

A Study of English Learning Effectiveness and Class Size for Elementary School Pupils in Japan

子供たちの英語学習効果とクラスサイズについての一考察

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Abstract : 2011 年公立小学校において小学校英語活動が導入された。筆者は東海地方の O 市の公立小学校 9 校において英語活動の印象を調査したが、その結果、クラスサイズが小さい場合、英語活動を楽しみ、英語をもっと練習したい、外国人と英語で話してみたい、の項目において有意な相関が示された。本稿ではこの調査結果を踏まえ、英語学習効果とクラスサイズについて考察していく。

keywords: class size, learning effectiveness, teacher effectiveness

1. Introduction

In Japan English language teaching at public elementary schools started in 2011 in accordance with accelerating globalization. In EFL settings like in Japan, English classes play a main role in offering opportunities to have learners experience face-to-face communication using English. Therefore, it is no exaggeration that internationalization of the Japanese depends on the effectiveness of the English classes.

This paper examines the relationship between 'learning effectiveness' and 'class size', based on the research results conducted among 385 elementary school pupils learning English in the Tokai area in 2009.

2. 'Learning effectiveness' and 'teacher effectiveness'

Reilly (2005) states 'effective learning' is the result of 'teacher effectiveness', rate of instructional presentation and the learner's knowledge base. In terms of 'teacher effectiveness', Reilly mentions the following:

Teacher effectiveness is defined by the amount of information transmitted by the teacher that can be learned by students. For example, if a particular class session requires learning five pieces of

information but the teacher is only successful in transmitting 2.5 of these pieces, the teacher is 50% effective.

3. Non-native teachers' perception of their own competences for teaching English

According to the definition by Reilly (2005), 'teacher effectiveness' relies on the amount of information which can be transmitted to the learners.

Pinter (2010) introduces the survey of Butler (2004) conducted in Asia among primary English teachers investigating the perceptions of their own competences with regard to teaching English as a foreign language.

The results indicated that the majority of these teachers in Japan, Korea and Taiwan did not think that they were adequately prepared for teaching English in primary classrooms. They identified their own English language competence, including oral fluency and pronunciation as the most urgent areas in need of updating and development (quoted by Pinter, 2010).

I conducted a research in 2009 among homeroom teachers at nine public elementary schools in O City of the Tokai area who were supposed to teach the English

language two years later. The number of respondents was ninety-nine, most of whom were experienced teachers aged over forty. The results showed that 68.7% of them had no confidence in teaching English with an unwillingness to involve themselves in the new program because of having no time to spare in their hectic days.

4. Research conducted on English classes in a city within the Tokai Area, Japan

I conducted research in 2009 among 385 pupils learning English at the same nine public elementary schools I mentioned above. English language education at the public elementary schools was planning to commence in 2011 catering to the fifth and sixth graders. Before the introduction, some trial teaching had been administrated at those elementary schools since 2002.

4.1 Questionnaire

4.1.1 Procedure

The questionnaire was conducted in the English classes from the end of February to the beginning of March in 2009. The 385 participants were from nine elementary schools, A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H and I. The questionnaire included the following three items:

1. Do you enjoy English class?
2. Do you want to practice English more?
3. Do you want to communicate with English speakers ?

Those answers were graded on four levels from “very much” to “not at all”, each of which was scored from 4 to 1. Participants were not required to identify themselves.

4.1.2. Results

The following is the results of the questionnaire.

Questions	5 th graders N= 205	6 th graders N= 180
1) Do you Enjoy English class?	87%	81%
2) Do you want to practice English more?	83%	86%
2) Do you want to communicate with English speakers?	73%	75%

The above table shows that there is no significant difference in the rates between 5th graders and 6th graders related to the three questions. Next, the correlation among the three items was examined. For the statistical analysis, *SPSS 15. OJ* for Windows was used.

As a result, the relatively strong or strong correlation among the three items were revealed in the 6th grader’s classes at elementary school A and elementary school H.

At elementary school A, a relatively strong correlation was shown between the questions “Do you Enjoy English class?” and “Do you want to practice English more?”, as well as between “Do you Enjoy English class? and “Do you want to communicate with English speakers? ($r=.58$ 、 $r=.69$)” Furthermore, a strong correlation was revealed between the items of “Do you want to practice English more?” and “Do you want to communicate with English speakers ? ($r=.73$)”

At elementary school H, a relatively strong correlation was shown between the questions of “Do you Enjoy English class?” and “Do you want to communicate with English speakers? ($r=.68$)” In addition, a strong correlation was revealed between the questions of “Do you Enjoy English class?” and “Do you want to practice English more?”, as well as between “Do you want to communicate with English speakers ?” and “Do you want to practice English more? ($r=.75$ 、 $r=.81$)”

Why did only those two schools have strong or relatively strong correlations among the three questions? The two schools provided different approaches to the pupils with different ALTs. A probable factor that the two schools had in common, however, was their class size,

both of which had less than thirty pupils. That is, school A had twenty-eight and school B had twenty-six pupils. The rest of the seven elementary schools had bigger classes composed of more than thirty to a maximum of forty pupils. This present study results showed that small size classes could benefit from 'learning effectiveness.'

5. On what grounds can small classes benefit from 'learning effectiveness'?

Pinter (2006) quotes a study in 1999 of Marianne Nikolov by emphasizing that young children are motivated by positive attitudes to English and the learning context, which means that they want to learn English because they enjoy activities and the comfortable atmosphere in class.

Furthermore, Pinter (2006) quotes the statement of Dornyei, who suggests that there are four main components of motivational teaching. Among those four main components includes creating motivating conditions for learning.

Then, what kind of place would create an environment with enjoyable activities, a comfortable atmosphere and/or motivating conditions for learning? It can be said that 'home' comes to mind in these cases. Every child without exception gains the ability to speak at home. Caregivers believe in their children's capacities, which can be another element for driving their development. The 'home' naturally yields 'effective learning'.

Dornyei (2001) argues that if you yourself believe that your students can reach high levels of achievement, there is a good chance that they will too. However, if you have low expectations about how much your students can cope with, they will probably 'live down' to these expectations.

School teachers are expected to play the same role as caregivers in society. They have the responsibility for how much they can induce and foster their pupils' capacities. One of the difficulties, however, is that school teachers have to take care of a much greater number of children than caregivers at home. Education in group is necessary to cultivate children's communication skills, but too many children could be beyond the teachers' abilities. Even experienced teachers cannot be attentive or sensitive to each child in a big class while presenting

enjoyable activities in an effort to create comfortable atmospheres or motivating conditions for learning.

6. Discussion

English classes I investigated were conducted by mainly ALTs, assistant language teachers, although it is supposed that Japanese homeroom teachers had to perform this role. This is, however, not the fault of the Japanese teachers. Just like the above-mentioned Asian teachers in the survey by Butler (2004), those Japanese homeroom teachers had neither skills nor confidence in teaching English to the extent that they had no choice but to rely on ALTs, which was shown in the above-mentioned research results. The reason was that the introduction of English language education at public elementary schools in Japan was initiated without well-prepared in-service-training except for a few seminars per year in response to the urgent need for globalization. Under such conditions, it is almost impossible to anticipate 'learning effectiveness' in English classes.

Furthermore, the present study showed that even with skilled native teachers of English, the difference in 'learning effectiveness' between smaller and bigger sizes of English classes was revealed in the pupils' responses. Given that, offering not only an appropriate in-service, but also considering class sizes is required.

At present, the maximum number of students for one class at elementary schools in Japan is supposed to be forty, which outnumbers the ones in foreign countries. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology made a five-year-plan to decrease the maximum number of pupils in one class at elementary schools to thirty-five by 2017 in order to enhance 'learning effectiveness' in every subject while citing an example of a practice in Akita *Prefecture*, where a small class system has been introduced since 2001. The nation-wide research results at both of the elementary schools and junior high schools in Akita *Prefecture* showed that their academic performances have been ranked high for four sequence years.

In consideration of the present study results, however, the targeted number of thirty-five is still inadequate. The Japanese government must aim at a number of thirty or less.

7. Concluding Thoughts

As globalization advances, even children living in EFL settings like Japan have to enhance their English skills for living as a world citizen. Otherwise, they will be left behind in the contemporary world.

Considering that English classes play a main role in improving English skills in EFL settings, the classes have to be as effective as possible in performing the role. First and foremost, class sizes must be reduced while offering adequate in-service training programs towards elementary school teachers.

Acknowledgement

This research was funded by Institute of Environmental Management of Nagoya Sangyo University & Nagoya Management Junior College Grant. I would like to extend my appreciation to Dr. Yukimaru Shimizu.

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