

Using Non-native English Speaking Teachers as a Teaching Resource in Elementary School English Activities*

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Abstract

In 2002, it became officially possible to teach English conversation in Japan's elementary schools. As of 2005, approximately 94% of all elementary schools now offer the class. Since the beginning, finding teachers qualified to teach these classes has always been a problem. In this paper, we discuss the possibilities of using non-native English speaking teachers (NNESTs) as a teaching resource in elementary school English activities from the perspectives of communication, second-language acquisition, and teacher resources. A survey was conducted utilizing questionnaires and classroom observations. Based on the results, the paper discusses the merits of and difficulties in using NNESTs in elementary school English activities.

Key Words : Non-native English speaking teachers (NNESTs), elementary school English, English as a tool for global communication, meta-linguistic sense, Japanese EFL learners' attitudes

1. Introduction

According to the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, in 2005, 93.6% of Japanese elementary schools taught English conversation within the time period called '*Period for Integrated Study*.' The aim of the class is usually to help students become familiar with oral English and to facilitate a positive attitude toward communication with people from different countries. Many elementary school children are learning English in Japan, and teachers are searching for an approach to teaching that will work most effectively. Yet, as David Paul points out (2003), there is very little theory and research on how to teach Japanese elementary school children, apart from standard international approaches. Another problem exists: the introduction of English activities burdened many elementary school teachers who had to accept the new mission, since some schools had only a few licensed English teachers and some none at all.

Furthermore, Japanese elementary school English activities cannot depend on ALTs, or Assistant Language Teachers of English, who are native English speakers hired by the Japanese government and usually teach at junior high schools. This means that Japanese elementary school teachers need to think carefully about appropriate approaches for their

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own particular teaching situations, especially in terms of instructors.

On the other hand, it is said that Japanese learners of English place too much emphasis on having native speakers as English instructors (Honna, 2006). According to Honna, the Japanese favor native speakers of English. In Japan, EFL learners are expected to acquire the equivalent ability of English to that of native speakers, and assimilation into the cultures of English speaking countries is emphasized. Since such a goal is impossible to achieve, Japanese learners typically lack confidence in using English. Thus, the previous studies indicated that Japanese learners of English tended to expect native speakers as their English instructors, with the expectation even greater in advanced learners (Honna, 2006; Moody and Aoki, 2006). Elementary school children or beginners, however, do not necessarily expect native speakers as their English instructors¹⁾.

The purpose of this study then is two-fold: 1) to discuss the possibilities of using non-native English speaking teachers (NNESTs) as a teaching resource in Japanese elementary school English activities; 2) to investigate Japanese EFL learners' attitudes toward their language instructors and their need for NNESTs.

2. Theoretical Thoughts on the Role of Non-native English Speaking Teachers

Before setting about the main task, we will briefly review the role of NNESTs from the perspectives of communication, second language acquisition, and teacher resources.

2.1 From the Perspective of Communication

Since one of the major goals of English conversation classes at elementary school is to foster a positive attitude toward communication with people from different countries, this paper discusses the role of NNESTs from the perspective of communication. There are three significant features in the case of instruction by NNESTs, who look different from native English-speaking people and are highly competent in English:

- 1) children would have less communication anxiety, which many Japanese still experience with native speakers of English. This is an unfavorable condition for intercultural communication.
- 2) children would overcome the stereotyped idea that equates English-speaking people with Caucasians, and would come to realize that internationalization is not limited to interchange between them and western countries. This would help children to be socialized without any racial prejudice or cultural bias.
- 3) children would realize that English is an international language, a global tool for communication among people from different cultural backgrounds.

In a 1960s survey about Japanese peoples' favorable image toward non-Japanese nationalities, the following were the top five: 1) British, 2) French, 3) German, 4) American and 5) Italian. Thai, Chinese, and Indonesians ranked between 8th and 10th (Wagatsuma and Yoneya, 1967). Even so, Japanese people tend to suffer from xenophobia and feel some tension and anxiety when it comes to actual English communication situations particularly

with Caucasians. Japanese learners typically lack confidence in using English, perhaps owing to some inferiority complex.

According to a 1991 survey by the Mainichi newspaper (Kanazawa, 1994), TV commercials which portrayed non-Japanese numbered 1385 with Caucasians portrayed more frequently (84%) than Africans and African-Americans (7%) or Asians (6%). According to Hiyoshi (2001), in the summer of 2000, TV commercials which portrayed Caucasians were 70%; only 10% portrayed Asians. In other words, though the percentage of TV commercials portraying Caucasians is less, the preference for Caucasians remains unchanged. It is presumed that through everyday exposure to TV, young children are influenced by these media images and form stereotypes toward particular racial groups. It is believed that early encounters with members of various racial groups who speak English will help children realize that English is an international language not just spoken by Caucasians.

2.2 From the Perspective of Second Language Acquisition

In recent years, under the influence of humanistic and communicative theories, great emphasis has been placed on 'learner-centered' teaching: teaching which makes the learners' needs and experience central to the educational process. In order to teach children most effectively, we first need to look at how children learn most effectively. Some children in classes may appear to succeed and others may not; many more could succeed if we more deeply understand how to help them learn. In successful learning, each child is a motivated, active learner eagerly exploring the world of English and successfully building a mental model of how the bits of English he/she encounters fit together (Harmer, 2001). What factors create the necessary condition for this to occur? The study looks at four significant features of NNESTs from the perspective of second language acquisition:

- 1) NNESTs are likely to have meta-linguistic sense. According to Yamada (2006), the fundamental ability, the root of linguistic competence, should be formed with a steady accumulation of one's knowledge and experience. This can be developed by mono-linguistic knowledge. However, it could become three-dimensional if one is bilingual in his/her native language and English. Being bilingual means having acquired a new channel, a new way of processing knowledge and experience. Being bilingual facilitates the development of a meta-linguistic sense. It is significant for EFL learners to have a teacher with such a sense.
- 2) NNESTs would help children realize that the goal of learning English should be its use as a tool of communication with people from different cultures, not merely a tool for passing entrance examinations with the improvement of grammar and translation ability, nor as a tool of communication with only native speakers of English.
- 3) In EFL, learners rarely feel it is either natural or necessary to learn English. Unless they are in an environment where there is a lot of English around them, they are unlikely to feel a deep emotional need for the target language. However, seeing NNESTs who are highly competent in English would help young learners get

motivated to learn English and to make attempts to communicate in English.

- 4) Unlike some ALTs who are sometimes emotionally more expressive than Japanese and frequently use overt non-verbal ways of communication, NNESTs tend to be calm and create a friendly and relaxed atmosphere where children feel comfortable enough to speak out. NNESTs also may encourage children to experiment and make mistakes. In this way, NNESTs might lower learners' affective filter, resulting in more effective learning.

2.3 From the Perspective of Teacher Resources

Harmer (2001) mentions that the measure of a good lesson is the student activity taking place, not the performance of the teacher. In these situations the teacher is no longer the giver of knowledge, the controller, and the authority, but rather a facilitator and a resource for the children to draw on. The children have need of their teacher as a resource. However, no teacher knows everything about the language. In the case of learners who are not children, the teacher should be able to offer guidance as to where students can go to look for necessary information. It could be said that one of a teacher's important jobs is to encourage students to use resource material for themselves and to become more independent in their learning generally. Children, however, who are not mature learners, have more need of the teacher as a resource. The study looks at NNESTs from the perspective of teacher resources, looking at two aspects of language resources and task handling.

2.3.1 Language Resources

According to Tanaka (2005), language resources consist of three elements: vocabulary, grammar, and functional expressions. It can be said that NNESTs are inferior to native speakers of English in terms of language resources and they might not be suitable to teach the advanced learners in some cases. However, it seems they would not have any problem in teaching beginners.

2.3.2 Task Handling

This study looks at real-life tasks performed in speaking and listening. Examples of such activities are presentation, speech, and interactive conversation in daily life. In terms of task handling, which supports one's English learning with language resources, NNESTs don't seem to be inferior to native speakers of English. If NNESTs have formal schema – knowledge of the logical organization of English– it is quite possible for them to have abilities nearly equivalent to native speakers in handling such tasks as critical thinking and expressing ideas coherently and effectively.

3. Case of Elementary School English Activities in Miyagi Prefecture

The study introduces a practice of using NNESTs for elementary school English activities in Miyagi Prefecture, Japan. The following shows the framework of English

activities at Yuriigaoka Elementary school in Natori City, Miyagi Prefecture (The Miyagi Prefecture Board of Education designated this school as a model school for elementary English language for three years, from 2004 to 2006).

1) NNETs' backgrounds and grades of the children they taught

- Portuguese student - grades 1, 2
- Malaysian student - grades 3, 4
- Iranian student - grades 5, 6

2) Roles of NNETs

They taught in team teaching with a homeroom teacher (HRT) and volunteer English teachers (VETs). They assisted the HRT, the main instructor, in teaching English. They taught the children English pronunciation, expressions, and introduced different cultures (mainly their native cultures).

3) Other information

Each class had 35 to 38 students. English activities were provided based on the annual curriculum and a lesson plan for each lesson.

4. Survey

4.1 Purpose of the Survey

In the study, a survey was conducted for the following purposes:

- 1) to investigate learners' perceptions of English language teachers and needs for NNETs.
- 2) to clarify the merits of and difficulties in using NNETs in elementary school English activities.

4.2 Method of the Survey

The survey was conducted through questionnaires from May to June in 2006 and classroom observations during the one year period from April, 2005 to March, 2006. The questionnaires to junior high school, high school, and university students contained twelve questions intended to elicit learners' perceptions of and expectations for their English language teachers. These questions are listed below in somewhat summarized forms.

Q 1 : Did you have an ALT in English classes at junior high school ?

Q 2 : If yes, what was the native country of that teacher ?

Q 3 : How were the lessons with the ALT at junior high school ?

Q 4 : How did you communicate with the ALT at junior high school ?

Q 5 : Did you learn anything from the ALT's lessons ?

Q 6 : Did you have an ALT in English classes at high school ?

Q 7 : If yes, what was the native country of that teacher ?

Q 8 : How were the lessons with the ALT at high school ?

Q 9 : How did you communicate with the ALT at high school ?

Q10: Did you learn anything from the ALT's lessons?

Q11: Who is your ideal teacher for English conversation classes?

Q12: What were the advantages of your having an ALT in English classes?

Questionnaire to elementary school students had the following three questions.

Q 1 . How did you like the English activities with a guest foreign teacher (NNEST)?

Q 2 . How did you communicate with the guest foreign teacher (NNEST)?

Q 3 . Who is your ideal teacher for English activities?

Table 1 shows the participants.

1. Primary students (Public schools)		
	Shiogama the 2nd Elementary School	5 th grade 100 students
	Yurigaoka Elementary School	4 th grade 74 students
2. Junior high school students (Public school)		
	Shiroishi Higashi Junior High School	1 st grade 65 students
3. High school students		
(Private school)	Shokei Girls' High School	3 rd grade 60 students
(Public school)	Shiogama Girls' High School	1 st and 2 nd grades 80students
4. University students		
(Private university)	Shokei Gakuin University	1 st grade 83 students
(Public university)	Tohoku University	2 nd grade 31 students

Table 1. Participants of the Questionnaire (Total 493)

Also, classroom observations were done by the chief of English activities at Yurigaoka Elementary School and the advisor of the activities (Miyasone) to clarify the merits of and difficulties in using NNESTs in elementary school English activities.

4.3 Results and Discussion

4.3.1 Learners' Expectations of English Conversation Teachers

Figure 1 and Figure 2 show an expected English teacher by students at elementary schools, junior high school, high schools and universities.

The result varies widely between the two schools. The reason for the high rate of bilingual Japanese (to be exact, excellent speakers of English who are Japanese) and Asian / African English teachers at Yurigaoka Elementary School could be that they have had Japanese volunteer teachers who are fluent speakers of English, and also guest teachers from different countries as substitutes for ALTs.

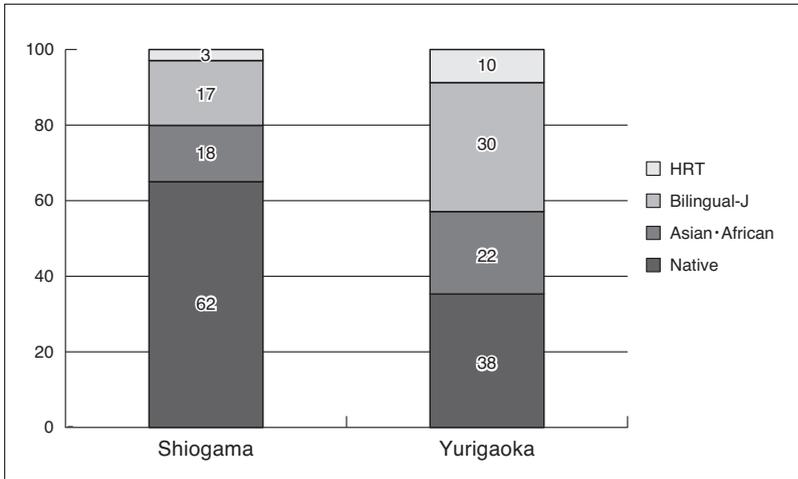


Figure 1. An Ideal English Conversation Teacher (Elementary School Students)

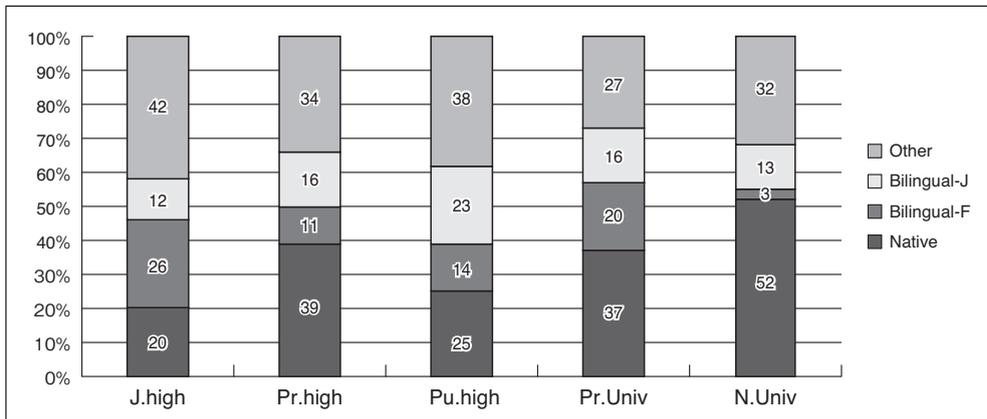


Figure 2. An Ideal English Conversation Teacher (Junior High School Students, High School Students, & University Students)

52% of national university students, which showed the highest rate among the above student groups, expected native speaking people for English conversation teachers.

4.3.2 Merits of and Difficulties in Using NNESTs in Elementary School English Activities

As a result of the classroom observations, the following merits of using NNESTs were found:

- 1) children had opportunities to learn about cultures other than English-speaking countries.
- 2) children realized that English could be a tool of communication with people from different cultures.

- 3) children got motivated to learn English by seeing fluent speakers of English despite their not being native speakers of English.

Furthermore, the following difficulty in using NNESTs was found: some of the pronunciation, accent, intonation and expressions NNESTs used were not correct. These were not seen, however, as serious impediments to teaching elementary school children.

5. Conclusion

This study tried to investigate the possibilities of using non-native English speaking teachers (NNESTs) as a teaching resource in Japanese elementary school English activities through questionnaires and classroom observations. As a result, the major findings are: 1) older learners of English tended to prefer native English speakers as their instructors; 2) there was a need for NNESTs among elementary school students; 3) NNESTs could provide the image of English as an international language and demonstrate that a wide range of English speakers in the world exist, which helped learners get motivated to learn English and to make attempts to communicate in English. In order to refine the research, more detailed questionnaires should be given to confirm our hypothesis and enable us to make concrete suggestions toward solving the problems NNESTs encounter in teaching.

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Note

- 1) This has been observed by Miyasone, the advisor of English activities at Yurigaoka Elementary School since 2004.

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