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Learning English: its Possibility and Sustainability in Early Education

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Introduction

The purpose of this study is to determine if starting English lessons at an early stage of learning has a lasting impact on the ability to use and understand spoken English.

The study was carried out on elementary school students, junior high school students, high school students and university students. Each of the above groups was divided into those students who began English before the national curriculum in junior high school, and those who began some kind of English education prior to junior high school.

Procedure

Elementary school students

The children were given 20 cards with simple sight words written on them. They were asked to read the words as quickly as possible, without making any mistakes. They read the cards a number of times and they

became more familiar with the words. The list of 20 words can be found in Appendix A.

Since elementary school has not officially begun teaching English, the groups were divided into children who began learning in the early grades (1, 2 or 3) and those who began learning in the later grades (4, 5 or 6).

Results

The results were mixed. It seems that many of the elementary age students who learn English also enjoy it and, therefore, study more, do more homework and often wish to take English tests. Their results indicate that they can read sight words quickly, listen well to native English and even read more difficult words by phonetically reading the sounds. Even the children who began English in the later grades show an interest in phonics and learning how to read. All of the elementary age students were less hesitant to speak out, even if they made errors in reading or pronunciation.

However, there was a marked difference in some students' interference with Japanese pronunciation, and, in particular, katakana sounds. These children had difficulties ending words with sounds such as d, t, v, b, p and g. For example, the words bed, dog, bag, tent, etc. were pronounced with an additional vowel after the last sound. Through repetition and careful correction, though, the students understood the difference and tried to correct it.

In conclusion, it is important to expose children early to native sounds and have them learn phonics and sight words before their late elementary grades. The introduction of romaji in elementary school often confuses children. They learn to write the letters of the alphabet using Japanese sounds. Many children confuse this with English sounds and often their spelling in English becomes a mix of English and romaji. However, with practice and exposure, this problem can be overcome.

Comment

With regular exposure to native English at an early age, children can assimilate sounds and rhythm better. Frequent but short lessons work best with very young learners, gradually becoming longer and introducing phonics and reading. Simple songs, letter/sound recognition, sight words and listening training will help children overcome difficulties which occur at junior high school.

Junior high school students

These students were divided into two groups; those who had studied English prior to junior high school (group A) and those whose first introduction to learning English was in junior high (group B). All students were given a selection of questions, ranging from simple ones, such as Where do you live? to more challenging ones, such as Have you ever been overseas?. For the easier questions, the students were asked the questions without looking at the card, and for the more difficult

ones, they were offered the option to see the question on the card. The card showed how to begin the answer to the question, so it was a great help for the students. A list of the questions used for junior high school students can be found in Appendix B.

Results

There was a marked difference between group A and group B. The basic differences include speed of reading, speed of response, pronunciation and natural rhythm/intonation of English. The students with little or no prior learning of English also had little exposure to native speakers, and perhaps naturally, they lack interest in studying outside of regular classes, except for school test study.

There was another interesting difference between group A students who attend private junior high schools and those who attend public schools. The number of English classes devoted to English in private junior high schools is higher than public ones. Those privately educated students are exposed to more English each week and have regular lessons with native speakers. Their progress, especially during their first year is quite remarkable. However, during years 2 and 3, their lessons focus more and more on grammar and translation and the students speak in English much less than in their first year.

In conclusion, junior high school age is a difficult one for students to practice speaking out in front of others. Not wanting to be different from others coupled with a natural shyness makes speaking English very

challenging. Speaking in front of others, for example, self-introductions and speeches creates a gap between those students who are confident in their ability in English versus those who struggle with it. This can lead to apathy and a dislike of English for newcomers to the language in junior high school. Classes should focus more on group work and presentations as a group, with less pressure on individual performance. Asking and answering questions should also be practiced regularly, as well as writing original opinions on a topic of interest to them.

Comment

Since the difference between students who learned even some English prior to starting junior high school and those who did not is quite considerable, the move to begin English education in grades 5 and 6, with activities in grades 3 and 4 is a necessary step to improve overall English. However, it does not go far enough by adding only one class hour per week. As seen in the private junior high school examples, more frequent exposure is required to attain a useable level of spoken English.

High School Students

Students were asked to read a short passage from Passport 2 textbook, published by Oxford University Press (see Appendix D). They were then asked a comprehension question based on the passage. Next, they were asked to compose a question based on the same passage. Finally, a number of questions were prepared and students chose one or two to

answer and add follow-up comments. The questions can be found in Appendix C.

Results

The biggest difference between students who had begun studying English prior to junior high school was speed of response. They seemed more familiar with native speaking speed and could comprehend the questions and, therefore, respond faster than students who began English in junior high school. Depending on the high school, pronunciation was also varied. Those in private high schools had better pronunciation of difficult sounds in English, such as th, l and r, and b/v. However, besides speed of response, there were no other major differences. Both groups of students had difficulty making questions on their own. Making grammatically correct questions and preparation time for such questions was long.

Comment

Since the difference between private and public junior high school students was so wide, it seems that the gap is lessened in high school. In my opinion, private high schools focus more on translation work and testing rather than speaking and communicating in English high school classes. This leads to a decrease in the gains made in junior high school. Some of the high school students who had studied English for a considerable length of time (from early elementary school) had a wide vocabulary and a strong desire to use it. However, this lead to long gaps

of silence while students tried to compose very elaborate sentences with high-level vocabulary. For writing and reading purposes, such vocabulary is necessary and desirable, but for speaking, the long pauses reduced communication effectiveness overall.

University Students

Students were interviewed individually for approximately 10 minutes each. Every student read a sample passage from Passport II textbook, published by Oxford University Press (see Appendix D). (This textbook was used during class with the students.) Then, the teacher asked one question regarding the passage. Next, students asked a question based on the passage. Finally, a selection of questions was prepared (see Appendix C) about everyday life. Depending on the length of time of response, either one or two questions were asked.

Results

Of the eight students, four had begun English prior to junior high school (group A). Three of these four students responded to the questions in a reasonable amount of time and appropriately. Pronunciation was also good. Only one student used exceptionally long waiting time to make a question based on the passage.

In Group B, two of the four students were at a similar level to each other. One other student had Japanese language interference

(pronunciation and grammar — word order), and the other had slow response time. Two of these four students in group B were very slow to respond to all questions (over 20 seconds wait time) and could not create a question easily.

Comment

A marked difference in ease of speaking (two of four students had been abroad) between group A and group B was noted. In addition, attitude to communication (ie. relaxed atmosphere, appropriate pause time and pronunciation) was clearly different between the two groups of students. It was noticed that, generally, making questions was very difficult for both groups. All students required longer than normal/appropriate time to prepare questions.

Because of the difference in backgrounds of these students, it is difficult to ascertain whether studying English earlier had a direct relation to their current level. Those who began early had better pronunciation and some had joined English speech contests in high school and had travelled abroad. However, early exposure to English may have been a stimulus to join speech contests and strive to improve their English ability.

Conclusion

Although the results were not markedly different, beginning English

education during the early years of elementary school seemed to have a lasting effect on students. Most importantly was the difference in listening skills, some pronunciation ability and ease of response. However, students' ability to create original questions and follow-up questions was not sufficient for natural communication. In addition, some young children learned English a few times each week which lead to an increased ability in reading, listening and responding to questions. But in almost all cases, the ability to create questions and answer with further information caused long pauses. Most students were comfortable with reading texts and/or questions provided and less comfortable with giving answers, asking questions or providing personal information with no prompts. Therefore, I suggest that one of the most important elements for communication with others requires the ability to provide your own information and ask others about themselves and practicing this skill is lacking in many classrooms in Japanese schools. In order to further develop these skills, much more speaking and question/response style is recommended in the early grades of elementary schools. In order to maintain the skills, it is necessary to continue such practices during junior and senior high schools. Communicating face-to-face, using proper intonation and body language during class time will help students become comfortable using English outside the school environment.

Appendix A

What

I

Who

Where

You

Be

Am

See

And

A

Go

The

Is

We

Your

To

Can

My

It

Like

Appendix B

What's your name?

Where do you live?

When is your birthday?

Which do you like better, red or blue?

How old are you?

What's your favorite subject?
What do you usually do on the weekend?
What do you want to be in the future?
Have you ever been to another country?
What season do you like best?
Do you have any pets?
What school do you go to?
What grade are you in?
What's your favorite food?
What sports do you like?
Do you like studying?
What did you do yesterday?
What do you like to do in your free time?
How tall are you?
Do you play any sports?
How many people are there in your family?
What 's your favorite restaurant?
What types of music do you like?
Have you ever been abroad?
Do you like reading the newspaper?
Would you like to study abroad?

Appendix C

What types of music do you like?
Tell me about your family.

Tell me about your weekend.

What's the weather like in Hokkaido?

What do you usually have for breakfast?

Have you ever been abroad?

What's your hometown like?

What do you do to stay healthy?

What do you have to do tomorrow?

Which do you prefer, the city or the country?

Where would you like to go on your next holiday?

What subjects are you most interested in?

Which sports are popular in Japan?

How long have you studied English?

What do you usually do on Sundays?

Where were you born?

What special events are there in Hakodate?

What country would you like to visit?

What TV shows do you watch?

What do you want to be in the future?

Appendix D

Sample dialogues used

Miki Kobayashi works for a travel magazine in Kyoto. Last year, she traveled to the U.K. and Ireland to work. She had a great time seeing the sights in London, Edinburgh, and Dublin. Now she's in China to

write her next article. It's her first visit to this country. Miki really wants to see the Great Wall of China and write about it for the magazine! She will make friends with Maria from Brazil, and Joanne from the U.S.A.

Naoki Tanaka comes from Nagano. He has started work in his parents' restaurant, but he is going to spend the winter working as a snowboarding instructor. His friend Hideo Shimizu has started work in an office in Naha, Okinawa. He likes his job, but is looking forward to his vacation! He visits Naoki in Los Angeles for a short holiday in the U.S.A., before they travel to Canada together for Naoki's winter job. They will make friends with two Canadians, Sarah and Ashley.