

Preparing a Course of Study for Elementary School Students

Part 1: A Summary of the Relevant Literature.

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Introduction

Following the intention of the Japanese Ministry of Education to introduce English education into all elementary schools within the next two or three years, increasing emphasis is being placed on English education aimed at young learners. This decision has been made in the light of the continuing international importance of English and the belief that the earlier learning is started the better¹. But, in order for course designers within elementary schools to devise effective courses, they need to be aware of the current state of research into language learning as it applies to young learners. In this, the first

¹ As yet, there is no clear evidence that starting foreign language education in primary education produces any particular beneficial results (Gika and Superfine 1998). In Korea where English language was introduced into the elementary school curriculum in the late 1990's no concrete results as to the effectiveness of the programme have been demonstrated. However, still it is argued that children learn language more efficiently than adolescents and adults. Gage (1998) suggests it is dangerous to accept the 'obvious' as being synonymous with the truth. Therefore, a detailed longitudinal study into the effects of introducing English language education in elementary schools is required, particularly in places where it is relatively difficult to get natural exposure to the target language. Finally, Gika and Superfine (1998) suggest that such instruction will only be harmful if the teacher is *untrained*. Thus, it is also important that adequate training and resources are made available.

of two connected papers, I will provide a summary of the relevant literature in order to indicate points which I feel act as important guides to creating courses of study at the elementary school level. This summary will provide a theoretical background for the subsequent paper which will offer a suggested course of study for a particular grade at elementary school. To begin to understand the issues involved, I will first briefly look at some aspects of educational psychology and show how these are relevant to children's learning. In this and the paper that follows, I will argue that a cognitive educational psychological approach is the most appropriate to language learning, especially at the elementary school level. I will, then, move on to look at the following areas in more detail; motivation and rewards, children as language learners, the role of the teacher, the importance of planning, the classroom environment and, finally, some issues relating to learning activities.

Educational Psychology: Behaviourism

Behavioural educational psychology argues that answers to questions lie within the physical world and that through using the scientific method important factors can be isolated and studied. Early behaviourism concentrated largely on the behaviour of animals and applied the results to human behaviour. Important here is the work by Skinner (1957) who put forward the idea of operant conditioning in which rewards are used to condition particular types of behaviour. This approach had a strong influence on language teaching in the form of the audio-lingual method. As Williams and Burden say, "In spite of its shortcomings, a structural or audiolingual approach has nevertheless dominated language teaching around the world" (1997:11). Ideas such as operant conditioning relate to motivation, a topic which will be discussed in detail later. However, behaviourism has been criticised because it sees the learner as largely passive, and increasingly the idea that people can be

conditioned to produce the wide range of language required to be considered proficient has been questioned. Therefore, within language teaching there has been a gradual rejection of behaviourism and attention has moved to consider the role the learner plays in his or her own learning.

Educational Psychology: Cognitivism

Cognitive educational psychology looks at how the mind thinks and learns. Cognitive psychologists argue that it is through observation that patterns and rules which may explain these processes can be identified. It is argued that the learner is an active participant in his or her learning and that through interaction they create their own understanding of the world around them. Consequently, 'thinking' is seen as being socially determined and this provides learners with a meaningful reason for learning (Glaserfield 1995 cited in Williams and Burden 1997:49). Piaget suggested children go through the following developmental stages:

- Sensori-motor stage where the child explores its environment through its senses
- Intuitive preoperational stage where the child begins to organize thoughts and understand the world in a more sophisticated way and has the ability to begin to use its imagination and memory
- Concrete operational stage where the child's thoughts are still largely locked within the concrete world rather than the abstract
- Formal operational stage where the child can think in the abstract, though may be subject specific rather than a general ability.

However, though research now shows that Piaget's projection of the specific ages at which people might reach a particular stage are inaccurate the overall idea remains a useful one. Therefore, because in general elementary students will be somewhere between the first and second stage, teachers "... should not

expect them to have reached the stage of abstract reasoning, and, therefore, should not expect them to apply this to sorting out the rules of the language. It is more important at this stage to provide experiences in the target language which relate to aspects of the child's own world" (Williams and Burden 1997:22).

Piaget identified two key processes related to language learning: assimilation and accommodation. When a child changes incoming information to suit existing knowledge the child is assimilating input. In contrast, when existing knowledge is modified to fit incoming information, the child is accommodating input. The importance of these two ideas is that they shift the focus to understanding how learners deal with input and that learning will only take place when the child is ready and able to process the information given. Based on these ideas, Piaget argued that children's errors are important as they reveal the state of the child's understanding (Flavell 1998:34).

Williams and Burden (1997) argue that Piaget's work can still be considered relevant today as it stresses:

- the importance of the individual
- the relationship between language, thinking and experience
- using tasks which are appropriate for the learners cognitive level
- the ideas of assimilation and accommodation, as they are closely related to research into second language acquisition

Developing the work of Piaget, Vygotsky, and later Feuerstein, argued for the importance of the social context in language learning. They suggested that because learning takes place within a social context it is this interaction which is essential for a child to learn. Consequently, they argue that interaction with the teacher plays a key role in helping learners to process and organize their thoughts (Williams and Burden 1997:67).

Having briefly looked at two schools of thought related to language learning, I would now like to consider how they relate to the important topic of motivation.

Motivation

In general it is considered that people are motivated to do things because of either the extrinsic or intrinsic value. Extrinsic motivation relates to an external impulse and, in terms of learning a language, it may be improved status through getting a better job, or promotion, resulting from acquiring certain abilities and / or qualifications. Intrinsic motivation stems from the learner's own desires. Therefore, people do something because they want to rather than because of some external influence. The two may be neither mutually exclusive nor fixed. Someone could start something because they were told to, but later they continue because of their own desire and the personal satisfaction it gives. This is important when teaching young learners as usually the motivation to start a foreign language does not emanate with the child concerned, therefore the challenge is to encourage enjoyment in learning for itself rather than focusing on it as a means to a distant and often insubstantial end.

A behaviourist approach to language learning favours giving rewards for the production of a 'correct' response. However, Strong, Silver and Robinson (1998) argue that extrinsic rewards are ineffective for creating longer term motivation and that an extrinsic reward "...consistently fails to produce any deep and long-lasting commitment to learning" (P.189). A cognitive approach, instead, argues that learning should be engaging to promote success, curiosity, originality and a positive relationship between learners. Consequently, rewards should be in praise of the work created and the learner's effort rather than whether or not a 'correct' response was given and that teachers need to help to

create an environment which tolerates errors (Cameron and Pierce 1998, Clifford 1998, Scott and Ytreberg 1990). Clifford argues learning needs be within the child's Zone of Proximal Development (Vyogotsky) so that there is a moderate chance of success. Students will quickly loose interest in tasks that are either difficult or too simple and this will have a negative effect on their motivation. With increasing achievement that learners will be motivated to try harder and therefore begin to perceive the intrinsic value of learning (1998:168). It is also important that learners are encouraged to sustain their efforts to persist with a particular task and this requires prompt feedback otherwise the relevance of the task will decrease "... from a teacher's point of view, motivation is seen as simply sparking an initial interest, for example, presenting an interesting language activity. However, motivating learners entails far more than this" (Williams and Burden 1997:121).

Children and Language Learning

I would, now, like to go on to look at children as language learners. Cognitive educational psychologists point out that when young children come to the language learning classroom they already have a certain amount of linguistic knowledge and experience relating to their own culture and first language which teachers can make use of to help them learn the target language. However, young learners see the world differently from adults and attempt to understand things that happen around in their own way and often simply accept information that is given them (Scott and Ytreberg 1990). In addition, children up to the age of seven may feel responsible for breakdown, in communication because they are unable to assess the *quality* of the *input* they receive. Consequently, from a cognitive perspective, it is important that teachers monitor carefully to ensure that the students begin to develop a culturally appropriate understanding of the world around them and begin to

accept the need to questions things when they do not understand (Cameron 2001). Therefore, initially, emphasis should be placed on solving problems as this will provide a stronger basis for learning than a focus on producing a correct answer without proper thought (Gardner and Boix-Mansilla 1998).

Children, and in particular, younger children like to play and can be encouraged to use the target language without realizing it when they are deeply involved in an activity this can give them frequent opportunities to experiment with the target language which is essential in helping them to accurately organizing the input they receive (Moon 2000). In addition, as was argued above, because learners at this age are unable to understand abstract ideas, items of vocabulary should, be established through labeling concrete objects. These words and ideas can then be assimilated and accommodated into the students existing knowledge. Lakoff (1987 cited in Cameron 1994) argues that it is the process of forming word categories that lays the basis for thinking. Phillips (1998) argues that thinking itself is a very important and dincult skill for young learners to master. Very often children form faulty conclusions as to how to categorize words and ideas and so the teacher has a very important role to play in helping students to become experts in organizing and making links between the information they receive (Cameron 1994).

The importance of self-esteem

Like adults, children are emotionally complex and are affected by perceptions of their performance within the language classroom. As such, feelings of failure will create a negative self-image and possibly negative opinions of language learning. Moon says, “children are every bit as complex emotionally as adults, and are equally affected by their experiences with regard to their language learning” (2000:18). Therefore, it is important that teachers help learners to

build a positive self-image. In order to do this, teachers should help them to identify the goals they want to achieve and the means to achieve them. This means helping learners to make choices about their own learning, as taking control away from children may encourage them to become externalizers (learners who are unwilling to accept responsibility for their performance) as opposed to internalizers (those who take control of their own learning). The teacher needs to help learners realize that they can have an effect on their own learning by beginning to accept some responsibility for their own improvement. From a cognitive perspective, an important function of education is to help students develop autonomy and independence, "A cognitive view of education, then, centres around individuals making decisions about their own actions as opposed to being at the mercy of external forces over which they have no control" (Williams and Burden 1997:119).

Therefore, it is important to build a positive learning environment. This can be done in a number of ways. Firstly, and very importantly, the teacher should provide a good role model. Secondly, teachers should avoid using games involving competition as these can often instill a sense of failure. Rather, games should focus on cooperation as these have the benefit of developing the learners' social skills while giving a greater sense of achievement. Thirdly, display examples of the students' work to help them realize that the effort they have made in creating something is valued (Scott and Ytreberg 1990).

It is clear, then, that a goal is, as far as possible, to create learner independence. In order to achieve this, the teacher has an important role to play. Thus, whilst teachers need to provide support and assistance they must have their own very clear and realistic goals of what they want to achieve and how these goals will benefit the language acquisition of their students (Pearsall 1996).

Therefore, I would now like to move on to look more closely at the role of the teacher in teaching English to young learners.

The role of the teacher

In considering the role of the teacher, I want to look at three areas: firstly, the importance of the teacher's beliefs and self-image, secondly, the importance of planning and finally, the teacher's role in creating a positive classroom environment.

As was noted above, the teacher should also be aware of his or her own beliefs about teaching language and how it is learned. Whilst it is not necessary for these beliefs to be the theories in vogue at any particular time, it is important that teachers can articulate and explain them clearly. If the teacher has a clear sense of how learning can be achieved, he or she will better be able to guide their students. In addition, it is also important that the teacher has a wide range of teaching techniques so that he or she can respond to both different situations and to the differing needs of the students (Met 1994). Williams and Burden argue that "Beliefs [are] far more influential than knowledge in determining how individuals organize and define task and problems, and [are] better predictors of how teachers [behave] in the classroom" (1997:56).

As with the learners, it is very important that teachers have a positive self-image because it is through this that they will be able to present themselves as positive role models for their students. Students quickly realize when teachers are unsure of themselves and the consequence of this is that students will feel that such teachers are unable to guide them effectively. Thus a negative self-image can have the negative effect of lowering students' motivation and consequently of increasing feelings of incompetence and inadequacy.

Ultimately, students may develop a fear of failure which may inhibit risk taking and creativity, things which are vital in becoming a proficient language user. Therefore, the teacher's self-image not only affects the students' feelings of security within the classroom it also has a role to play in deciding whether or not a child has a positive image of learning English (Moon 2000:16).

Finally, an important element in helping teachers to create a positive self-image is to have confidence in and, at least, a basic awareness of the target language. Even if their linguist skills are not what they would wish they were, "... the language teacher needs to convey a sense of self-confidence in using the language whilst at the same time respecting learners' attempts to express themselves and their view in the language" (Williams and Burden 1997:62-3).

Planning

In order for teachers to be able to put their beliefs into language learning into practice and to have the confidence to present the target language effectively, they need to be competent at planning classes. Met says "All good teachers must be good planners..." and "... the planning phase of the teaching process requires high levels of thought and may be the most important element in successful teaching" (1994:160). Effective planning helps teachers to see the pitfalls of the activities they want to use and also, what materials will be required to ensure they run smoothly.

In the discussion above, I argued that learning is a social activity. Research has shown that children learn language best when it is presented in familiar contexts (Scott and Ytreberg 1990; Cameron 1997). Careful planning is important to ensure that language is related to contexts with which the students are familiar so that the meaning of the language chunks that the

teacher has identified as being the linguistic focus of the activity will be much easier for the students to realize. It is this attention to meaning within context that aids learning (Garrod 1986; Superfine 1996; Read 1998; Cameron 2001). Felberbauer (1998) suggests that younger children are more likely to take and interest in language when it is related to familiar topics. In addition, creating a clear and familiar context will make it easier for teachers to present a genuine purpose for completing tasks because it is this which is such an important element in producing effective learning activities.

Effective planning also ensures that there is continuity between classes so that students are given a sense of progression whilst at the same time allowing elements within the target language to be revisited to deepen students' understanding (Bruner cited in Williams and Burden 1997).

Finally, teachers need to plan their monitoring of their students. Whilst this is a highly complex skill which takes time to develop, it is, nevertheless, essential because it is through monitoring that the teacher is better able to identify where students need support and to offer appropriate solutions. However, it should be pointed out that the students' performance should be assessed upon how they try to use their language resources rather than solely on their linguistic accuracy (Gadusova and Hart'anka 1996).

Building a positive classroom atmosphere

The teacher should try to create a classroom atmosphere that is both relaxed and enjoyable, while having a strong sense of community so that children are discouraged from laughing at other's mistakes. Though this may not always be possible, it is important that the teacher establishes clear rules which are explicitly explained and understood by the students to achieve this aim.

Ultimately, it is desirable that some of the running of the classroom be given to the students as this can help to build learner independence (Read 1998; Seager 1998; Lewis 1999; Moon 2000). In addition, whether or not the teacher actually does, he or she should appear to 'like' and be interested in all of the children and try to involve them in conversation, responding to the topics they raise as if they are genuinely interesting and important. Teacher talking time which is focused only on formal instruction will create a classroom atmosphere that remains formal rather than becoming relaxed (Moon 2000).

The teacher should not only strive for a positive relationship between him or herself and the students but also between the students themselves, so, he or she will need to think carefully about patterns of student interaction. Varying patterns in which the students work together helps them to apply their knowledge in different situations. This is important as it reinforces the socializing role of education. Johnson argues that, "a sociocultural perspective on language acquisition emphasizes the fact that language development and social growth go hand-in-hand. These two processes viewed together are called *language socialization*. That is, children are both socialized through language and socialized to use language in culturally preferred ways" (1994:187). Scott and Ytreberg (1990) point out that frequently children prefer to work alone whilst being in the company of others, but because at this level students are also learning about what is appropriate social behaviour, it is important to help them to learn to work together cooperatively.

Tasks

Finally, I would like to consider the issue of language learning tasks. The discussion here will be brief as this topic will form a major part of my subsequent paper.

Initially, children should focus on listening and speaking tasks. This is because, even with their first language, students are only able to begin to cope with the written language at between the ages of 8 to 9, therefore, it is unreasonable to assume that they should take on the additional burden of dealing with written English (Cameron 2001).

Secondly, tasks should also ensure success at various levels by having multiple positive outcomes. In this way, students can perform to the best of their ability and still feel that they have achieved their goals and so will be encouraged to continue to strive to increase their abilities. In addition to designing tasks with multiple outcomes, teachers will also need to consider how much, and what kind of, support should be given to students. Initially, the teacher may need to provide a significant amount of support, but as the students gain confidence, this support should be withdrawn so that students develop the ability to think for and rely on themselves. Nevertheless, while support is being withdrawn, the teacher should ensure that adequate feedback is given to enable the students to see how they can improve (Moon 2000).

Finally, tasks should be designed to provide purposeful repetition. Language needs to be used frequently for it to become part of the students' active vocabulary. Whereas simple repetition, with no clear purpose, has little effect on aiding memorization, games where repetition of phrases is an integral part of the activity will help language to be absorbed more quickly as it is being used in a meaningful way. In addition, following the rules of a game means that students must not only apply their linguistic knowledge to the task, but they must also use their skills to devise strategy and so on to accomplish the task. This can help to motivate especially young learners who would otherwise soon lose interest (Lewis 1999).

Conclusion

In this paper I have briefly outlined factors which I feel should be used to inform course design at the elementary level. Firstly, I outlined research into educational psychology which highlights important factors concerned with helping children to learn a foreign language. From that discussion I noted that children require a supportive, relaxed and an enjoyable learning environment in which to study. Further, I argued that language should be related to familiar contexts and have a clear focus on meaning as opposed to linguistic structure. Following this, I looked at specific areas related to course design. In particular, I looked at children as young learners and showed that it is essential that they be helped to acquire and maintain a positive self-image as this will help them to achieve greater autonomy in their future language learning. I then argued that teachers have an important role in helping young learners to achieve this and that it is the responsibility of the teacher to provide a positive role model. It is also essential that teachers strive to maintain a positive classroom atmosphere in which teacher-student and student-student relationships are valued and encouraged. I argued that this is because whilst young learners are learning a language they are still in the process of learning how to live within society and need guidance in how to cooperate with others. Finally, I briefly looked at issues relevant to tasks. Here, I argued that tasks should allow for multiple outcomes so that students, While trying their best, are able to experience satisfaction at having completed the task to the best of their ability. Further, I pointed out that tasks are the means by which language can be meaningfully practiced to ensure that it can be internalized and later be actively produced. In the paper that will follow this I will use the points raised here to provide a theoretical framework for a course of study for sixth Japanese elementary school students.

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論文要旨

小学生英語の教育課程 PART 1 関連図書の概要

ウォルターズ・ニコラス

キーワード：教育心理学、指導計画、小学校での英語教育、低学年の児童、動機

本論文は、小学校での英語授業の指導計画に関する要因について簡潔に概観する。初めに、子どもの外国語学習に関する教育心理学における研究に注目する。教師の支援があり、リラックスした楽しい学びの環境と、言語構造ではなく言葉の意味に焦点を当てた身近な場面における言葉の重要性を述べる。次に、低学年の児童において良い自己像を描きそれを持ち続けるように促すことが、その後の言語学習が自立性を増すので、大変重要である。そのために教師は大きな役割を担っている。教師は、児童と教師の関係や児童同士の関係に価値を置きより良い関係になるよう促し、教室全体が良い雰囲気になるように努める必要がある。低学年の児童は言葉を学ぶ一方で、社会でどう生きるかを学ぶ途上にあり、他人とどう協力していくかを教える必要があるからだ。最後に、タスクに関連した問題を考える。ここでは、自分たちの力でタスクを遂行することで児童が満足感を体験できるようにさまざまな結果を生むべきである。さらに、タスクは意味のある言葉のやり取りによって言葉の習得になるための手段なのである。以上のことを踏まえて、小学校6年生の指導内容の理論的枠組みを述べたい。