A Case Study for Nurturing Global Sensibilities : Creating an International Environment at Ehime University Faculty of Education Fuzoku Primary School

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1. Introduction

Foreign language ability is a skill of unquestionable usefulness when going abroad, and it is increasingly becoming a valuable tool to have within Japan. At the end of 2011, there were 2.07 million foreign residents in Japan (International Organization for Migration, 2013). As of April of the same year, there were 8,993 registered foreign nationals in Ehime Prefecture (Ehime Prefectural Government, 2012), making social or professional contact with non-Japanese residents highly likely if not inevitable.

Ideally, citizens should be unhindered and uninhibited when communicating with people from other countries and educators should strive to nurture within young students the will to actively interact with them. Instilling in children global sensibilities and an eagerness to communicate in conjunction with giving them the skills required to do so in meaningful ways is an important part of primary education. For successful, smooth interactions with all residents of Ehime, proficiency in a common language such as English is necessary.

The primary school setting provides opportunities for children to be surrounded by languages other than Japanese. Gaining familiarity with a foreign language can be done through personal interactions among the students, teachers, assistant language teachers (ALT), and with non-Japanese visitors; by making foreign languages available visually and audibly; and in using realia from abroad whenever possible. With imagination, this can be done in practical and fun ways.

In creating an international atmosphere at Ehime University Faculty of Education Fuzoku Primary School, due consideration is given to guidelines of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology's Foreign Language Activities curriculum and to the Ehime Prefecture Board of Education's goals in respect to international understanding education. This report delineates methods for creating an international environment at Ehime University Faculty of Education Fuzoku Primary School and examines feedback from its teachers concerning the cultivation of global sensibilities within children.

2. Ehime University Faculty of Education Fuzoku Primary School

Ehime University Faculty of Education Fuzoku Primary School, which shares its grounds with the Ehime University Center for Education and Educational Research, is an institution for grades one to six with an enrollment capacity of 672. It employs 38 administrators, full-time teachers, part-time lectures, and support staff. The author of this report is a native speaker of English privately hired in April, 2008, as the in-house assistant language teacher for three purposes: to familiarize students with people of other cultures; to give support during the language classes for fifth and sixth graders in advance of the April, 2011, inclusion of Foreign Language Activities to the national curriculum; and to provide cultural lessons to third and fourth graders in the segment of Integrated Studies dedicated to International Studies.

Integrated Studies is not included in the curriculum in first or second grades. For third and fourth grade students, a share of the total annual seventy hours of Integrated Studies time is designated to International Studies (Ehime University Faculty of Education Fuzoku Primary School, 2013). Topics vary from learning about

the ALT herself and her home country, to special events from around the world, non-verbal communication, dance, and the culture of food. The school's international program includes contact via Skype and letters with children in Australia, the Philippines, Canada and the United States as well as communication activities during visits with guests from abroad.

The government has mandated thirty-five hours of Foreign Language Activities per school year for both fifth and sixth grade students to "develop people who can act independently with a global point of view in a society that is becoming more international" (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2013).

3. Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology: Guidelines and Goals

Foreign Language Activities courses began nationwide in April, 2011, and are not graded subjects. The three main goals set out for the fifth grade course during its initial two years as described in the teaching manual "*Eigo* Note 1" were

> To use foreign languages to deepen understanding about language and culture; to attempt to cultivate attitude that fosters assertive communication; and to gain familiarity with the sounds and basic expressions of a foreign language (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports and Technology, n. d.).

Grade six goals were identical, with additions emphasizing personal relationships, international understanding and human interactions. The "*Eigo* Note 2" teaching manual detailed these aims but stressed that the ideas within were merely suggestions and that striving to memorize specific expressions was unnecessary (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, n. d.).

The language used in the unit goals is non-threatening and is sufficiently basic which results in low-pressure goals for students. The terms *memorize* and *master* are not used in the "*Eigo* Note" manuals. Instead, *familiarize*, *know*, *to be aware*, to *attempt to tell*, *to have an interest in* (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, n. d.) are the words and phrases used extensively concerning the relatable and age-appropriate targets and subject matter.

This gentle approach is also evident in the 42-page second-generation instructors' edition of the textbook series "Hi, friends". The manuals for both grade levels were drastically simplified from their 152-page predecessors. The course goals are clearly highlighted and aim to (a) stimulate awareness of language and culture, (b) familiarize children with established phrases and (c) use expressions that facilitate the communication between children and their friends (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, n. d.).

Unintimidating methods for exposing children to English in the spirit of these mandatory, yet non-graded, subjects are provided to Fuzoku Primary School students. In further efforts to familiarize with and accustom students to foreign languages and cultures, teachers' attitudes play a significant role.

4. Revealing Teachers' Attitudes: Questionnaire Results and Feedback from Educators

Teachers' attitudes toward things labeled *foreign* play an important role in the primary school learning environment. Positive or negative attitudes will likely be reinforced if students follow the examples of teachers to whom they are receptive on a human level (Allwright and Baily, 1991).

Employees at Fuzoku Primary School were given a survey to complete regarding creating an international environment in their school and classrooms. Participants were asked about their use of materials from abroad, foreign language greetings, English words of praise and English labels for the daily schedules on their blackboards. They were also asked whether creating a positive global atmosphere was considered meaningful, and additionally, about how they would respond to a child asking about *foreign* menu items in their school lunches. Although this was not a scientific study, the feedback from the questionnaires has provided insight into the attitudes of teachers (the names of whom are omitted for privacy purposes).

The questionnaire was created in Japanese by the author of this report, then proofread and reformatted by a Japanese co-worker. It was distributed to thirty-eight staff members, consisting in part of eighteen homeroom teachers, four full-time departmental staff, seven part-

time teachers and three administrators. Twenty were returned and then the contents were read and translated back into English by the author. Seventy-eight percent of the homeroom teachers and seventy-five percent of the full-time departmental staff completed the questionnaire to reveal that all found creating an international environment at a primary school to be meaningful.

It might seem that positive responses were merely the teachers following the Ehime Board of Education's goals for international understanding, specifically that of developing respect for foreign cultures within children (Ehime Board of Education, 2013). However, on further inspection of the written reasons as to why participants feel having an international environment at their school is significant, teachers illustrated a variety of thoughtful opinions which fell into three main categories.

First, educators emphasized the importance of children becoming accustomed to foreign cultures in habitual, innate ways. Comments included, "I would like them to become familiar with a foreign language in their own environment without being conscious of it and without having a dislike for it"; "children naturally take in ... knowledge" which "fosters a natural and international view point."

Teachers also expressed that an international atmosphere should be created to build international understanding. It was stressed that in striving to accomplish this, children would learn about the world and other cultures, and their horizons would be broadened which is increasingly becoming necessary in their own communities. The desire to raise children with international sensibilities was also given as a valid reason for surrounding students with language, items, and people from abroad.

Finally, teachers commented that being exposed to the world outside of Japan, while stimulating the children's natural curiosity, conversely led them to learn more about Japan, thereby strengthening their own cultural identity :

> It's meaningful for the sake of international studies ... but I also think it is important to value our own county's culture (I do not use foreign language vocabulary unnecessarily. I want to prevent a foreign language rebellion).

When asked to expand on the methods they employ to create an international atmosphere in their classes, one educator wrote that he comments on international matters in class because "sometimes during the study of Japanese [language and literature], things about foreign countries come up." One teacher involved in International Studies wrote "when calling on students, I just use their names without an honorific [suffix]." Another wrote, "I put up clocks that tell the local times of our partner schools abroad."

Administrative staff, a majority of the part-time staff, one full-time departmental and four homeroom teachers did not submit completed questionnaires. It is reasonable to assume that since the submission deadline for the questionnaire fell during the semester's final week, other demands took priority over it.

5. Bringing the Outside World onto School Grounds : Ideas for Creating an International Environment

Fuzoku Primary School has developed audible and visual ways to expose students to the world outside of Japan in a non-threatening and stimulating manner. Special events for communicating with students' peers abroad in English and Japanese have been very successful ; however, Fuzoku's exchange activities may not be suitable for re-creation in public primary schools. All of the following simple techniques can be employed at any primary school, but time and energy are demanded of the staff wishing to implement these methods.

(1) Lunch with the ALT

At Fuzoku Primary School, time is not set aside for International Studies for first and second grades, even for special events. Despite the enrollment of students who have attended kindergartens with English programs, there is not an outlet for them to utilize their language skills apart from speaking with other students from similar backgrounds and with staff members confident enough to speak English.

Classrooms for these grade levels are in a detached wing of the school making contact with the ALT an uncommon event that causes surprise. To give the students more exposure to the ALT, a schedule for mealtime visits was arranged.

This initiative has been invaluable to students wanting to spend time with a non-Japanese person during school hours. Exchanges with the ALT and more assertive children include demonstrations of their English skills; looking closely at the ALT's appearance; asking questions about their differences, the ALT's home, English vocabulary; and sharing events of their day.

(2) Lunchtime Lessons for Students

During lunchtime breaks, English classes were conducted during the 2012-2013 school year on convenient Thursdays for fifteen minutes. Participants joined their fifth grade volunteer friends and the ALT to have fun in English. Basic English was practiced through games and songs, while topics were specifically selected as not to interfere with subjects covered in International Studies. Other scheduled lunchtime events kept these lessons from being held weekly. It was unpaid time for the ALT who agreed to volunteer her time in advance. Similar classes at public schools could be problematic for ALTs who are not in-house employees, as their time during the workday outside of teaching is often used for planning lessons or for travelling between schools.

(3) Lessons for Teachers

Summertime lessons were held and weekly English conversation handouts were distributed to encourage teachers to use English. During the 2010-2012 school years, fifty simple, one-page language lessons were given as reference materials to the staff of Fuzoku Primary School. The bilingual lessons contained English vocabulary and phrases that can be used during the school day, as well as cultural points in relation to timely events taking place such as sports day, swimming lessons, school lunch duty, and end-of-the-day routines. During the 2013-2014 school year, twenty-one staff members demonstrated their desire to improve their English skills by reordering the complete set of lessons.

(4) Signage

During the 2012-2013 school year, most rooms of the school were decorated with laminated room signs in English. The font is lightly stylized but is printed largely and clearly making navigation within the school easy for visitors who do not read Japanese. To further assist such guests, an English-language school map appears in the school entryway and it was distributed to office staff and to homeroom teachers.

In the first semester of the 2013-2014 school year, middle and upper-grade homeroom teachers were given a package of English signs to use when appropriate. It contained large, laminated, magnetized labels in English of the teachers' names, school subjects for their blackboard schedules, the school map, words of praise, and a translated list of the contents. This set of English signs was purposefully prepared for immediate ease of use.

The phrases used on the signs with praise words were chosen to positively express approval at varying degrees (*excellent*, *well done*, *good job*, *you're close* and *try again*). Labels for school subjects are in fonts that do not contain strong or sharp features, for the purpose of conveying gentleness.

(5) A Bulletin Board for International Exchange News and English Study

A designated location within the school has been utilized to visually expose children to English. Since the fall of 2010, a large whiteboard in a high traffic area has been employed as the English and international exchange news bulletin board. It is an important tool in promoting Fuzoku Primary School's international cultural exchanges since pictures of partner schools' students and examples of their letters are periodically posted. It also serves to inform guardians and students of what to expect in International Studies and Foreign Language Activities classes.

Vocabulary words, games, photographs and news from our various exchange activities are displayed there. An effort is made to decorate the board monthly with attractive, meaningful and colorful components. Themes of past displays include the ALT's trip to Canada, summertime, insects, animals, Halloween, Japanese New Years, Hawaii, and a body parts display that children can rearrange freely.

English language labels (often accompanied by their Japanese translations) are included in these displays for those who wish to read and comprehend vocabulary. Students who are able to read English can share their knowledge with other children. This entertaining board can help to ignite a spark of curiosity about English and the outside world.

A photograph of the Canadian partner school's class was of particular interest to students and staff because

of the students' races. For the students to become familiar with their multicultural counterparts, this same photograph was displayed in all grade four classes involved in pen pal letter exchanges with this particular class. Even primary schools without a similar program can benefit from posting photographs of children abroad in school settings, for the purpose of raising awareness of other races and cultures.

(6) The School Song

Fuzoku Primary's school song was translated into English and performed skillfully in a presentation given by a fourth grade class to visitors from Hawaii. Added to a music or international program, English-versions of school songs can be beneficial in relating English to already familiar aspects of school life.

(7) Lunch Menu Announcements

Since first semester of the 2013-2014 school year, on-air menu announcements have been given in English by the students in the broadcast club. Exposure to English in this way offers all students the opportunity to briefly hear some English daily. It is fitting that Japanese announcements are accompanied by English interpretations, as items of foreign origin also appear on the menu.

6. International Meals : Feedback from Educators

To test the attitudes of the teachers even further, one area of the questionnaire distributed to staff focused on international dishes served in the school lunch program. Japanese school children receive affordable lunches, and Fuzoku's are planned by the Matsuyama School Lunch Center and the school nutritionist, then on-site cooks prepare the local, domestic, and foreign dishes. Respondents were asked how they would react to children asking about dishes described in the lunchtime broadcasts as originating from abroad.

Any new food item is considered foreign to children, making their introduction a challenge that some readily face while others approach with timid curiosity or caution. Methods with which teachers approach the task of encouraging children to eat their meals are important regardless of where the recipe came from.

Students eat lunch in their classrooms with their homeroom teachers, fourteen of whom, as earlier stated, completed questionnaires. Regarding how they would respond to children asking why there are foreign dishes in school lunches, four did not specifically use the words *foreign* or *international* in the explanations that they report are given to students. Rather, they place emphasis on the taste of the food served, writing that they describe the food as "delicious." Three homeroom teachers used only the word *diverse* in their answers to differentiate the international menu items from domestic ones, for example, "It's such a happy thing to be able to eat such diverse dishes, isn't it ?"

The seven remaining homeroom teachers' responses to the question regarding foreign food items were overwhelmingly positive. They reason with children, "Delicious things have no borders," "Knowing things about various countries is fun" and "It's a good thing, isn't it, to be able to eat food from countries you haven't been to." One commented, "School lunches are a part of [a child's] education. I want them to know not just the flavors of Japan, but about those of other countries." The following thoughtful return came from a homeroom teacher previously involved in Foreign Language Activities and International Studies :

> Ideally, I would answer that to know about other cultures, we should start with the culture of food, or that one should gain many experiences before becoming an adult ; but in actuality, I say, 'it tastes good, doesn't it ?' The teacher should lead by example in being accustomed to other cultures.

With staff support, the enjoyment of new foods will become something for children to receive pleasure from.

7. Conclusion

Educators have numerous opportunities at primary schools for creating an environment with an international feel. Sufficient time, creativity and dedication are important, but of even greater value are teachers who lead by example and demonstrate to their students, positive attitudes concerning the outside world. Parallels between learning to accept new, unfamiliar foods and the willingness to embrace foreign languages, cultures and people can be made : Their tentative consumption can lead to graceful tolerance and acceptance.

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