Laying the Groundwork for Ongoing Learning: A Scaffolded Approach to Language Education in Japanese Elementary Schools and Beyond

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Abstract

This paper is based on a twofold argument. Firstly, it argues for the need to view English language learning as a long-term undertaking and to link elementary school English programs more strongly with junior and senior high school programs in order to support students' success across the term of their lives as English language learners. Secondly, the results of a classroom investigation into the feasibility of using meaning-based word order (IMIJUN) as a framework for achieving this greater congruity of programs by scaffolding Japanese elementary school students learning as they are challenged to go beyond memorizing English to creating their own English sentences is reported.

Index Terms: classroom investigation, elementary school, English education, grammar education, meaning based word order

1. Introduction

From 2011 the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology's (MEXT) revised course of study will come into effect, thus officially introducing Foreign Language Activities in grades 5 and 6. In fact, approximately 94% of Elementary schools had already implemented some form of foreign language study by 2007 [1], and yet very little research or theory has yet been put forward to delineate best practices in the teaching of English to Japanese elementary school students.

This paper seeks to open up this debate by arguing the need for an integrated and long-term approach to foreign language education that not only supports students' learning at the elementary school level, but lays the foundation for their ongoing learning and use of English. Having shown the need for such an approach, the initial results of a research project designed to meet this need by teaching students a simple framework (IMIJUN) for understanding and creating English sentences, are reported. While still in the initial stages of research, it is shown that with IMIJUN as a scaffold elementary school students can enjoy both the challenge and freedom of learning to create their own English.

2. Why starting younger is not enough

While the image of the young learner who absorbs language like a sponge is one that is often envied by struggling adult learners around the world, the reality of language education in Japanese elementary schools is often far from this dream.

There can be no argument that young learners under normal circumstance will in time acquire their mother tongue with unerring perfection [2]. However, in foreign language classroom settings youth has often been found to be more of a handicap than an advantage [3]. It is critical that teachers are fully aware of this fact as early learning experiences can have ongoing effects for better or worse.

The dangers of the early introduction of foreign language education are most clearly highlighted by Clare Burstall's [4] landmark study of 17,000 British children learning French in British public primary schools. While students initially showed good results and high motivation, follow up studies of the students after they entered secondary school showed that motivation and performance had decreased to the point where they were outperformed by students who had not been exposed to French lessons before entering high school. Paradoxically, the early introduction of language education had actually lowered overall achievement. Analysis of interviews with both students and teachers suggest that a disparity in teaching methods and the incompatibility of language learning strategies that had been successful at the elementary level to the more complex high school French were to blame for this failure. The program was discontinued.

The current situation in Japan is disturbingly similar to that seen in Britain in the 1960s and 70s. As can be seen from MEXT's own investigation of the content of foreign language activities classes [5]; games, songs, simple conversations and pronunciation practice have become the staple of foreign language classes with students expected by default to either learn by rote or intuit the rules governing the language. This situation is perhaps not surprising as teachers are to some extent Constrained by the small number of hours allocated to foreign language learning on the one hand (only 35 hours of instruction are allotted to Foreign Language Activities in each of the 5th and 6th grades in the new curriculum [6]), and the widespread expectations of naturalistic or inductive approaches to language education on the other. MEXT's course of study for foreign language activities [7] states that "teachers should try to have pupils understand language and culture experientially, avoiding giving too detailed explanations" and this is often interpreted to mean that Japanese explanations of grammar do not belong in the elementary classroom. While this dedication to experiential methods should be applauded, its time consuming nature cannot be underestimated. Ur [8] cautions that "the inductive method should be employed wisely and sparingly, restricted only to rules that can be perceived and defined quickly; otherwise a lot of valuable class time can be wasted."

In fact, it will be argued here that this fixation with how the target language is presented has obscured the more important issue of how students are inculcated to learn the language. For as Lightbown and Spada [9] state "language programmes in schools should be based on realistic estimates of how long it takes to learn a second language." Clearly it is imperative that elementary school language classes be designed to scaffold students' first steps on what will undoubtedly be a long road.

3. Fixed vs Free-Word Order Languages

The significance and rules of word order in English can be an especially challenging concept for Japanese students. This is because while English is a fixed-word order language, Japanese is a free-word order language which uses particles, rather than word order to indicate the grammatical relationship between words in a sentence.

To understand the difference consider the following sentences in English and Japanese:

1) Jack ate the banana.

2) The banana ate Jack.

3) jyaku ga banana wo tabemashita.

4) banana wo jyaku ga tabemashita.

While inverting the order of the subject and object in the English sentences 1 and 2 fundamentally changes their meaning, the Japanese sentences 3 and 4 retain their original meaning because although the subject and object have been inverted, the subject and object markers *ga* and *wo*, respectively, have not been separated from their respective chunks of speech.

This fundamental difference between Japanese and English separates Japanese learners of English from learners of English whose mother tongue uses a fixed-word order system, even if it is different from English. Thus, while a young French student learning English for the first time might reasonably be expected to grasp on their own the basic differences between French and English word order, a Japanese student may spend a significant amount of time and energy trying fruitlessly, either consciously or unconsciously, to discern the differences which do not exist. Japanese learners searching for which particles shape the relationships between words in English may be confused before realizing that English relies on word order to accomplish this function. It is also possible that students may simply assume that, like Japanese, English order is fluid and continue throughout their lives, as many Japanese people do, to stick chunks of language to the end of sentences.

Historically, this aspect of the English language has been explicitly taught in Japanese junior and senior high schools to avoid this problem. The method used to teach this is the *Go Bunkei* or 5 sentence pattern model; in which students learn to classify English sentences into 5 possible sentence patterns [10]:

1) Subject + Verb (S+V)
2) Subject + Verb + Complement (S+V+C)
3) Subject + Verb + Object (S+V+O)
4) Subject + Verb + Indirect Object + Direct Object (S+V+O+O)
5) Subject + Verb + Object + Complement (S+V+O+C)

However, this approach to teaching English word order can be clearly seen to be unnecessarily complicated for elementary school students and is of limited value in constructing English sentences due to the levels of cognitive processing it requires.

In contrast IMIJUN is an uncomplicated system for scaffolding Japanese students' understanding and construction of English sentences, which can be taught in a few minutes without the need for complex grammatical explanations and immediately implemented.

By firstly, teaching this fundamental order of English using a simple Japanese word chant:

dare ga,	*suru,*	*dare,*	*nani,*	*doko,*	*itsu*
(who)	(does)	(whom)	(what)	(where)	(when)

Students are able to consciously scaffold their language in a way that mirrors monolingual English speakers' unconscious learning of English.

Table 1 below shows how the five or even the seven sentence patterns of English (e.g., Crystal, 2004) [11] can be explained by IMIJUN.

Table 1. *IMIJUN and the English Sentence Patterns.*

	Dare -ga	*Suru/ desu*	*Dare*	*Nani*	*Doko*	*Itsu*
	who	*does*	*whom*	*what*	*where*	*when*
SV	He	laughs.				
SVO	He	shut		the door.		
SVC	He	became		a doctor.		
SVA	He	resides			in Tokyo.	
SVOO	He	gave	me	a book.		
SVOC	He	calls	me	Bill.		
SVOA	He	put		the book	on the desk.	

4. IMIJUN a Natural Scaffold

IMIJUN, which comes from the Japanese words IMI (meaning) and JUN (order), is a means of ordering meaningful chunks of English to make coherent sentences. It was conceived by Akira Tajino [12] and corresponds to the natural way in which monolingual speakers of English develop their language competency. Tajino (2008) discusses the rationale for IMIJUN from several theoretical perspectives, including first language acquisition and functional grammar, and provides some empirical evidence to show the effect of the IMIJUN teaching at the university level [13].

IMIJUN provides a scaffold for students which can be refined and expanded as their language proficiency increases. This is because, as Pinker [14] explains, the fundamental word order of English is so central to the language that speakers as young as 2 or 3 who have not yet mastered other areas of their mother tongue have already internalized it. Thus, it is not uncommon to hear children utter sentences which do not conform to other English rules, but are still easily understood because they follow this fundamental pattern.

As a scaffold for language learners the strength of IMIJUN lies in this natural approach which rather than aiming to explain every possible English sentence using a meticulous set of rules, uses an uncomplicated model to explain the fundamental word order of English. This simplicity means that like young monolingual speakers students' minds are freed to spend more time thinking about what they want to say and less time is needed to worry about which sentence pattern to use to say it.

5. Classroom investigation

This section describes the methodology and results of a short investigation into the use of IMIJUN to scaffold students learning of a variety of basic sentence patterns contained in

Eigo Note 1 and 2.

5.1. Research development

This research is a collaboration of teacher-instigated research and researcher generated theory. Therefore it seeks to marry the realities of elementary school classroom language education with an understanding of the latest research in the field of language education as a whole.

5.2. Hypothesis

Having identified the pedagogical necessity of a scaffolded approach capable of supporting students to bridge the gap between elementary and junior/senior high school English programs; and knowing the value of IMIJUN in scaffolding language learning at a variety of different linguistic and developmental levels, it was hypothesized that: "employing IMIJUN to scaffold students' current language syllabus would not decrease either motivation or understanding".

5.3. Research and Lesson Design

An initial investigation of the viability of using IMIJUN to scaffold 5th and 6th graders' English programs without any change to the existing target structures or vocabulary was conducted in Kaguyama Elementary School. Like most public elementary schools Kaguyama's classes consist of over thirty students with varying levels of exposure and skill in English. Each lesson was approximately 45 minutes in length.

To insure the consistency of content with students' regular lessons, classroom teachers were consulted at length and both target topics and vocabulary were taken from Eigo Note [15] [16], the students' regular textbook.

While structures and vocabulary were taken from Eigo Note, the method of instruction was based on IMIJUN, with lessons roughly divided into three sections as explained below.

Classes were also videotaped for later analysis and after each class was completed, Japanese feedback forms were administered to students by their homeroom teachers and both quantitative and qualitative data was collected anonymously from students.

5.3.1 Introduction to IMIJUN.

Students were first introduced to the difference in basic word order between English and Japanese using simple sentences and a mirror to visually illustrate the inverted nature of English and Japanese sentences.

Following this, students memorized the IMIJUN pattern by chanting with the teacher and other students.

5.3.2 Introduction of target phrases and vocabulary using IMIJUN software.

Once students were accustomed to the IMIJUN word order they were invited to practice constructing English sentences from Japanese prompts using the IMIJUN software and a smart board interface. Figure 1. shows an introductory exercise where students use IMIJUN software to reorder Japanese sentence using meaningful chunks. As students progressed instruction was reduced and students were encouraged to take control of the activity and monitor each other, thus, preparing them for possible future autonomous study. By the end of this section of the class students were able to use the software's built in word order and voice functions to correct their own and other students' syntax and pronunciation.
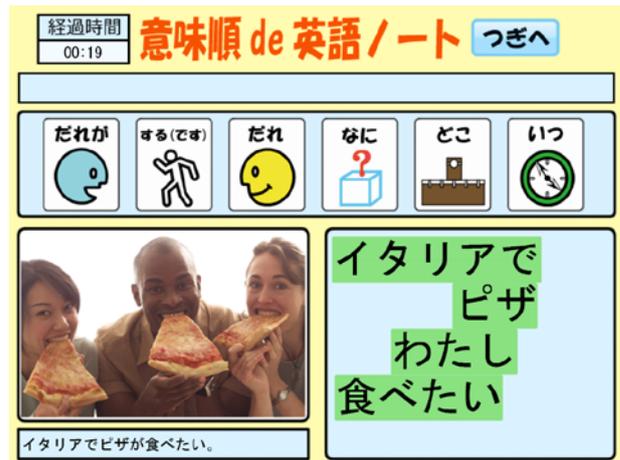

Figure 1. *A screen capture of IMIJUN software.*

5.3.3 Scaffolded interaction with other students using target language.

Once students were comfortable with using IMIJUN to construct model sentences they were given the freer task of constructing, asking and answering question with their classmates. This allowed students to experience what it might be like use IMIJUN to structure their own conversations outside of the classroom.

5.4. Results

Here we will deal with the results from the 3 quantitative questions that pertain to our hypothesis:

Question 1) "Do you like English?"
Question 2) "Was today's lesson fun?"
Question 3) "Did you understand today's lesson?"

Each question was administered using a simple 3 level likert scale. Students were able to answer "No", "Normal" or "Yes". Finally, each answer was given numerical value: No=1, Normal=2 and Yes=3. Average results from these numerical values have been tabulated and are presented below in Table 2.

Table 2. *Questioner results for 5th and 6th graders.*

	Q1	Q 2	Q3
5th Grader	2.60	3.00	3.00
6th Grader	2.50	2.88	2.68
Average of 5th and 6th	2.55	2.94	2.84

5.5. Discussion

In both 5th and 6th grade classes more students responded positively to questions 2 and 3 than did to question 1. While it could be argued that the novelty of being taught using a new model of English instruction may have effected students perception to some extent, it must be recognized that contrary to common belief, under the right conditions, elementary school students, far from disliking to learn grammar, actually found it both understandable and more enjoyable than their experience of English in general. Due to the small number of participants and the large number of uncontrolled variables in this initial investigation, it would be difficult to make statistical generalizations from these results. However, it would seem very clear from the data collected that when

introduced using the IMIJUN model a constructive grammar based approach was both enjoyable and easy for the students in our test classes to understand.

5.6. Further Research

Based on the positive results of this initial study further research into the possibility of using IMIJUN to scaffold and align elementary school language programs is indicated. This research should seek to address two key questions: Firstly, where and in what ways can IMIJUN best be used at the elementary school level and secondly what are the long-term effects of the introduction of IMIJUN on students' performance and motivation once they reach junior and senior high school.

6. Conclusions

Fundamental differences in language structure between Japanese and English and limited class time in elementary schools necessitate that an overall framework to scaffold students learning be taught as early as possible. IMIJUN provides this scaffolding without requiring students to learn difficult grammatical rules thus allowing students to mediate their own learning from an early stage.

Although this was only an initial investigation of the suitability of IMIJUN for elementary students it is clear from students' feedback that the scaffolding it provided allowed for an easily understood and enjoyable learning environment.

While it was found that IMIJUN could possibly be used to provide a basic scaffolding for English learning it is also important to continue research into the development of further techniques to support students in acquiring other areas of language such as vocabulary and pronunciation and areas of grammar outside of word order.

7. Acknowledgements

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