

# How to Utilize An English Drama to Enhance English Education at A Primary School: The Case of Asuka Primary School

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## 1. Introduction

Under new teaching guidelines handed down by the Education, Science and Technology Ministry that were put into effect from the beginning of the 2002 academic year, primary school students have the opportunity to become accustomed to English during the time for “comprehensive learning” classes. Each school is allowed to decide how to use such classes, which were introduced to primary school curriculums at the beginning of the 2002 academic year. The general goal for “comprehensive learning” is to foster ability to take up a subject on students' own and solve problems on their own. As more and more parents want nowadays that their children receive English education, many primary schools include English conversation in this class at least to some degree. However, not all of the nation's primary schools make time for English lessons, as the language is formally introduced to public school curriculums from middle schools. There are some reasons English is not a regular subject at primary schools. According to Reiko Matsukawa, there is no room at primary schools to add another subject to the curriculum because the five-day week system started in the 2002 academic year. Another reason is that the Education, Science and Technology Ministry failed to show concrete reasons to make English a regular subject.<sup>(1)</sup> Therefore, as English is not compulsory at present primary schools, the situation of English education varies widely from school to school. There are, of course, some primary schools which provide effective English education. One of them is Asuka Primary School, where an English drama was utilized to enhance the students' awareness of international understanding.

The purpose of this paper is to report on the English education at Asuka Primary School, Kumano city, Mie Prefecture, where the whole school and the community became involved in producing an English drama with the help of an ALT, or Assistant Language Teacher, from the United States.

## 2. The Pros and Cons of Discretionary English Classes at Primary Schools

### 2. 1. Different Views about English Education at Primary Schools

There have been a lot of arguments from opposing sides about introducing English education into primary schools. One of opinion leaders who advocates English education at primary schools is Katsutoshi Ito, a Kanagawa University professor. He states in the interview with The Daily Yomiuri in January 2000 that children learn a second language best around the age range of 6 to 8. This age is called among linguists a “sensitive period,” and during this period, they learn a language just by listening to and using it, even without formal instruction.<sup>2)</sup> Ito's conviction stems from his personal experience. He found that, while his family was in Boston, his eight-year-old daughter, learned English much more effectively than his older daughters. The peak age of 6 corresponds to the first-grade age in primary school, two years earlier than the “sogo-teki gakushuu” or the comprehensive learning time frame which was introduced from the third grade. That is the reason he advocates that English classes should start in the first grade. He also introduces the research conducted by Canada's McGill University. According to the research, children who had bilingual education performed better in scientific subjects in later academic years, and such children might not be bound by the structure of the language they use. Ito thinks that introducing English education to primary-school level is ideal as it would allow teachers to take advantage of young students' ability to absorb new languages just like a sponge absorbs water.

One scholar who opposes introducing English to primary schools is Takao Suzuki, a professor of Keio University. He asserts in his book, Why Japanese Can't Do Well in English, that English should be taught to only those who are really willing to learn and have the aptitude. He asserts that Japanese people should throw away the delusion that all

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the people should master English.<sup>③</sup> He recommends such motivated students to be trained for high government positions in which they can take advantage of their acquired skills to eloquently express Japanese views to the world. He also states that Japan does not make itself clear to the world, which makes other countries suspicious. To other nations, Japan seems enigmatic. Japan needs capable people with a command of English who can explain and assert Japan's position and thought on various issues. These skills, he says, are required of a limited range of people, such as politicians, diplomats, journalists and international business people. For this reason, he argues that English-language education should be made a selective subject at all educational levels, and that only people who need it should learn it.<sup>④</sup>

Kumiko Torikai, a professor of Rikkyo University, also opposes the idea of introducing English to primary schools. She advocates that English education should be started at middle schools, because there is no systematic programs for teaching English at primary schools at present. Middle-school students, she says, have mostly mastered their native language and have developed analytic ability and have flexibility and good memories. Their age is the most appropriate to learn English.<sup>⑤</sup> Among foreigners who teach English in Japan, some favor English education at primary schools, and others are against it. According to The Daily Yomiuri's "Readers' Forum," a foreign teacher who supports the idea of introducing English Education to primary schools says, "English lessons at primary schools is brilliant. It is the step Japan needs to revolutionize English-language education. There is more to learn from language than more vocabulary and grammar. Culture and language are intertwined. If students were comfortable speaking English, they would learn more about other cultures because they would have the communication skills to get to know more people from other countries."<sup>⑥</sup> Another foreign teacher of English, who is against implementing English education to primary schools, says, "Introducing English to primary schools is not only a bad idea, but actually a step in the wrong direction for the children's education. English should cease to be a compulsory subject and instead become an optional subject at all levels of study in this country. Most Japanese are fundamentally unsuited to learning English, and the vast resources that are poured into compulsory English education are being wasted. Most Japanese do

not actually need any English ability.”<sup>7)</sup>

## 2. 2. Summary of Different Opinions on English Education at Primary Schools

There have been a lot of arguments among teachers of English on English education at primary schools. Supporting opinions are as follows.

- a. Children obtain English rhythm and pronunciation more easily.
- b. Children acquire listening and speaking abilities naturally without difficulty.
- c. Children become free from an inferiority complex and prejudice against English.
- d. Children find something fun in learning English.
- e. Children have flexibility in their thinking through learning English.
- f. Children develop their objective views through learning English.
- g. Children are inherently inquisitive and eager to learn new things.
- h. English education opens up a new facet to the world for them if it is properly taught.
- i. Habits acquired early on are long-lasting and deeply rooted.
- j. English vocabulary learned at primary schools assists students once they enter middle school English classes.

Opposing opinions are as follows.

- a. There are not enough qualified English teachers at primary schools.
- b. Average class sizes at primary schools are too large to teach foreign languages.
- c. There is no room for primary school curriculum to implement English.
- d. Students do not have enough time to learn a new subject.
- e. Students should be more profoundly taught of their own language.
- f. It is hard to objectively evaluate students' English ability.
- g. English education increases the number of students who attend cram schools.
- h. English education forces students to be involved in “examination war.”
- i. English education produces students who hate English even at the primary school level.
- j. There is no consensus among primary school teachers about introducing English.

## 2. 3. The Government's Stance toward English Education at Primary Schools

In 2000, an Education Ministry's advisory panel agreed to propose that basic English be taught as early as the first year of primary school. It was the first time a ministry advisory body recommended English to be taught in primary schools.<sup>68</sup> The panel had been holding discussions for a long time on how to improve English-speaking skills among Japanese. Some members of the panel opposed the proposal because they thought teaching English to children so young will not necessarily help them learn to speak English well. The panel members, however, agreed to introduce English education at the earliest stage possible. They believed that young children would be motivated to learn English, learn proper pronunciation and acquire good listening skills. Accepting the proposal from the panel, the Education, Science and Technology Ministry made it possible for primary schools to teach English to students in the third grade or above as part of a curriculum designed to increase international understanding.

In the middle of such arguments about English education at primary schools, discretionary English education started in the 2002 academic year.

## 3. The Situation of English Education at Kumano-City's Primary Schools

There are 13 primary schools in Kumano city, whose population is about 26,000. Except for one school, Asuka, the situation of English education is almost the same. Of the thirteen schools, seven schools were chosen for the research. The research was conducted by interviewing principals of each school in February, 2003. All of the schools in Kumano city rely on one ALT (Assistant Language Teacher) for English education. The ALT, David Nowe from the United States, is employed by Kumano city. There are no Japanese teachers who teach English at these schools in the 2003 academic year.

Here are the research findings.

Arima Primary School: The total number of the students is 306. The school invites the above mentioned ALT fifteen times in one academic year. The ALT teaches all the grades when he visits the school, staying the whole day. The purpose of the school's Eng-

lish education is to give the students the opportunity to become familiar with a foreigner.

The school asks the ALT to introduce some aspects of American culture. They also ask the ALT to give an easy English conversation to the fifth and the sixth-grade students. All the students, the principal says, are always looking forward to seeing the ALT on the days when the ALT is expected to come and they enjoy his instruction very much. Most of the parents, the principal finds, want their children to learn English at school.

Ido Primary School: The total number of the students is 237. The school invites the ALT six times in one academic year. The ALT gives easy conversation classes to the fifth and sixth graders. Various types of games in English are also introduced into the classes. The school wants the students to have the chance to study not only about the culture of English-speaking countries, but cultures of other foreign countries.

Kanayama Primary School: The total number of the students is 149. The ALT visits the school six times in one academic year. All the students of the first to the sixth grades study English on the same days when the ALT visits the school. The purpose of teaching English is to enhance the students' awareness of international understanding. The students play various kinds of games in English, for example the practice of matching the names of colors in Japanese to those in English. Names of familiar foods, animals, birds and flowers are introduced.

Kinomoto Primary School: The total number of the students is 141. The school invites the ALT three times in one academic year. Only the sixth graders have English classes. The school wants, the principal says, that the students develop their listening ability. He believes that it is better for students to practice English pronunciation when they are at primary schools. He believes primary school students are best fitted to master correct English pronunciation. The ALT teaches conversation basics in English, such as greetings and self-introduction. The school also wants to help their students to familiarize themselves with English and deepen their understanding of foreign cultures, rather than helping them improve their English-speaking ability.

Kosaka Primary School: The total number of the students is 22. The ALT visits the school ten times in one academic year. The purpose of the English education, the principal says, is that all the students from the first to the sixth grades develop international understanding. English songs are introduced in the classes and basic conversation such as greetings and self-introduction are also included in the English classes. The teachers of the school, the principal says, are not so interested in introducing English to the school.

Isato Primary School: The total number of the students is 50. The ALT visits eight times in one academic year. English songs are introduced, and students learn conversation basics, such as greetings, self-introduction, thanking properly, and so forth. Students play some games in English. They also learn names of each part of a human body.

Asuka Primary School: The total number of the students is 22. This school utilizes an English drama to enhance the students' awareness of international understanding. More details are shown later.

Most of these schools think that the purpose of English education is not aimed at im-

Table 1

Each School's Frequency of English Classes and Their Object Grades

School	Students	Visits	Object Grades
Arima	306	15	1st to 6th graders
Ido	237	6	5th and 6th graders
Kanayama	149	6	1st to 6th graders
Kinomoto	141	3	6th graders
Kosaka	22	10	1st to 6th graders
Isato	50	8	1st to 6th graders
Asuka	20	24	1st to 6th graders

Note: The numbers of visits are represented in one academic year.

proving children's language abilities, but rather at getting them accustomed to foreign people and culture by inviting the ALT. Through English classes, these schools want to help the students understand what international understanding means. Most of the schools are located in mountainous areas and the students seldom have chances to contact with foreigners. All the schools want to increase the number of English classes if they are able to invite native speakers of English. They think that their students enjoy English classes conducted by the ALT very much and that the students look forward to seeing the ALT. This is because the ALT is good at communicating with students. It is very fortunate for these schools to invite such a talented ALT. Some principals think their teachers are not necessarily eager to have English education, because these teachers want to use "comprehensive learning" for other activities. All the principals think that the success of English classes with native-English speakers totally depends on ALTs' personality.

## 5. Asuka Primary School's English Education

Asuka Primary School: The total number of the students is 20. The school invites the ALT twice a month. Because of the small number of students, all the students, from the first-grade to the sixth-grade, have a chance to see the ALT from the United States and have various activities in English. The school thought of producing its own English drama with the ALT's help. They invited the community people to join the drama. They succeeded in producing the English drama in the 2002 academic year.

The school recognizes the "comprehensive learning" as the linkage between the study of human rights and that of international study. In other words, the school intends that the "comprehensive learning" should be utilized as a means for studying different culture through the communication with the ALT. It also wants the community people to be involved in the international exchanges. To fulfill these objectives, they decided to produce a drama partly in English with the ALT's cooperation.

(1) The purpose of producing a drama:

(a) To develop the students' understanding of different cultures.



(b) To give the ALT an opportunity to work as a cultural diplomat.

(2) The outline of the drama: "A New Student from America"

The place is Asukacho, Kumano City. The people in Asukacho have lived harmoniously with the river Oomata. In Spring frogs in the river start to sing their songs all together. In Summer children enjoy swimming in the river. House wives use the river to wash farm products. The households along the Route 42 are about two-hundreds, and the population is about five-hundreds. Asuka is a very small village in the mountain. Asuka Primary School is a very small school of twenty students. One day an American arrived to the school as a new student. The students have never experienced studying together with a foreign student, nor have they seen and talked with foreigners. Therefore, they treat the American as if he is an alien from other planet, and they run away from him whenever the American comes near to them. One day, the American student tries to find a public rest room and tries to ask students to help him, but the students ran away. Then an old man happened to pass by him, and the American student asked for help. This man does not speak English, but tries hard to find what the American student wants him to do. They succeed in communicating each other with non-verbal communication means. The students who witness the scene realize that they can communicate without English if they try hard with firm determination. After this incident, the students start to communicate with the American and gradually they become friends.

(3) Hypotheses for producing a drama:

(a) It is possible for the students to know about American culture by playing the drama with the American ALT. It is also possible for the students to understand the differences of thinking by translating a Japanese script into an English one.

(b) It is possible for the students to become aware of the fact that Japanese and Americans are the same human beings by playing the drama together with the ALT.

(c) It is possible to integrate Japanese culture and American culture by dancing "ise-ondo" or the song of Ise-town with a jazz beat.

(4) The Verification of the hypotheses:

(a) The verification on the first hypothesis (a)

The ALT asked why he was expected to wear a wig of blond hair. The teachers of Asuka Primary School thought it natural for Americans to wear a blond wig, and suggested the ALT to do so. The ALT thought it strange, because there are different races in America, including those who have black hair. Through the communication between the ALT and the Japanese teachers, the Japanese teachers were led to recognize that they should correct their stereotypical view about the hair color of Americans. The ALT is a Korean American, and looks like a Japanese. Therefore the teachers wanted the ALT to look like a typical American with blond hair. In the process of producing an original drama, the teachers of the school found various cultural differences, especially the difference in the way of thinking.

(b) The verification on the second hypothesis (b)

The ALT played the role of a foreign student in a small village. As the students got accustomed to communicating with the ALT while they played the drama together, the students became more and more friendly to the ALT. Their performance with the ALT became better and better day by day. They became so friendly to the ALT that they did not act well in the scene in which they ran away from him. In the Act four, the students were given chances to speak English. Although the drama demonstrates that one can communicate without English by using one's imagination, the students realized that if they could speak English, the boundaries in which they could expand their communication with native speakers of English would be limitless. The students who did not speak English loud at the earlier stages became gradually to speak loud and clearly.

(c) The verification on the third hypothesis (c)

All the students danced in the last scene the "ise-ondo" or song of Ise-town with the rhythm of American jazz. They did not feel any awkwardness to perform the Japanese dance with the rhythm of jazz. The ALT belongs to a Japanese dancing team and is a good dancer. Some community people who were the members of the dancing team also joined the jazz dance, resulting in the final dance scene as a grand finale. It may be said that the ideal mixture of different cultures was possibly shown on the stage.

## 6. English Used in the Drama

Good morning everyone.

Hi, David, come here, please.

Everybody, please be quiet.

Shut up.

Hello, my name is David.

I am from America.

I can't speak Japanese.

Please teach me.

Nice to see you.

Oh, my god!

I have to go for a pee.

Where's the bathroom?

Please tell me.

Is there anyone around here?

I can't wait.

Thank you very much.

It's important to understand one's feeling.

To approach others.

To accept others.

Soon there will be a MATSURI.

Yeah, we dance like this.

It looks like fun.

Is it an American dance?

Turn your chest.

Stomp your feet.

Clap your hands.

I want to dance with you.

Let's dance together.

No problem.

It's natural to help each other.

Today will be fun.

Now we will teach dancing to David.

Well, that's good.

I think so, too.

Singing and dancing is great.

When we dance together, we understand each other.

Grandma, grandpa, David's dance is fun.

Well, I'm too old for that.

No thank you.

The song composed by the ALT:

Why do they run from me?

All I want to do is to use the bathroom.

Why do they run from me?

I came here all alone.

Left my family, left my home.

But I have no friends right now.

Oh, I wish they would be my friends.

Why do they run from me?

## 7. Conclusion

As society becomes more and more international, and opportunities to communicate with foreigners increase, English becomes more and more an essential means to survive in the international age. In that sense, it is beneficial for Japan to have the people who are conversant in English. The reason that the Japanese government made it possible for primary schools to introduce English education was to make all Japanese able to use English. Leaving many things unresolved, however, the government implemented English

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One of the initial problems is that without a specified textbook and without experience or qualification to teach English, teachers are left with little to rely on. To help alleviate this situation, some of the boards of education throughout the nation have dispatched native English speakers to assist English classes. Another major issue is the difficult task of securing enough native English speakers to help teach at primary schools as assistant language teachers. Tadahiko Higuchi, the president of The Japan Association for the Study of Teaching English to Children, suggests that team-teaching by a native-speaker of English and a Japanese teacher who is in charge of the class would be an ideal situation.<sup>99</sup> Therefore, training primary-school teachers to teach English is the most urgent task. Other problems, such as the absence of a uniform curriculum and a wide variance in the number of classes that allocated to English, need to be addressed. Although there are many obstacles in teaching English at primary schools, Asuka Primary School demonstrates that if English education is done properly by enthusiastic teachers, the students' international awareness could be enhanced.

Many schools throughout the nation plan to select English conversation for "comprehensive learning" classes, chiefly in response to a rise in the interests of parents. Seventy-six percent of primary school students' parents support the introduction of English to primary schools. The majority of Japanese people, 77 percent, favor English education at primary schools.<sup>100</sup> To answer these expectation, the Education, Science and Technology Ministry should make English a regular subject as soon as possible. According to Chuji Kawai, a professor of Kansai University, Korea's English education at primary schools seems successful.<sup>101</sup> Therefore, it would be beneficial for Japan to learn from such an "advanced" country in terms of early English education.

### Notes

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