

Australian JFL Teacher Reflections on Foreign Language Activities in Japanese Primary Schools

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Introduction

In this paper, I report preliminary findings from a three-year comparative research and exchange project between primary school teachers in Japan and Australia, a project that represents a confluence of my research interests in language education, teacher training, curriculum studies, and intercultural communication. Research presented here is part of a larger study about how foreign languages are taught in comparable but reverse international FL contexts – English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Japan, and Japanese as a Foreign Language (JFL) in Australia. This wider mirror-context study is mainly concerned with examining teacher attitudes about primary school FL education, critically comparing stated curriculum objectives, assessing human resources issues, and evaluating teaching methodologies and course materials used for foreign language education in two comparable international FL settings. Another prominent objective of the project is to provide intercultural in-service teacher training opportunities for the participating teachers. The overarching aim is to gain a holistic understanding of FL education at the primary school level through close examination of both the unique and shared contextual factors in each setting.

This paper focuses on findings from one part of the project involving international reciprocal exchange visits of six cooperating primary school language teachers. These visits brought three practicing Australian JFL primary school teachers to Japan to observe EFL teaching, and sent three Japanese primary school teachers charged with English language teaching to Australia for JFL classroom observations. The purpose of these reciprocal visits was to provide intercultural Professional Development (PD) opportunities for participating teachers, to improve in-service language and teacher training services for local teachers, and to establish grassroots international exchange between the cooperating schools. This paper specifically focuses on data from the reflection diaries kept by the three participating JFL teachers from Australia. Findings from this data set are outlined in terms of the critical observational and reflective feedback provided about EFL teaching in primary schools in Japan, and how teachers can learn and change through the process of reflecting on how language is taught in a mirror context. Outcomes are discussed

primarily in terms of how grassroots exchange can enhance teacher development and improve foreign language education through intercultural in-service PD exchange visits.

Situating the study: Research background

Foreign language education at the elementary school level is a relatively new curricular development, and only recently are we beginning to see research results reported on EFL teaching in Japanese public primary schools (Aline and Hosoda, 2006; Butler, 2004, 2006, 2007a, 2007b; Butler and Takeuchi, 2008; Hashimoto, 2011; Hosoda and Aline, 2010; Matsuzaka Carreira, 2006). Initiatives from the early 2000s, such as the nation-wide *tokku* projects, were established as a first step to formally integrating foreign language study in the primary school curriculum. The *tokku* projects and the subsequent formal MEXT integration of ‘foreign language activities’ into primary schools in 2011, which for all intents and purposes means English, have provided researchers with a rich data resource to examine foreign language education for young learners in Japan. It remains, however, an area largely underdeveloped in terms of published research and what little there is covers a wide range of EFL-related themes such as team teaching, methodology, teacher training, practical activities/materials, assessment, and motivation. In other words, a fully developed research trajectory has yet to emerge in any one of these themes. That which has been published, with the exception of the more scientific and research-oriented work cited above, mainly consists of context-specific and practical research about the introduction of English language education at the primary school level. Some of these Japan-focused research reports have aimed at identifying ideas for best practice (see, for example, Hosoda and Aline, 2005; Kelly, 2002; Moser, Harris, and Carle, 2011; Murphey, Asaoka, and Sekiguchi, 2004; Sampson, 2010; York, 2011; and Yukawa, 2002) while others have taken a more critical stance toward issues involved with the introduction of English lessons in primary schools (Fennelly and Luxton, 2011; Lingley, 2007; Kizuka, 2009; Takagaki, 2003). This stance is most critically articulated in Hashimoto (2011), who examines the process of policy-making related to elementary school language education as an “elaborate scheme” by the Japanese government aimed at protecting Japanese culture by actually “...undermining the position of English and refusing to accept the language as a core part of its identity” (p. 15). It is in this area of language planning and policy studies, as best represented in the work of Butler and Hashimoto, that published research on the Japanese primary school education initiatives is most quickly reaching maturity.

Comparative research linking curriculum, language planning, and methodology has been published about how primary school English is being adopted and taught across Asian contexts such as Korea, China, Taiwan, and Japan (most notably Butler, 2003; 2009), and researchers based in these Asian countries have begun to report on English education in their respective

locales. However, there are no published studies of mirror-context language education research for any two particular settings comparing aspects of FL education at the primary school level in reverse contexts. The aim of this study is therefore to help develop a comparative research base regarding FL curriculum goals for primary schools – a research base still very much in its infancy. With no research studies on EFL education at the primary school level in Japan as seen through the critical lens of ‘outsider’ foreign language teaching professionals, it is hoped that this study can contribute to a forming literature in the area of primary school language education. While Butler has done valuable work in comparing primary school language education across EFL contexts, this project aims to broaden the research base by considering how different foreign languages are taught in reverse FL contexts.

The Japan (EFL) and the Australian (JFL) settings were chosen for several reasons. A comparable mirror FL setting was needed to supplement my local research (Lingley, 2007), which involved a study of the Kochi primary school EFL context by critically examining of interlocking curricular issues related to the local implementation of the *tokku* policy. Although my findings indicated that issues unique to the local context are a key factor in developing a curriculum, there was still much to be learned from further comparative research into other local curriculum initiatives, and by critically comparing and evaluating these initiatives based on global standards of language education. In its early phase, the Kochi primary EFL education project existed very much in isolation, running itself without much needed exposure to methods and international norms in the area of young learner FL education, or the constructive external scrutiny needed for improvement. With the formal introduction in 2011 of the new foreign language activities course, local language education is still very much in need of critical external feedback.

To compare the local EFL setting with a comparable international mirror FL setting, Tasmania in Australia was selected. Kochi and Tasmania were deemed comparable in terms of size, their respective periphery locations within Japan and Australia, and as working examples of reverse FL teaching situations. Also language learning at primary school in both contexts has non-regular subject status, though there is a longer, more established tradition of primary school FL education in Australia. Japanese as a foreign language is only one of several foreign languages taught in Australia but it is the most established Asian foreign language nation-wide with developed local networks of JFL teachers. The importance of learning English for career and academic advancement is well established in Japan, and study of Japanese as a foreign language in Australia is similarly regarded as potentially leading to international career opportunities, but in a more niche way. Further, in terms of PD opportunities, there has been very little available to local Kochi teachers with respect to guided classroom research, in-service and methods training, workshops, demonstration lessons, and materials development support. Conducting

a comparative research study in conjunction with practicing classroom teachers from abroad addressed this shortcoming at the local level in both contexts, and established an inclusive teaching practice/research relationship at the local community level with a strong PD component.

Challenges for mirror-context comparative studies

While the notion of conducting a mirror context analysis of foreign language education is intuitively appealing, requisite caution must be exercised in that the differences from each setting can be significant enough to limit the impact of any inferences drawn from this kind of comparative study. In our case, comparison of the Japanese and Australian primary school FL teaching situation is burdened by differences in teacher training, curricular aims, and foreign language teaching philosophies. In Australia, foreign language education is charged to trained LOTE (Language Other Than English) teachers who have received language teaching methodology training and who have a demonstrated proficiency in the target language. These teachers work to specific and detailed age-appropriate syllabi with clearly defined objectives and assessment indicators for each grade. One need only take a look at the Tasmania LOTE curriculum document to see how Japanese language learning is sequenced and structured within the core interrelated content strands of ‘communication’, ‘language as a system’, and ‘language and culture’. This, in turn, is supported by defined targets for each grade for Japanese linguistic items such as grammar, vocabulary, and the reading and writing of hiragana and kanji. All of this is further framed by clearly articulated assessment principles, best practice suggestions, and guiding documentation about how the LOTE curriculum fits into the broader literacy-based educational philosophy. Official LOTE curriculum documents from other Australian states such as the Victoria Essential Learning Standards (VELS) are similarly detailed in scope, and the soon-to-be-released Australian national curriculum for languages will further establish a common standard for LOTE teachers. That such detailed objectives are not always fulfilled in actual practice due to other educational and contextual factors is a separate issue. The point is that Australian JFL language teachers have something with which they can anchor their teaching practice.

The contrast with the official Japanese foreign language activities curriculum documents could not be clearer. The broad-reaching objectives of these activities, as described in the official MEXT guidelines, is to “form the foundation of pupils’ communication abilities through foreign languages while developing an understanding of languages and cultures through various experiences, fostering a positive attitude toward communication, fostering a positive attitude toward communication, and familiarizing pupils with the sounds and basic expressions of foreign languages” (p. 1). These same elements, worded differently, appear in the state curriculum documents from Australia but that is where the similarity ends. The main difference

is in the details about how these objectives can be met. MEXT provides no model syllabus documents, instead leaving this to the discretion of local schools, communities, and boards of education. Only vague suggestions with no supporting framework are provided about making lessons communicative in style, tailoring lessons to the interests of students, focusing on the joy of communication, tapping the community for human resource needs, becoming familiar with the sounds of English, using gestures, and deepening students' understanding of culture. These are left mainly to the homeroom teacher to operationalize in their FL classes, and with a lack of training in language teaching methodology, low levels of confidence about using and teaching English – MEXT indicates in the guidelines that the foreign language should, in principle, be English – and research indicating that the “neither the curriculum nor the guidebook seem to be well understood” (Fennelly and Luxton, 2011, p. 21), there are potentially serious repercussions connected with leaving untrained teachers to their own devices. Granted, some schools, especially those with special designations as pilot schools, might conceivably flourish from the relative ‘freedom’ provided by these guidelines. Butler (2007) points to the potential for “bottom-up forces” (p. 133) to lead primary school language education initiatives by MEXT deferring virtually all details regarding curriculum implementation to schools and boards of education. But without a proper blueprint, the prospect for unevenness in language education and consequent gaps in student achievement as they enter middle school will remain high. Given the obstacles faced by untrained primary school teachers who are suddenly made responsible for foreign language lessons, having no detailed curriculum documents or model syllabi for each grade level demonstrates at best a lack of commitment to teachers on the part of MEXT, and at worst educational negligence.

Furthermore, with nothing concrete in the MEXT document in terms of expected grade level achievement, assessment is effectively de-emphasized in the Japan setting. When compared with how carefully a philosophy of assessment is featured in the official Tasmania curriculum document, the MEXT course guideline offers nothing of substance. This ensures that while foreign language activities have become a compulsory part of the primary school curriculum, no formal academic subject status is forthcoming. Neglecting assessment also hinders curriculum linkage between elementary school and middle school - a common concern raised by teachers at both levels. Admittedly, assessment is a controversial issue in primary school language learning due to variation in programs and teacher expertise, among other things (see McKay, 2006, for a more in-depth discussion). It is defined here as not only a measurement of student performance but also as an evaluation of FL education programs as a whole. In order to fairly and sensitively assess student performance in a foreign language in any given context, evaluation of the program itself is necessary, especially programs which are experimental in nature, or new. This includes assessing the broader curriculum objectives, methods, materials, and even the teachers

themselves. Central to this concept is how assessment of students can positively impact on how teachers approach their craft and improve their teaching practice, especially in less-than-perfect conditions. The Australian guiding principle of “assessment *for* learning, *as* learning, *of* learning” which is inclusive of methods like rubrics, blended formal and informal assessment, portfolios, and ‘can do’ statements represents a level of sophistication not found in the official Japanese document.

These curriculum and policy level contrasts are not the only factors that can temper results of such a mirror-context analysis. Other differences include the coverage of FL education. Nationwide, Japan is effectively uniform with English classes for all Grade 5 and 6 classes with irregular FL classes for the lower grades. In Australia, Japanese as a foreign language competes with the more traditional European languages and other Asian languages such as Indonesian and Chinese, and is therefore taught only at dedicated schools. When JFL is featured at a primary school, it is regularly taught to all grades including at the prep or kindergarten level. Also, LOTE teachers assigned to JFL classes exclusively teach the language whereas, in Japan, it is mainly the homeroom teacher who is responsible for foreign language activities, perhaps with the regular or irregular assistance of a native-speaker ALT. Like in Japan, native teachers are sometimes utilized in Australian JFL classes but perhaps because LOTE teachers are qualified in language teaching methods, there is less reliance on native-speaker resources than there is in Japan, and Japanese native speakers usually participate on a voluntary basis. Finally, while English is the primary language taught in foreign language activities, there is often a ‘foreign countries/cultures’ emphasis which serves to broaden what is taught both in terms of the number of target countries where English is the native language and the many other cultures and languages which can be included within the sphere of ‘foreign language activities’. In Australian JFL teaching, Japan is the single focus of instruction with respect to teaching about language and culture. With a specific target language/culture, it is easier for JFL teachers to focus their instruction.

In spite of these core differences, or perhaps because of them, there is still much to learn by comparing what happens in our respective language teaching settings. Irrespective of the differences outlined above, what happens regarding the teaching of languages in both contexts is surprising similar. In Australia, with its core emphasis on language teaching, teachers still do much to facilitate the “joy of foreign language/culture”, which is a pillar of the Japanese foreign language activities guidelines. They do this by including such things as Japanese crafts and games, song and dance, origami, cooking, and traditional clothing in their classes. Likewise, in Japan, a fair amount of actual language teaching happens within the more broadly conceived ‘foreign language activities’ course with teachers regularly building in thematic vocabulary, and introducing and practicing simple language structures.

Participating teachers

For the reciprocal exchange visits, participating teachers were briefed on the basic curricular differences prior to being placed in schools in their mirror context, and were asked to make observations accordingly. Coming from different backgrounds, it can be expected that participating language teachers bring a different set of expectations and experiences to the way they might observe language education in the reverse setting. The Japanese primary school teachers from Kochi were selected based on their involvement with, and enthusiasm for, teaching English as part of the foreign language activities course. They were also required to have adequate English ability so as to facilitate communication with staff in the Australian host schools. Participating Australian JFL teachers similarly had to demonstrate an acceptable level of Japanese proficiency, preferably with some experience of having been in Japan. Each of the six teachers, three from each country, was briefed about the comparative aims of the research project and all expressed interest in how this kind of research could potentially be fulfilling as a PD experience and drive their own classroom practice. All participating teachers were either recommended by researchers working in higher education, or were actively involved in the closely connected international grassroots exchange projects between local Kochi and Tasmania schools that preceded this research. A mix of male and female teachers participated (four women and two men), and each grouping of three teachers consisted of two older experienced FL teachers, and one novice FL teacher. The group of participating teachers represents a ‘sample of convenience’ of sorts because in reality there is a very limited number of practicing teachers who fit the above criteria, especially among Japanese primary school teachers involved with English, and many teachers who might otherwise like to participate have busy personal lives and family commitments, and cannot easily take the ten days required to visit a foreign country for research/fieldwork during holiday periods.

Method

Over the three-year duration of the project, six teachers, three from each country, participated in reciprocal exchange visits of approximately one week. During their fieldwork in the reverse FL setting, teachers were asked to visit as many as three schools per week and observe four lessons per day from different grades and in different teaching situations such as team-taught lessons with a native-speaker assistant, and solo classes taught only by the Japanese or Australian classroom teacher. Different kinds of schools were selected for observation – those with well-known language teaching programs and those that were a more ordinary representation of language teaching. City schools and country schools were selected in both contexts so that teachers could observe small and large class sizes. Participating teachers were also encouraged to take an active role in school culture while visiting, and to contribute to demonstration lessons and teacher meetings.

Each of the six JFL/EFL teachers was asked to take field notes during their stay and to keep a reflective diary of their observations. The field notes and reflective diary entries were conceptually divided as follows: field notes recorded in-class observations about what actually happened during a lesson. For example, what methods and materials were used, what the lesson objectives were, what the students did during the lessons, what role the teacher and/or ALT played, and comments on what language was used for instruction. The reflection diaries were concerned more with overall impressions of FL teaching at primary school from the perspective of someone who teaches language in a reverse setting. Teachers were asked to keep the reflection diary throughout their stay, contributing to it regularly upon completion of school observations. The diaries recorded impressions of how EFL/JFL teaching differs in Japan and Australia, impressions of the experience from the reverse FL viewpoint, and both critical comments and favorable feedback about what they observed. The reflection diaries were also meant to record more general impressions of the experience as a whole, and teachers were encouraged to write about how the experience might potentially influence their own teaching practice, and to make comparisons about the similarities and differences of language teaching in the two settings.

Following their school visits, items and segments from the field notes and reflective diaries were tagged as requiring either further clarification for meaning or as a topic of interest for more in-depth discussion during the post-experiential interview. Each of the teachers was then interviewed in a semi-structured format based on the tagged content of their reflection diaries. All interviews, each approximately 60 minutes in length, were recorded and transcribed. As the interviewer, I carefully took on an ‘insider/outsider’ position as needed – ‘insider’ in the sense of having spent time in elementary schools both as a former FL teacher of young learners and as a researcher/project planner, and therefore being able to identify with participating teachers and facilitate further expression of their observational experiences, and ‘outsider’ in the sense of maintaining distance and objectivity as a researcher interested in impartially recording the views and experiences of the participants. This semi-structured and ‘mixed participation’ method of interviewing was deemed appropriate given that all planning and hosting of teacher visits was done by me as research project coordinator, and because of the need to nurture relationships with participating FL observer-visitors, host classroom teachers, and cooperating host schools. As the researcher, I was not present at any of the reciprocal school visits where data was collected in either context. All data from teacher reflective diaries, observational field notes, and follow-up interviews were then examined.

Analysis of Australian JFL teacher reflection diaries

As noted, this study focuses specifically on the data from the reflection diaries of the three

visiting Australian JFL teachers. In this section, I discuss the findings from these teachers (Sarah, Arthur, and Darlene - all pseudonyms), but first I will touch upon some of the more general commonalities produced by both groups of visiting teachers as this is relevant in framing the findings from the JFL teacher focus group of this study. Visiting teachers from both contexts noted the positive PD impact that mirror-context observations had on their career work, and all noted that their language teaching philosophy had been fundamentally altered through the experience. The task of observing and reflecting was a complicated process for each of the teachers – all six teachers expressed what might be referred to as a ‘wow factor’ or ‘honeymoon’ stage as they began the process of keeping their reflection diaries. In this stage, teachers tended to frame everything in terms of how much better their target reverse context was, and expressed negative comparative comments about their own teaching context. During the process of observation, this initial zeal gradually declined and teachers were able to take a more realistic position about what they were seeing, and were finally able to objectively weigh the overall benefits of such observation in their post-experiential interviews. Another interesting point is that both the Australian JFL teachers and the Japanese FL teachers framed their criticisms from their respective identities as teachers. In other words, the teachers from Australia strongly based the content of their reflections from the viewpoint of language teachers, and the Japanese teachers who visited Australia approached the task largely from the perspective of a homeroom classroom teacher who sees the needs of students in a more holistic way. Even though participating teachers were briefed about the differing aims of the FL program they were observing, avoiding criticisms based on their own contextual perspective was difficult. In practice, this meant that JFL teachers made some of their most pointed criticisms - and positive evaluations as well - from the perspective of foreign language teachers, and Japanese teachers placed a disproportionate focus on differences in school culture, classroom management, and overall childhood development. The visiting Japanese teachers, whose reflection comments will be examined in the next stage of this research, were strong in their belief that the philosophy of the foreign language activities course represented a more inclusive approach than just language teaching.

Sarah

Of the three Australian JFL teachers, Sarah was relatively new to the field with only three years of language teaching experience. Comments made in her reflections showed considerable internal conflict in trying to calibrate her own forming JFL language teaching philosophy with what she observed in the mirror EFL context. Her ‘wow factor’ stage was more extended, and filled with highly favorable feedback about the good behavior and respect shown by students to teachers, a fascination with the emphasis on speaking in the classes she observed, and a strong (and repeatedly expressed) desire to bring what she was seeing back to Australia. Sarah’s identity as a language teacher had always placed prominence on the use of arts and crafts but observing highly

structured language classes in Japan emphasizing controlled communicative speaking activities caused her to question her heavy reliance on culture:

I know now that I am definitely going to cut down the amount of craft that is actually not worth my effort to do. In the end the outcome of the students is probably going to be the same anyway. I know in the past I have made too much of an effort to make language learning fun ... When I think of it also, after watching the Japanese operate, I should not worry so much about the cultural aspect in my class. I think if I concentrate on developing more constant conversation in the classroom then students will find this enjoyable.

After seeing how spoken communication was emphasized in the classes she observed in Japan, Sarah also openly questioned her own teaching emphasis on written Japanese in her classes back in Australia. Comments expressing her changing beliefs about the value of writing instruction were as follows:

It seems that students here reinforce words learnt really well by just repeating/asking each other. I could do this a lot more maybe instead of worrying about writing it down so much. After all they soon forget what they have written down anyway. Maybe time spent on repetition would be more beneficial than writing it down.

I really like the way all students are practicing the words/asking questions often. This method really allows for use of intonation. They are really engaged; all want to have a go. This method of using only verbal communication once again seems really effective at this point. I think it's a good way to form a base of the way to ask/answer questions.

Once again, I love the way the target language is introduced and used with a game. There is a real focus on getting the kids to use and repeat the language. This is something that I'm going to try because it's clear that the students enjoy this type of learning.

I have not in three days seen one student write any vocabulary down?! Maybe this is just a waste of time back home...?

However, Sarah's positioning as a language teacher trained in using the target language as a means of communication came through strongly in her criticisms. Many of her critical comments focused on the lack of relevance of some materials for students and worries that there was often no meaning associated with certain tasks. She worried that certain grammar points were being presented in isolation:

I do feel that learning needs to be relevant to the students learning. For example why do they need to know can you play the trumpet? I'm yet to see if this grammar structure is combined with something else ie. "Can you see the mountain?" Can you ~? Or is it just for this q/a purpose?

I know by experience this type of activity in my classroom for my Grade 5s, let alone Grade 6s, would be a pointless task to my students. I feel that there constantly has to be meaning associated with a task and a fun element which is year appropriate.

There were also parts of Sarah's reflection diary that amounted to a cry for help in terms of the need for more school support for LOTE teachers, something echoed by the other two JFL teachers in more subtle ways. She expressed frustration about JFL as a vulnerable subject in a crowded curriculum with little or no support from homeroom teachers:

Ok something I've just realized. Yes, there is a homeroom teacher in with the classes in every lesson I've seen here! I think that this creates a more positive and meaningful atmosphere to the students. Students are a lot better behaved and the language teacher can concentrate much more on teaching as opposed to correcting behavioral problems. If students can also see their own teachers learning and becoming interested in language classes then not only will the students be influenced to learn like the teacher, the teachers may be able to follow up in class a little more and maybe do some sort of follow up of the Japanese class during the week.

I have only been out of uni for 3 years and have only ever had network meetings and 2 PD days. This has been the third occasion of real PD to gain insight on new/activities and ideas to use in the class. I'm starting to realize just how little help I get at home. The principal hasn't checked up on what I am doing all year! I would love to be considered more in planning.

Arthur

Sarah's lack of confidence in her own teaching techniques, and expressions of frustration about lack of school support in her home context, contrasts with the higher degree of self-assurance shown by the two more experienced JFL teachers. Each of the JFL teachers were particularly impressed by what they saw in Japan – both inside the classrooms and in terms of institutional and collegial support for language learning from other teachers. Arthur made the latter a point of focus in his reflections having had the opportunity to participate in a demonstration lesson and the de-briefing session that followed:

Teachers were all professional and worked well in teams to promote learning and enthusiasm for all students. This was evidenced at a staff meeting at one school. All staff observed a lesson to Year 1 students (the other students all left early that day). The teachers then broke into groups to give feedback to the teacher on the lesson and discussed as a staff on how the lesson could be improved and perhaps future applications. I was impressed at the willingness of teachers to link the learning to other curriculum areas such as mathematics. I felt that this peer observation and feedback is a fantastic way of developing expertise for the whole staff. I feel that in Australia it would be very difficult to arrange for all other students to go home early so that all teachers could observe the one class.

It was Arthur's impression that language teaching pedagogy was very similar in both countries but that in Australia there was a greater emphasis on grammatical knowledge and cultural understanding while English teaching in Japan seemed to have a more singular vocabulary building focus in the classes he observed. Like Sarah, he too was impressed by the greater comparative engagement of Japanese students with the lessons than is usually seen with students in Australian JFL classes. Arthur believed that:

Australians can learn more about the way the Japanese structure their lessons with a formal, clear learning intention at the beginning of the lesson and a formal reflection at the end. While this is done by some teachers in Australia at some level, it is a good way of focusing the lesson.

When expressing critical commentary about the lack of Japanese teacher expertise in the teaching and use of English, it was always couched with a measure of understanding and praise. While he strongly believed that teacher expertise needed to be developed in order to teach successfully about language and culture, Arthur sensitively placed the onus for this not on teachers but elsewhere:

If all teachers, regardless of expertise are required to teach English, there needs to be support for them to learn the language and pedagogy. In-country experience would be of great benefit to such teachers. Teachers would benefit from in-country experiences or working collaboratively with experts to improve their English competency.

For Japanese teachers to teach English without the cultural understanding or expertise is a hindrance to a quality education across the board.

His positioning identity as a Japanese language teacher influenced some of his strongest observational criticisms. Arthur displayed very little patience for incorrect modeling of English by teachers, expressing criticism for such unnatural phrases as, "It's English time. Let's start!", or the creative use of "marathon dash" to describe a 'sprint' in Olympic sports. His comments indicated a preference that more teaching emphasis was needed about how to correctly use the language and how to use it properly in context so that good language learning habits could develop at an early stage:

Japanese teachers can improve their student learning by making clearer connections between language and culture, explicit teaching of word meaning/origin and how to use words in context.

The one thing I noticed that was lacking was a detailed explanation on how to use words and making connections with the words and their origins. Elaborating on phrases and variations would be helpful. Through my observations, vocabulary was one of the main foci of learning in Japanese classrooms, however if connections to meanings and origins were taught more explicitly, I believe it would help students to remember the vocabulary.

Darlene

Of all the visiting JFL teachers, Darlene expressed the strongest confidence in her personal language teaching philosophy and pegged the content of her reflections around the idea that students must get as much natural L2 exposure as possible and that tasks and activities should have real meaning. She has been a strong advocate of maximum use of the target language for instruction throughout her career. Darlene was the most experienced language teacher among the Australian JFL observers having spent 13 years teaching Japanese and, before that, 10 years as a French teacher. Her comments generally reflected surprise in the positive language learning developments in Japan since her last visit, and genuine praise at the amount of spoken communication in primary school classes:

I don't think in Australia, our Grade 5 pupils would be at this standard in Japanese. Maybe it is because we cover more cultural activities. Overall, I have been impressed with the classroom management of the teachers, the use of English, but maybe room to give more instructions in English.

Even though she was a veteran teacher, Darlene approached her visit strongly in terms of how she could build her own teaching repertoire with materials and methods that could be taken back to Australia. She remarked positively on a demonstration lesson she observed and, like Arthur and Sarah, one of the things about English classes that impressed Darlene most was the use of comment sheets at the end of most classes in which students reflect on the lesson:

Students fill out a "comment sheet" at the end of every English lesson and these are kept on file and apparently referred to regularly to monitor student feedback. This was very surprising to me and I will definitely use this idea at my school.

I loved the way the teacher used "hints" e.g. with the sports quiz, so they had to use adjectives and their partner had to guess. I would use this activity because it is new to me. There was lots of wonderful singing and gestures to accompany the words. I think singing really helps students remember vocabulary. Unfortunately many teachers in Australia don't seem to sing much.

However, Darlene's reflection also marked considerable selectivity in terms of what she thought she could actually use back home in her JFL classes. While in theory she liked the common technique of writing the day's list of activities on the board, her personal belief was that lessons should not be so predictable for students, and that the excitement about not knowing what is coming next is good for young learners.

Darlene reserved her strongest comments for the need to model English appropriately and to use English as a real means of communication rather than as rehearsed speech that others cannot

understand. She expressed particular concern that children were not exposed to enough natural English whether in the form of instructional materials or in teacher talk. Darlene was especially critical of the dangers of modeling incorrect pronunciation:

...their lessons are on a particular subject and there is no input other than the role play of the two teachers at the beginning of the lesson. I am not sure what to do about difficulties with pronunciation. As both these teachers were Japanese, the students were not hearing correct modeling anyway.

By way of summary, what the data from the reflection diaries shows is that Australian JFL teachers were generally impressed by the level of primary school English education in Japan. This includes both actual classroom instruction and the support that EFL gets from non-FL colleagues, schools, and communities. All three teachers made a point of highlighting how important it was to have the homeroom teacher heavily involved with language teaching, even when their English skills were limited. Their diaries showed a clear willingness to learn from what the Japanese FL teachers were doing in their classes, and to adapt that to their own context. Teachers demonstrated a strong desire to take the best of what Japanese EFL had to offer back to their own JFL classes. As specialized language teachers, their critical observational feedback is of great use to practicing EFL teachers and those responsible for further developing the primary school English curriculum in Japan. The most common criticism involved incorrect modeling of pronunciation and language use, the introduction of grammar in isolation, and failure to properly address target language use in context. All three teachers also raised other issues about making language meanings relevant to the learner, and the need to limit the role of rehearsed language that is spoken but not understood by the listener. Findings thus far represent a rich qualitative data set in terms of teacher attitudes, though further analysis on other levels still remains to be done.

Limitations

Visiting JFL teachers noted the positive impact that mirror-context observations had on their language teaching philosophy, but also expressed frustration that many of the methods/materials that worked in one context might not work in the other. While the reflective diary notes and follow-up interviews have yielded useful data, it is worth noting that participating teachers sometimes indicated reticence to deviate from stated official curriculum objectives. This was especially true of the Japanese teachers who visited Australia but there were indications at the discourse level of the reflection diaries that the JFL teachers were similarly cautious in how they presented issues about language teaching in Australia. This study has focused only on general findings from one set of teachers and does not include the additional data from the follow-up interview – some of which shows that participating teachers tend to use less of what they learned

in the foreign context than indicated in their reflective diary entries. Further, while some mention was made of the diaries kept by the Japanese teachers who visited Australia, we are not ready to make full comparative links about teacher attitudes, or inferences about how the experience influenced one group over the other until both sets of data are analyzed in a more comprehensive way. Finally, the limited number of schools that took part in this study makes it difficult to fully determine what is actually happening on the ground in a broader sense. That the participating schools were willing to host ‘outsider’ observer teachers indicated a certain confidence in their programs, and it is not farfetched to assume that data collected in these few school represents a ‘best case scenario’ picture of primary school language teaching in the local context of Kochi.

Conclusions

This paper outlined preliminary findings from one part of a larger study comparing foreign language education at primary school level in two reverse FL contexts – Australia and Japan. Data from reflective diaries kept by three practicing Australian JFL primary school teachers during their visits to elementary schools in Kochi, Japan was summarized in terms of the positive and negative feedback the JFL teachers expressed about the EFL classes they observed, and in terms of their positioning as language teachers. It shows that in spite of getting no actual guidance from MEXT and having very little in terms of language teaching training, there is still some encouraging work being done in schools in terms of operationalizing the foreign language activities course in primary schools. Teachers and schools are doing their best to implement a course under less than ideal conditions, and this is evidenced by how ‘outsider’ language teachers positively evaluate FL teaching in general. However, in order to achieve real success, and to fully professionalize English language education at the primary school level, there is still considerable work to do.

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