

Improving Learners' Behavioral Issues through English Instruction

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Abstract

Japan today has encountered an era in which university places outnumber university applicants. Cram-free education combined with a high percentage of college applicant acceptance has led to a situation in which it is not uncommon to find college students with six years of English education who cannot name all 26 letters of the English alphabet. In order to engage these students in college English lessons and to help them feel comfortable participating in class activities, strict classroom management and higher teaching strategies are required. This paper presents an educational practice analysis of what classroom activities are beneficial for these learners and identifies methodology for facilitating optimum instruction. The project is the culmination of six years of continuing curriculum and material development for early childhood education majors in a two-year college. Implementation-based observations of a variety of activities and reflective analysis were the methods used for formulation of the curriculum.

Key Words: curriculum and material design, early childhood education majors, in-class behavioral issues, English for a Specific Purpose (ESP).

1. INTRODUCTION

Japan today has entered an era in which university places outnumber university applicants. As a report from the Higher Education Bureau, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) (2012) presents, the number of students continuing on to higher education at the age of 18 years has been on the rise since the first half of the 1960s, when over 15% were enrolled in higher education. By 1975, the number had reached 38.4%. According to the latest MEXT report, the numbers have risen to 57.6%. Trow (1973, 2005) divides the demographics of tertiary education into three categories. When up to 15% of a population has higher-level education, this group is considered elite. When 15%-50% have higher education, higher education is considered mass. When over 50% of the population has higher education, higher education is considered to have reached the phase of universal access. According to his categorization, Japanese tertiary education has reached universal access. Trow claims that when a society reaches this categorization, the "whole population" becomes subject to rapid social and technological change.

Universal access to tertiary education combined with the MEXT-mandated education reformation called *yutori kyouiku* (cram-free education system) has created an educational environment in which it is not uncommon to encounter groups of learners who have moved to the tertiary level without learning the rudimentary basics of some subjects. The author's own experience teaching English in three different universities over the last ten years, combined with the observations of other colleagues, has confirmed this trend. Due to the drop in standards, it is not surprising to find learners with at least six years of English instruction who have difficulty identifying all 26 letters of the English alphabet. Izumi (2012), based on a survey held by the Benesse Education Research and Development Center in 2009, points out that among 2,967 2nd year junior high school students interviewed, 61.8% answered that they feel weak in English. Among these, 80% answered that they began to feel this way by the latter half of the 1st year of junior high school. Izumi further points out that a survey of 3,643 teachers of public junior high schools suggests that English learning itself is not the sole cause for students' difficulties and negative feelings toward English. Sixty-eight percent of the teachers answered that student difficulties and negative feelings are rooted in their lack of learning habits. Sixty-one percent felt that it was also rooted in low motivation for learning itself.

In order to address these issues, the current research has two aims: First, this research will examine how to manage behavioral and educational issues of a group of students who have low English ability and are not focused on academics. Second, this research will explore what kind of materials and teaching methods best engage the interest of early childhood education learners.

This paper presents a pedagogical practice report of a long-term project seeking to elucidate the most beneficial and optimal learning strategies for early childhood education majors in a two-year college. The English courses offered for first- and second-year students are elective courses for graduation; however, they are mandatory to receive certification by the MEXT in Japan in early childhood education-related licenses. The curriculum development was based on observations of the learners' engagement and a reflective analysis of the outcome of a number of various hands-on activities attempted in the classroom. A description of how the curriculum was gradually formed over six years of instruction, details of the final class activities and actual samples of learners' work are presented.

2. NEEDS ANALYSIS

In the first year of instruction, the following two types of problems were identified via observation: behavioral issues and administrative issues. The participants were freshman early childhood education majors in a two-year college.

Student behavior issues were many. Launching the project started with the disciplinary phase on the first day of instruction – how to take 70 students (64 female and 6 male) in a lecture hall, get them seated and have them quiet down and be ready to start the class. A number of students had difficulty taking a seat while others stood around talking in loud voices, clapping hands, and laughing in high-pitched tones. Most of the students did not even notice when the teacher came into the room. Even with a microphone, the teacher's voice was drowned out by the noise in the classroom. In addition to general inattention and disrespect for the instructor, students would arrive in class dressed inappropriately wearing their high school uniforms or even see-through evening dresses. They also would bring unnecessary items such as hair irons and fake nails while forgetting to bring pencils, even for exams. Behavior issues such as these interfered negatively with English instruction. Gaining students' attention through English activities was extremely challenging.

Administrative issues also presented challenges in this first year. There were 70 students in one class that was held in a large lecture hall. This many students in such a large room partially enabled the unexpected behavior. The disrespectful classroom behavior and low academic achievement aside, the administration's lax requirements for earning course credit did not encourage students' attentiveness to the coursework. Students knew that even if they did not pay attention and were disruptive in class, all they had to do was pay a small fee to re-take the exam and pass the course.

Even though students' focus was not on academics, they demonstrated some interesting traits. For example, despite low attention to academics, the attendance rate was good. Individual learners would stop the instructor often for questions during the session and even outside of the classroom, but unfortunately the topic was most often completely unrelated to the English activities they were working on. Through individual discussions with students, it was discovered that there were some serious students who were there to realize their dream of becoming an early childhood educator.

Early English instruction in kindergarten and nursery schools is increasing in popularity. In most cases, a specialized English teacher is hired part-time. However,

non-specialized Japanese teachers are the ones who often design the curriculum. These teachers also stay with the English instructor to help lead the children so they are the ones who have the first opportunity to teach English to children. Therefore, it is important for them to feel that learning English can be enjoyable, making their final stage of English education even more important. To protect the rights of learners who really wished to learn and desired to obtain their national license, it was decided that some drastic changes needed to be made at both the classroom and the administrative levels.

3. SOLUTIONS AND OUTCOME

3.1 Solutions and Outcome of the 1st Year

After the first semester, three major reformations were implemented in two aspects. The first was to reform the administrative aspects, and the second was to reform classroom management.

The administrative requests were to first divide the class into two smaller classes of 35 students per class, second to use a regular classroom, and third to implement stricter grading policies that were not typical at that institution. These grading policies would allow students to fail if classroom requirements were not met. Furthermore, no makeup assignments or examinations were allowed. Since there were no full-time English professionals assigned to this institution, the instructor's requests were brought directly to the administration. The administration was cooperative in reducing class size and establishing firmer grading requirements. They recognized the need to create a more academic environment and foster more academic behavior in the students. Although a regular-sized classroom was not available, they did their best to provide a smaller classroom. In order to further facilitate classroom management, a seating chart was developed. Students were seated in order of the roster, with one empty column between each column of students (see Figure 1). Strict, detailed classroom rules with penalty points were set for maintaining control. For example, coming to class without pencils and a textbook led to a deduction of two points from the semester grade.

Figure 1: Assigned Seating Arrangements



3.2 Findings and Outcome of the 2nd Year

These changes had an enormous impact on students' behavior in the classroom. They facilitated classroom management and encouraged students not only to pay attention in class, but also to take more responsibility for their actions.

The smaller class size and assigned seating with one empty column between students made a big difference. Keeping space between the seats made it less comfortable for students to talk. In order to deliver a message to another student, they had to turn in their seats or make their voices louder, thus drawing attention to themselves and making their message public to the whole class. Most importantly, the seating assignment relieved peer pressure for talking during class, since each group of close friends was separated by the roster seating. Furthermore, they could not easily depend on other learners and had to take responsibility for their own work. It provided a secure learning environment and allowed them to focus on academics.

At the end of the 2nd year, two categories of results were identified via instructor's observations: learners' outcome and instructor's results. With the reformations, learners were able to work on the activities and assignments with less unnecessary chatting. They were better able to focus on the material being taught in class and they took more responsibility for both their behavior and their academics. Students were better able to listen to and follow directions.

These changes enabled the instructor to focus on the English acquisition of the learners without having to spend so much time correcting their behavioral issues. This led to being able to better identify their actual English levels and gauge their interest in the activities. In the first year, the instructor identified their English level as low; however, a

closer assessment of students' assignments in a focused classroom atmosphere revealed that it was extremely low. There were students who were not able to identify or write the letters of the English alphabet. Interestingly, students did not seem to feel badly about their lack of knowledge, as revealed by the following conversation examples:

Student 1: "How do you write the letter 'p'?"

Student 2: "You don't know that? It is..."

Student 3: "What color is orange?"

Student 4: "I do know that one!"

It was found that some students could not spell any words, so they wrote everything in *katakana*. Even for the higher-level students in the class, sounding out and guessing the meaning of basic words such as *were*, *where*, *went*, *want*, *saw*, and *show* was difficult. They had been learning English for six years and yet English still looked like a nonsensical code to many of them.

3.3 Curriculum and Materials Developed for the Third Year and Beyond

After the second year of two different levels (1st and 2nd graders) of four classes, it was decided that materials designed and tailored to accommodate the targeted students' English level and interests were needed. Three major reformations were conducted prior to instruction for the third year. These were based on past experiences with these learners and led to a new curriculum being established.

The first change was to design a continuous curriculum that included material covering two years of instruction. This allowed the second year class to build on what they learned in the first year rather than having two separate, seemingly unconnected English classes. The second change was that the instructional approach was shifted to English for a Specific Purpose (ESP). These learners will have the opportunity to teach English in the near future; therefore, it would be beneficial to teach them something that they will actually use in their career. For this reason, English teaching strategies for young learners were introduced at the same time that they were learning English themselves. The third change was that instruction was designed to minimize the big gap among students' English levels. The introduction of new target vocabulary and expressions ensured that the material being covered in class was new to all the students. Previous knowledge of English was not at the forefront of their continuing English education for this course. The main focus was instead

placed on the oral phase of English and vocabulary related to their academic field. Each activity was designed to be “hands on” and provide a practical application for their future careers. What they had mastered and created in class could be directly used in their kindergarten or pre-school lessons. In reality, some students still could not read or write the alphabet; however, the focus on the oral phase and the introduction of new material that was related to early childhood education lowered their anxiety and motivated them to practice creating a positive, fun learning environment.

Beginning in the third year, the instructor did not have to worry as much about poor student behavior, and there were even times that student performance was impressive and motivating. Their attention was focused more on the given instruction and the activities, and they could work quietly and independently on the activities when needed.

For the fourth year, along with the curriculum changes set in the third year, a textbook (Chujo, 2008) tailored specifically for this class was introduced and used for the fourth and fifth years.

4. EFFECTIVE AND BENEFICIAL LEARNING STRATEGIES

After trying out different types of approaches over the years, several student learning tendencies were brought to light: (1) this group of students tended to be auditory learners, (2) they were sensitive to variations in sounds and could effectively mimic English sounds, (3) they did not hesitate to speak or sing out loud in the classroom, (4) they preferred to work in pairs and groups, (5) they enjoyed English activities much like children enjoy English activities, and (6) they showed great creativity in designing teaching materials. For these reasons, employing activities related to their major such as singing, dancing, drawing and crafting changed the learning atmosphere in a positive way. In addition, a series of short activities in each lesson proved to be most effective for maintaining learner interest in class.

The following are the six approaches that were observed to work effectively:

- (1) Make each activity short by dividing each lesson into three or four parts, balancing both oral and written communication activities. This requires all the activities to be broken down into small tasks. This helps students to stay focused and allows for achievement in a short amount of time.
- (2) Implement their field of study in activities, in English expressions, and in the

teaching strategies while using project-based, sectioned tasks.

- (3) Try not to require an English background for the class. For example, introduce vocabulary based on the field of interest that has not been previously introduced in their past English learning, such as “bib,” “diaper” and “pacifier.”
- (4) Use a kinetic base. For example, sing and chant with hand play and use Total Physical Response (TPR) activities.
- (5) Use pair or group work with specific, controlled instructions for what to work on. Encourage students to support each other and stimulate each other.
- (6) Use childish visual presentations such as textbooks with illustrations drawn by graduates, picture books and cards with pictures.

In designing activities, repetition was determined to be very important for stabilization. The curriculum was made parallel for both the first and second years. The activities students performed in the first year were used as a base for the second, more advanced year. When the learners were able to review and recognize the accomplishments they gained in the first year, they were ready for the more advanced level (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: The Activities List

First Year Students	Second Year Students
Tongue twisters	Tongue twisters
Chants	Chants
Songs (with hand movements)	Songs (with hand movements)
Quiz	Proverbs
Classroom English (TPR)	Classroom English (TPR)
Mini English lesson (same lessons)	Creation of a mini English lesson
Flashcards (nursing related vocabulary)	Flashcards (advanced nursing related vocabulary with verbs)
Japanese old tales	Children’s stories
Picture books	
Presentation	Presentation (memorization)

Several short activities were implemented in each lesson in order to maintain learners’ interest and keep them engaged in the lesson (see Figure 3). Extensive review of the activities was held throughout the semester and during the two years of instruction.

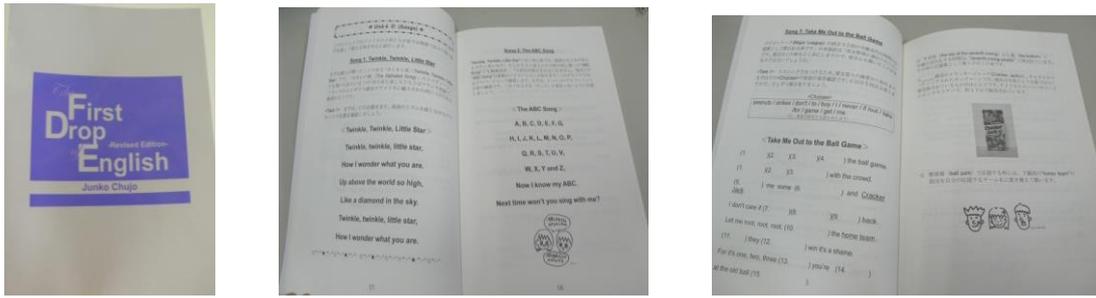
Figure 3: Implementation Schedule (2nd year)

Tongue twisters	_____			
Chants	_____			
Songs	_____			
Flash cards	_____			
Proverbs	_____			
Classroom English	_____			
Mini English lessons	_____			
Children's stories	_____			
Presentations	_____			
Class Session Number	1	5	10	15

Because of their limited English ability, students needed very detailed scaffolding. By incorporating step-by-step scaffolding in each activity, they were able to comfortably and earnestly engage in the activities. For example, in each modeling activity, it was important to sound out each word very carefully and slowly in order for the learners to write down the phonemic representation in whichever way they felt comfortable. This was a very crucial step. With this step, they were able to comfortably speak out loud, repeatedly engage in the activities and finally learn the material by heart. When these steps were done successfully, the learners were able to earnestly engage in and enjoy the activities.

In the sixth year of instruction, a major revision was done on the textbook (Chujo, 2010). The textbook was redesigned to serve as both a workbook and portfolio. Some worksheets at the end of the textbook were made to be detachable. All of their learning could be reflected and compactly accumulated there so that when they looked back over their two years of instruction, all the material would be there for future reference. Figure 4 shows examples of this revised textbook. It was intended that reviewing the compilation of their learning would also give them a sense of achievement.

Figure 4: Revised Textbook and Sample Pages



5. CHALLENGES

While great progress had been made in achieving a stabilized work environment in the classroom, there were times when it was necessary to re-establish extensive control in their learning environment. During one class session, the regular classroom was not available. The class was directed to use a room with several big tables that included children's decorations and a piano. Seating arrangements around the big table required six students to be seated face to face next to each other. In this instance, students' behavior changed; they started chatting freely and paid less attention to the instructions.

In the sixth year, another group of freshman came and all of sudden one of the classes reverted to a situation similar to the second year of instruction. The class was not filled with an energetic type of student. Rather, these students seemed to have no energy or motivation to do anything. Curriculum and material that had been developed over the previous years did not capture their interest as a class. As a result, ten students failed the first year class. Only then did they realize that they needed to do their work. By the second year, they had focused more on their work and they were a very different group.

Even though class behavior had improved immensely, these two situations revealed that periodic adjustments had to be made to the program in order to continually encourage students to behave in a manner that allowed for a positive learning environment. One student's comment in the end-of-semester questionnaire indicated that improved behavior was limited to this particular set of classes: "This is a good class since I can learn in a quiet atmosphere." This comment implied that students' improvement in behavior did not transfer to other classes. This realization suggests that classroom success does not depend solely on effective curriculum and material, but also depends on the combination of many factors such as classroom organization, rules, seating assignments and extensive control. A totally

autonomous learning style does not yet apply to those students.

6. EFFECTIVE AND ENGAGING ACTIVITIES

The three most engaging activities in which the learners earnestly engaged and took responsibility for their learning and performance were rhythm activities (such as tongue twisters, chants and songs), flashcards (*karuta*) and projects.

Rhythmical activities such as tongue twisters, chants and songs were used at the beginning of the class for the purpose of switching their minds into English. Pronunciation instruction was also held through these activities. Consonants such as /l/, /r/, /f/, /v/, /θ/ and /ð/ were trained using a description of articulation points with Japanese instruction. Chants, nursery rhymes and children's songs were used. Hand plays were also introduced. After students learned these, active, vivid and energetic voices, chanting and singing were heard in the hallways and other rooms after class. These rhythmical activities stuck in their minds long after they left the room.

Flashcards were another effective tool used with these students. Three sets of early childhood-related vocabulary were introduced with handmade flash cards. Most of the vocabulary introduced was not familiar to them from past English instruction in school. Therefore, they were all able to start at the same level. Since these words are closely related to their major, students were interested in learning the terms provided. Words were practiced in the following sequence:

- (1) Words were modeled at a regular, slow pace multiple times.
- (2) Students answered questions with words lists and illustrations of the vocabulary.
- (3) Students checked the answers and practiced reading until they sounded comfortable.
- (4) Students made cards. Pictures were provided to cut out. Students then created a colored picture on the front (see Figure 5) and wrote the appropriate word on the back.

Once the cards were ready, students moved on to the activity. These could be practiced on their own, with a partner or with the whole class. In the beginning, students were encouraged to practice individually. When students felt comfortable enough, the teacher or partner called out each word, and the rest of the students found the picture on the card that

on the piece of paper was tedious, uninteresting work; however, every step they did led to the completion of the final picture book. They first wrote with pencils and then with markers, so they practiced twice. Most of the drawing and painting was done as homework. Figure 6 shows some examples of students' first year final projects. After they finished making the picture book, they practiced reading it aloud. The story was re-written at the level of 2nd or 3rd grade junior high English; however, it was not an easy task. In the very first step, they wrote notations for many of the words; therefore, without the notations in their picture book, they were not able to read with confidence in front of the audience without practicing a number of times. This activity was practice for the final presentation.

Figure 6: Samples of Picture Books



For the second-year students, a challenging project was assigned: memorize and present an entire children's story with their partners (see Figure 7). The presentation required some visual aids. Most of the learners made a picture card show (Kamishibai).

Figure 7: The Presentation Script

One day, Peter and Allen were walking in the forest. Then, they saw a big black bear. "Look! There is a bear!" Allen screamed and quickly climbed up a tree. But Peter fell down on the ground and could not climb up the tree. "Oh no" Peter was very scared. The bear was coming closer and closer. "Oh, no! What should I do?" Peter thought. "Please, please don't come near me. I don't want to die," he whispered. He decided to pretend he was dead, lie down on the ground and not move. The bear finally came very close to Peter. Then, the bear opened his mouth and said something. "#\$%\$%&~%#\$#" "\$&&%#\$"\$%&." Then, the bear walked away and disappeared. "I was saved!" Peter shouted. Allen came down from the tree and asked Peter. "What did the bear say to you?" Peter answered, "He told me not to travel with a friend who runs away when you need help."
 ". . . ."

For assisting students with memorization, different levels of multiple exercises were designed. These exercises progressed from translations, to fill in the blanks, to sentences, to putting the stories in order, then finally to writing the whole story with matching pictures (see Figure 8).

Figure 8: Worksheet Samples

✦ Exercise Level 3 ✦

Choose the appropriate words from the given choices and fill in the blanks.

<Choices >

up, there, don't, forest, say, with, ground, told, finally, screamed, disappeared, tree, away, thought, saw, fell, bear, move, scared, asked, and, help, pretend, whispered, saved, should, opened

- ① One day, Peter and Allen were walking in the ().
- ② Then, they () a big black bear.
- ③ "Look! () is a bear!"
- ④ Allen () and quickly climbed () a tree.
- ⑤ But Peter () down on the () and could not climb up the ().

✦ Exercise Level 5 ✦

Now, you are in the highest level. Write the appropriate expressions in the blank. Try not to look at the script.

1	2	3	4	5	6
					
7	8	9	10	11	12
					

During the first memorization step, pronunciation was carefully introduced. While students were creating their visual presentations, the recorded story was played the entire time. Since they are auditory learners, their sound mimic ability was high. Naturally, it helped them copy their pronunciation from the sounds they heard. Students were encouraged to memorize two sentences each for each class.

The choice of different achievement levels of goals was presented to the students to stimulate their motivation. Each sentence had a number of points assigned to it. The more sentences they successfully performed, the more points they earned. Prior to the presentation, each group decided and reported on the level for which they wanted to aim. Amazingly, 30 out of 32 (32 all aimed for highest level) pairs were able to achieve memorization through the last level (see Figure 9).

Figure 9: The Presentations



Students first thought this assignment to be impossible. However, once they realized through the in-class work that they were capable of memorization, they became very engaged in the activities. This activity left them with a sense of accomplishment. This sentiment was expressed on the questionnaire following the activity where many student comments showed that they were very confident of their achievements. Also, they said the support of their partner throughout the projects made it possible. Students summarized their project with a presentation to reflect their overall learning with their partner (see Figure 10).

Figure 10: Samples of Project Summaries



7. EVALUATIONS

Here are some of the learners' comments about the English class that were written on the end-of-class survey. The comments represent the traits of the class.

- I was very nervous to find out that I have to study English even in college. But I enjoyed the class very much.
- In English class, it was good that the class was quiet.
- I really enjoyed the tongue twisters, chants and singing with hands.
- In this class I could do activities in pairs, so my friend helped me a lot. For the presentation, I felt responsibility for my part and worked very hard.
- I did not think I would be able to do the memorized story presentation, but I was surprised that I could do it.
- I thought it is impossible to memorize and do a presentation, but I felt such an accomplishment. English is my weak subject, but I enjoyed it very much.
- It was fun, fun, fun!
- I like English now.

8. CONCLUSION

Those learners with low English ability who have behavioral issues as a group also have their individual interests and preferred learning styles. These students had a desire to help others, which showed clearly in the cooperative work that took place during structured group activities. Gaining and maintaining their attention in an academic environment was made possible by gaining their trust and informing them that if they followed the instructions

step by step, they would be able to master their topic in English. Their learning style was difficult to identify due to the interference of the behavioral issues; however, after discovering it and tailoring class activities to that style, the class changed to a more positive, engaging atmosphere. Through very high levels of scaffolding and gradual repetitive instruction, a positive learning environment was created.

Hands-on activities captured their interest most and helped improve their behavior by keeping them engaged in the class. The switch to ESP by merging English, art (drawing and creating), music and teaching English to children worked wonderfully. Practicing tongue twisters, chants and children's songs was effective. Projects gave them an opportunity to show their impressive artistic creativity and allowed them to utilize the skills they were developing in their early childhood education classes. They left English class with a wider profession-specific vocabulary set and with activities and materials that they could utilize in their career. By learning through these ESP teaching methods and approaches, it is hoped that when these learners come to teach English in the schools, they can convey the sense that English is fun.

The curriculum described in this paper was formed gradually over six years of reflective instruction analysis based on observations of the learners' engagement in class activities. The questionnaire results showed that the learners were able to achieve a level they had never thought possible in English. In addition, many students commented that English class was fun and enjoyable. To achieve this, initial administrative cooperation for providing a better classroom environment and identification of the learners' preferences in learning styles and materials were both important.

More research is required to determine if these lessons have a lasting effect on these future teachers and their young students. Evaluation of their own attitude toward English as well as evaluation of the attitude they impart to their students regarding English will help determine whether the methodology had a lasting impact on their overall attitude toward English learning and teaching.

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