mandatory subject for Grades five and six in primary schools. Primary schools include students from Grade one (six-year-olds) to Grade six (twelve-year-olds). MEXT’s overall goal in “Foreign Language Activities” is:

To form the foundation of pupil’s (sic) communication abilities through foreign languages while developing the understanding of languages and cultures through various experiences, fostering a positive attitude toward communication, and familiarizing pupils with the sounds and basic expressions of foreign languages. (MEXT, 2009, p. 1)

MEXT has further framed Foreign Language Activities for Grades 5 and 6 as follows:

1. Instruction should be given on the following items in order to help pupils actively engage in communication in a foreign language:
  - (a) To experience the joy of communication in the foreign language.
  - (b) To actively listen to and speak in the foreign language.
  - (c) To learn the importance of verbal communication.
2. Instruction should be given on the following items in order to deepen the experiential understanding of the languages and cultures of Japan and foreign countries:
  - (a) To become familiar with the sounds and rhythms of the foreign language, to learn its differences from the Japanese language, and to be aware of the interesting aspects of language and its richness.
  - (b) To learn the differences in ways of living, customs and events between Japan and foreign countries and to be aware of various points of view and ways of thinking.
  - (c) To experience communication with people of different cultures and to deepen the

understanding of culture. (MEXT, 2009, p. 1)

Thus, MEXT emphasizes the importance of communicating in a foreign language and an understanding of different cultures. I believe that before implementing English teaching in primary schools, several issues have to be considered. In particular, one of the key challenges surrounding MEXT's new mandate is the lack of a definite curriculum. In addition, MEXT has not indicated how teachers' training for teaching a foreign language will be conducted. The problem is that teachers at primary schools did not learn approaches for teaching a language when they took their teachers' certificates because they were not assigned to teach a foreign language at primary levels. As well, assessment, although critical to the teaching-learning process, has not been addressed.

In this paper, I first describe a brief history of "English Activities". In Section 2, I examine literature which is relevant to English as a Foreign Language teaching. Finally, in Section 3, I discuss crucial components for future primary level EFL teaching in Japan.

### **"English Activities" in Primary Schools in Japan**

In October 1998, MEXT announced a revised course of study which had been changed drastically compared to the previous version. In this Course of Study (1998), MEXT stressed the significance of communicative competence: "In order for students to develop practical communicative competence in the target language, great emphasis will be placed on the practice in the situations where the target language is actually used. Listening and speaking practice will be particularly emphasized at lower secondary school" [middle schools]. Thus, MEXT has reformed the Course of Study to focus on students' communicative competence in a foreign language. In addition, in the revised course of study, time allotment for major compulsory subjects such as: Japanese, mathematics, social studies, and science was reduced. In the time that was saved, children in primary schools from Grades 3 onwards learn "International Understanding" in the period of "Integrated Study", one of the new school subjects. The overall objectives of Integrated Study were to help

children develop capability and ability to discover problems by themselves and solve those problems properly. [...] [Integrated Study] also aims at helping children learn how to learn and reason, develop mind [sic] to independently and creatively cope with problem-solving activities and/or inquiring activities, and deepen their understanding of their own way of life (MEXT, 1998).

Integrated Study is comprised of topics such as Environmental Studies, Welfare Studies, Information

Gathering and International Understanding. Children have Integrated Study three blocks a week for 45 minutes per block.

The table below provides information about area, example activity, and what children do in Integrated Study. For example, in environmental studies, children do field work. As their practical activity, they visit a car factory.

Table 1: Integrated Study

<b>Area</b>	<b>Example Activity</b>	<b>What children do</b>
<b>Environmental Studies</b>	Field work	Children visit a car factory. Children reap a field.
<b>Welfare Studies</b>	Volunteer activities	Children visit senior citizens' homes.
<b>Information Gathering</b>	Computer skills	Children retrieve and gather necessary information using Internet
<b>International Understanding</b>	English Activities	Children engage in songs and games in English

Even though “International Understanding” was one of the subjects in Integrated Study, MEXT did not provide a specific curriculum for “International Understanding”. Therefore, primary schools had to design their own curricula. However, MEXT issued the goal of “International Understanding”, which was “to expose children to foreign language and help them get familiar with foreign life and culture” (MEXT, 1998). According to MEXT’s goal, teachers were to teach English in “International Understanding”.

Later, MEXT revised a part of The Course of Study in December 2003. In The New Course of Study, MEXT changed the title “International Understanding” to “English Activities”. That is, “English Activities” was placed under the umbrella of the larger frame of Integrated Study. The government restricted its offering to Grades 5 and 6 school children respectively. However, as most primary schools could not stop teaching “International Understanding” abruptly, schools continued to teach the subject.

More importantly, in April 2008, MEXT announced that “English Activities” would be stipulated as a compulsory subject in primary schools from 2011 with a built-in three-year transitional period from 2008 to allow teachers to make the required adjustments. However, enough in-service preparation has been given to help teachers with these adjustments. Therefore, no distribution for teaching materials except an “English notebook” makes teachers feel uneasy about

teaching “English Activities”. Individual teachers within individual schools have been left to their own devices.

## **Section 2: Literature Review**

### **Best Practices in Second Language Education**

In this section, I review the literature on second language teaching because it is critical to review theoretical approaches to teaching to recognize the best ways that teachers can teach English effectively. Considering the situation in Japan, practically, students learn English in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, not in an English as a Second Language (ESL) context because they have rare opportunities to use English outside of the classroom. Even in the classroom, students generally concentrate on the content of the text by employing translation. Even though much of the literature has been conducted in an ESL context (ex. Asian students in American classrooms) much of this research literature is still applicable to the Japanese/English teaching context and the MEXT's educational goals for English language learning in primary school. The chapter has three parts: first, I discuss communicative competence; second, I examine communicative teaching approaches; and last, I talk about underlying theoretical perspectives on EFL teaching.

### **Communication Competence**

The main goal of MEXT is for students to be able to communicate in English. Here, I discuss communication competence which is emphasized in the goal of Foreign Language Activities. Communication competence is “a term originally proposed by the sociolinguist Dell Hymes” (as cited in Brandl, 2008, p. 276). Hymes (1972) states that when a person acquires a language, “he or she acquires knowledge not only as grammatical but also as appropriate” (p. 277). That is, he or she acquires “competence as to when to speak, when not, and as to what to talk about with whom, when, where, in what manner” (p. 277). Thus, Hymes’ consideration of communication competence entails linguistic knowledge such as grammar and vocabulary and knowledge of how a language is used in a social and a contextual situation. Communication competence is now generally considered as “proficiency in another language [that] includes much more than knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, or linguistic competence” (as cited in Brandl, p. 276). Further, Canale and Swain (1980) state that communication competence can be thought of in four distinct ways: grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic. Below is an explanation of each of these.

- 1) Grammatical competence: this competence is “understood to include knowledge of lexical items and rules of morphology, syntax, sentence- grammar semantics, and phonology” (Canale & Swain, p. 29).
- 2) Sociolinguistic competence: this competence consists of “sociocultural rules of use and rules of discourse” (Canale & Swain, p. 30). These rules are important when the understanding “between the literal meaning of an utterance and the speaker’s intention” (Canale & Swain, p. 30) is vague. This competence is also to know when to start, end conversations and to say something appropriately in a certain social situation (Hymes, 1972).
- 3) Discourse competence: this competence is “the interpretation of individual message elements in terms of their interconnectedness and of how meaning is represented in relationship to the entire discourse or text” (Richards & Rogers, p. 160).
- 4) Strategic competence: this competence to “communicate effectively” (Brandl, 2008, p. 6). This competence is comprised of “verbal and nonverbal communication strategies” (Canale & Swain, p. 30). They supplement communication interruption because of “performance variables or to insufficient competence” (Canale & Swain, p. 30, see also Celce-Murcia; Dörnyei, & Thurell, 1995).

Of critical note, communication competence is not only to acquire language usage and grammar but also to acquire strategies on how to use the language in a social context. To put it more broadly and fully, communicative competence “entails the ability to interpret and enact appropriate social behaviors and requires the active involvement of the learner in the production of the target language” (Boyd & Maloof, 2000, p. 165; Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei, & Thurell, 1995). Based on these conceptions of communicative competence, second language scholars have come to emphasize the importance of the social context of learning. In what follows, to achieve the goal of communication language skills, I discuss communicative language teaching.

### **Communicative Teaching Approaches**

The common criticism of English education in Japan is its lack of facilitation of “communicative abilities, in particular, oral skills, that is, speaking and listening” (Butler, 2005; Ellis, 1996; Hirata, 2008). As a consequence, students cannot speak English after a six-year English education program (Ellis, 1996; Hirata, 2008). Therefore, MEXT has been reforming the Course of Study to enhance students’ communicative abilities since 1998.

According to Chamot and O’Malley (1994), Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) “emphasize[s] the development of interpersonal communicative skills as the major goal in language

learning” (p. 86). The goal of CLT is “to promote the development of real-life language skills by engaging the learner in contextualized, meaningful, and communicative-oriented learning tasks” (Brandl, 2008, p. 22). In CLT, the curriculum is organized “around the language functions needed for interactive communication (for example, greeting, requesting, apologizing) and semantic topics and notions (time, location, frequency, and so on), rather than a strict grammatical sequence” (Chamot & O’Malley, p. 86). Of note, in CLT, “often there is no text, grammar rules are not presented, classroom arrangement is nonstandard, students are expected to interact primarily with each other rather than with the teacher, and correction of errors may be absent or infrequent” (Richards & Rogers, 2001, p. 166). In this learning style, teachers’ roles are guides and facilitators (Breen & Candlin, 1980; Dubin & Olshtain, 1986; Richards & Rodgers, 2001) and they also support and encourage learners. Broadly speaking, as Brandl (2008) notes, CLT does not “adhere to one particular theory or method” (p. 6). Rather, it is a “diverse set of principles that reflect a communicative view of language and language learning” (Richards & Rogers, 2001, p. 172). Practically, in western countries, CLT has become “the dominant teaching approach for second language acquisition” (Hirata, 2008). Yoon (2004), for example, researched CLT practices in classrooms and showed its effectiveness in the EFL curriculum in Korea where English was introduced in primary schools from 1997. As well, in Japan, CLT is gradually introduced in secondary schools “to impose a communicative approach to language teaching” (Cross, 2005; see also Butler, 2005). However, even at the secondary school level, literature on successful teaching of CLT in Japan is still scant.

In the following section, I describe instructional materials of three kinds to explain how a wide variety of materials support CLT. Richards and Rogers (2001) consider that materials have “the primary role of promoting communicative language use” (p. 168). Instructional materials can be text-based, task-based, and realia (Hwang, 2005; Richards & Rogers, 2001; Wesche & Skehan, 2002). Text-based materials are various kinds of textbooks “designed to direct and support Communicative Language Teaching” (Richards & Rogers, 2001, p. 169). Task-based materials consist of “[a] variety of games, role plays, simulations, and task-based communication activities” (p. 169) to support CLT. Realia include “[...] signs, magazines, advertisements, newspapers, or graphic and visual sources around which communicative activities can be built, such as maps, pictures, symbols, graphs, and charts” (p. 170). Besides, Brandl (2008) suggests other realia such as: “real-life telephone conversations, messages left on answering machines or voice mail” (p. 13). Even if children cannot readily understand real-life conversations by native speakers of English, to listen to and experience authentic materials is a worthwhile endeavor. Wilkins (1976) advised using authentic materials which “have not been specially written or recorded for the foreign learner, but which were originally directed at a native-speaking audience” (p. 79). Other researchers have also pointed out the significance of using authentic materials in the ESL classrooms focused on the CLT approach

(Dubin & Olshtain, 1986; Hwang, 2005; Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Wesche & Skehan, 2002). When I consider the context of Japanese primary schools, usage of task-based materials and realia is essential because role playing, simulations and reading signs and advertisements are practical activities to facilitate oral language competencies which MEXT emphasizes. Furthermore, Chamot and O'Malley (1994) think "authentic reading materials such as advertisements, menus, newspaper articles, and signs are preferred" (p. 87) even for beginners. Authentic material will enhance children's interests to know different types of advertisements or restaurant menus in English speaking countries. Therefore, although the emphasis of CLT has shifted educators away from strictly text-based, grammar-focused instruction, reading and writing are still important components.

In summary, considering the two sections briefly reviewed above, researchers consider CLT an effective teaching approach to acquire communicative competence. In practice, CLT is implemented in East Asian countries as well as in the West for foreign language acquisition. In the Japanese context, it is important for primary school teachers to know how to introduce CLT in the classroom. MEXT has to support in-service teachers wholly by providing courses to introduce communicative language teaching because "to prepare effective language teachers, it is necessary to have a theory of effective language teaching" (Richards, 1990, p. 4).

### **Best Practices: Teaching in General**

There are a few best practices from the general literature on teaching that are also relevant to primary EFL teaching. This is particularly so given that children in Grades 5 and 6 need plenty of support to tackle a language that they seldom – if ever – encounter in their home communities. First, I describe the underlying theoretical approach to ESL teaching. In recent years, sociocultural considerations have influenced language teachers all over the world. For example, Canale and Swain (1980) consider that language learning requires knowledge of linguistic rules of the language being taught and various social and cultural characteristics (see also Lantolf, 1996; van Lier, 1994). That is, language learning relates to understanding that society or culture. Culture is a way of life and it is defined as "the ideas, customs, arts, and tools that characterize a group of people in a given period of time" (Brown, 2007, p. 188). Culture affects people's behavior, way of thinking and judging. Thus, culture

as an ingrained set of behaviors and modes of perception, becomes highly important in the learning of a second language. A language is a part of a culture, and a culture is a part of language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture (p. 189).

In other words, to learn a new language is also to learn a new culture (Brown, 2007; Watts-Taffe & Truscott, 2000).

As well as sociocultural considerations, researchers have also highlighted the significance of teachers' scaffolding students' learning and maintaining a risk-free learning environment. For example, Lee, Butler and Tippins (2007) believe that scaffolding students in language learning, especially students' learning in a foreign language, is very important (see also Anton & DiCamilla, 1998; Ellis, 1998). Scaffolding, a technique used widely in general classroom learning, is "the process by which experts assist novices to achieve a goal or solve a problem that novices could not achieve or solve alone" (Boyd & Maloof, 2000, p. 185). Thus, scaffolding helps learners move from one level of learning to the next (Watts-Taffe & Truscott, 2000). In the context of Japanese English education, children need effective scaffolding in learning a foreign language.

A risk-free learning environment is very important for learning in general. Particularly, language learners worry about learning a new language (i.e. Drucker, 2003; Lee, Butler & Tippins, 2007; Watts-Taffe & Truscott, 2000; Williams, 2001; Young, 1996). It has been shown that students can successfully acquire second languages in a risk-free environment, where the focus is on communication skills (Miele, 2007). Therefore, teachers' responsibilities include lessening students' anxiety and fear in learning new languages (Dubin & Olshtain, 1986). Teachers need to create an atmosphere where students do not "feel shy about speaking or asking questions" (Dubin & Olshtain, 1986, p. 77). In addition, teachers should not call on students individually so as not to make students timid or insecure (Dubin & Olshtain, 1986). Also helpful is when teachers sometimes use their first language for instruction to support students. Together, sociocultural considerations, scaffolding and a risk-free environment are relevant to the teaching of Japanese students in Grades 5 and 6, who are required to learn English as a foreign language for the first time.

Above, the issues of communicative competence, communicative language teaching (CLT) approach and English language learning in general are discussed. It is shown that CLT and essential components in teaching a foreign language in general facilitate learners acquiring communicative competence.

### **Section 3: Crucial components for teaching "English Activities"**

In this section, crucial components are discussed in a larger framework in terms of teaching "English Activities" as a subject. According to Canale and Swain's paper (1980), there are four important areas for teaching a second language: "syllabus design[s], teaching methodology, teaching training, and materials development" (p. 31). If I consider the situation in Japan, although MEXT issued an "English notebook" for Grades 5 and 6 respectively, MEXT does not direct teaching



methodology, teaching training, or materials either both primary schools and teachers. As most teachers in Japanese primary schools do not have English teaching certificates, it is an extremely difficult task to teach English to children. Based on Canale and Swain's findings, in the first place, three components are essential in teaching English in Japanese primary schools. In teaching methodology, the issues are how teachers design in-depth lesson plans, incorporate appropriate instructional materials (syllabus design and materials development in Canale and Swain's terms) and create a risk-free learning environment. The importance of in-depth lesson plans, teaching materials and learning environments are referred to. Furthermore, to design, create and support crucial components in teaching English, teachers' training (Canale & Swain, 1980) is also essential. Each issue is discussed below.

### **The Importance of In-depth Lesson Plans and Teaching Materials**

First, I consider that in-depth lesson plans and the appropriate teaching materials are the basic and important components for language teaching. Many researchers pointed out the significance of using authentic materials in the ESL classrooms focused on the CLT approach (Dubin & Olshtain, 1986; Hwang, 2005; Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Wesche & Skehan, 2002; Wilkins, 1976). If teachers use authentic materials in class activities, children will have interest in learning materials and may be motivated to learn more. As well, children can learn sociocultural background in diverse cultures. Children will rarely have opportunity to experience authentic materials from middle schools onward because public schools have to use textbooks designated and authorized by MEXT. Therefore, primary school teachers have to keep in mind that children have an opportunity to experience authentic materials such as supermarket advertisements and various kinds of signboards in English speaking countries during "English Activities" classes. It is necessary for teachers to be always aware of accessing up-to-date issues in the world and get current information for children. In addition, it will be helpful for the homeroom teacher if the Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) suggests affordable authentic materials which will be used during the class. As Brandl (2008) states, "a well-planned lesson is a way of keeping students focused and on track" (p. 40). Based on in-depth lesson plans, a homeroom teacher and an ALT can play their roles collaboratively and support children in any situation. For example, in Narita Primary School in Narita City in Kanto region, the homeroom teacher and the ALT spend about two hours preparing for one lesson ("Shougakkou to Eigo," 2009). It goes almost without saying that in-depth lesson plans and the collaboration between the homeroom teacher and the ALT may lead to significant and fruitful lessons for children.

### **The Importance of Learning Environment**

Another crucial component for language learning is a learning environment. As I referred to in section 2, a learning environment for students is critically important. Primary school children in Japan feel anxiety, hesitation and embarrassment as well as excitement because they learn English for the first time as a new language. It is important to consider the aforementioned feelings in considering the best learning environment. I believe that the teacher is in charge of creating “a risk-free classroom environment” (Williams, p.752; Young, 1996; Watts-Taffe & Truscott, 2000; Williams, 2001), for children. The teacher should create a supportive and stress-reduced class environment. For example, a teacher needs to create a good atmosphere for learning and walks around in the classroom to scaffold children’s learning. In general, in Japan children are silent during class. Shortly after classes end, a few children who have questions about what they have studied in the class come to the teacher and ask their questions. If they were to ask questions during the class, they would perhaps understand more clearly at the time the question is posed. To put it another way, if the teacher allows children to ask questions during the class, this will create a safe environment where children can ask questions and express their opinions more freely during the class and likely learn more English. In “English Activities”, children’s active participation and performance are expected in a risk-free learning environment.

### **The Importance of Teachers’ Training**

Finally, I discuss an essential issue: primary school teachers’ training. In introducing “English Activities” as a subject in primary schools, I claim that the teachers’ challenges for teaching English are the most critical problem, which I referred to in the problem statement in section 1. Primary school teachers do not know how to formally teach English because they did not take language pedagogy at university, as language teaching was not part of primary schools until now. Butler (2004) argued the importance of teachers’ language proficiencies. She has conducted in-depth research on teachers’ English proficiency in primary schools of East Asian countries where English is taught as a foreign language. Based on the research, Butler pointed out the urgency of teachers’ professional training which focused on speaking skills in English and which is emphasized by the government policy.

We have to consider English education in primary schools in the long term. To achieve success of 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. Homeroom teachers need constructive and continuous training for teaching English. 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 (“Eigo joshu kakuho,” 2009), 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 an ALT’s support. Furthermore, a recent problem is the quality of ALTs (“Shougakkou Eigo,” 2009). 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 pedagogy.

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 boards 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 needs to take action for pre-service teachers. MEXT enacted the amendment to teachers’ licences for pre-service teachers. It says that starting April 2009 students who are teacher candidates have to take an “Oral English communication” course (it is 2 units) at university. They will be accredited to teach English in primary schools (Obunsha, 2008).

I believe that primary school teachers have a great number of duties besides teaching various 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. Obviously, 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, 1990, p. 1). It is time to consider teachers’ training supported by the board of education in the prefecture or in the city and MEXT. It is worthwhile to offer 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 be successful in the daring plan issued by MEXT: English will be a compulsory

subject in primary schools.

In summary, teachers' training is the most crucial of the important issues. Teachers have to have basic knowledge and theory of English language teaching so that they support children to learn. If teachers have confidence, supported by basic knowledge of teaching English, they can teach children effectively. The more teachers have confidence, the more they will be able to cope with difficult teaching situations. Obviously, substantial training and practice creates more effective lessons. The key of success for "English Activities" is teachers' continuous effort and sense of responsibility for teaching children a new language. Above, significant and core issues are discussed for teaching "English Activities" as a subject.

In conclusion, teacher professional development is the most crucial of the important issues. Teachers need to know effective teaching approaches and have to design in-depth lesson plans to achieve the goal issued by the government: the acquisition of communicative competence. Teachers also need to have ideas of instructional materials which facilitate children's understanding of different cultures. Teachers who teach a foreign language have formidable tasks and primary school teachers will also take them on beginning in 2011. MEXT has to take positive measures to support primary school teachers and ultimately, to achieve the MEXT's goals.

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