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Syllabus Design and Textbook Selection
for Primary School English Programs

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Introduction

With an increase in the number of Japanese primary schools offering English classes, the role of the language has become more important and this has brought an air of optimism as well as concern among educators in the field. The government has become more aggressive in revising the country's English language education system while some institutions have initiated programs that could improve their status among academia and prospective students. Takeo Kawamura, Education, Science and Technology Minister, states that implementing English-language education for primary school students is essential if we want to help cultivate Japanese who have a practical command of the language (Matsuzawa, 2003).

As a result, the task of educators and English teachers in particular has become more demanding and challenging. On the one hand, the introduction of English at primary schools means administrators (in most cases) have to take away at least one classroom hour from another subject. This has caused concern and discontent among some parents and teachers. On the other hand, pressure is on administrators to justify inclusion of English as part of school curriculu and therefore they must produce tangible results in students' English ability and/or children's attitude toward the language.

Traditionally, English has not been taught as a regular subject at most primary schools in Japan and instead, the main goal has been to "have fun" while introducing it to students. This has meant conducting English classes without the existence of clear goals, a syllabus, and an evaluation system in place. However, with most private schools and more than half of primary schools currently offering English at least once a week, it is natural that

greater emphasis would be placed on the subject. As a result, the task of designing a syllabus and adopting appropriate and engaging teaching materials has become extremely important. The goal of this paper is to explore what is meant by "an appropriate syllabus for children" and whether schools should adopt a textbook or leave the decision up to each teacher.

Designing a Syllabus

The task of designing a syllabus for primary schools could be a daunting one. There are no clear guidelines as to what topics or functions to include and in what order to teach them. The emphasis on having fun stressed by some educators and parents, the students' diverse personalities and curiosity towards anything new, and their fragility and sensitivity at such a young age make planning a one-year program challenging but also rewarding.

When designing a syllabus, many administrators focus on content goals. According to Halliwell (1992), these content goals are usually arranged into structure, topics and situations, and functions. However, she suggests that instead of content goals we need to set "attitude goals" for children. The goals of a such program can be described as:
- pleasure and confidence in exploring language
- willingness to "have a go"
- children wanting to dare to communicate

The Oklahoma State Board of Education (2001) targets "communication and culture" as the cornerstone for all language learning programs in their schools (Grades K-3) and clarifies that the goal for all Oklahoma students should be to learn "how, when, and why to say what to whom." Therefore, goals set by Japan's Ministry of Education seem to be in line with these recommendations. The Ministry of Education states that "children should come in contact with foreign languages, foreign lifestyles, and foreign customs at a level that is suitable for them and also done in a positive, hands-on fashion. Foreign languages should be introduced through songs, games, skits, and fun activities so it would make a positive and interesting experience." Furthermore, it also states that "English taught at elementary

schools should not be used as preparation for junior high school English. (Practical handbook for elementary school English activities, 2002)."

These goals give us an overall picture of what educators should be concerned about when planning and prioritizing goals. Also, by taking a closer look at research, guidelines, and textbooks in the field we may be able to have a better picture of where the focus should be when designing a syllabus.

New SuperKids (Longman) and *Let's Go* (Oxford University Press) are the two most popular textbook series sold in Japan. An analysis of topics and functions covered in books 1 and 2 of the series shows that they are very similar. The analysis shows that both titles cover the following topics and functions in their first two books: daily greetings, asking and giving personal information, talking about family members, identifying and describing school-related vocabulary, expressing likes/dislikes, expressing wants, stating have/have not, describing daily routines, describing present action, suggesting an activity, asking/telling about time, asking/telling about ability, asking/answering about someone's health, counting various objects, and vocabulary related to the above topics as well as food, drinks, sports, weather, animals, toys, parts of the body, professions, and colors. It is worth noting that not only these two textbook series but also most English textbooks designed for children in Japan contain similar topics and functions. The reason for analyzing only the first two books of each series is that in most schools, considering the time allocated to the subject, students are unable to reach the level where they can study book 3.

Standards developed by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) for K-12 learners (1999) define the "what" of foreign language learning in American classrooms and their range covers Novice to Pre-Advanced Learners. Table 1 shows the standards for the Novice Level Learners which can be applied to both children and adults. As can be seen, these standards and criteria are very detailed and comprehensive. They may be beyond the reach of many English programs in Japan, but nonetheless give educators a broad view of what to teach and expect when working with children. The ACTFL Guidelines also give administrators some valuable knowledge that can be used to start a fundamentally sound program.

Table 1
American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL)
Guidelines for Novice Level Learners

Topics and contents
Communication occurring in the Novice Level range often includes some combination of the following topics about the self: Family, friends, home, rooms, health, school, schedules, leisure activities, likes and dislikes, shopping, clothes, prices, size and quantity, pets and animals   * beyond self such as: geography, directions, building and monuments, weather and seasons, cultural and historical figures, places and events, calendar, time, food and customs, transportation, travel, professions, and work

1. What characterizes Novice Level Learners' performance in speaking?
• Speak with one- or two-word phrases such as reciting numbers, colors, and classroom objects.   • Use memorized phrases and short sentences when communicating.   • Use words and phrases primarily as lexical items without awareness of grammatical structure.   • Comprehend and produce vocabulary that is related to everyday objects and actions on a limited number of familiar subjects.   • Imitate model words and phrases using intonation and pronunciation similar to that of a model.   • Communicate with pauses, false starts, and some recourse to their native language and make frequent errors when taking risks with the language.   • Are understood primarily by those very accustomed to interacting with language learners.   • Rely on visual aids, gestures and repetitions to enhance communication.

2. What characterizes Novice Level Learners' performance in listening?

- Understand short, simple conversations and narratives (live or recorded), with highly predictable and familiar context.
- Understand simple daily communications on familiar topics, including simple instructions such as classroom procedures.
- Respond to simple commands, familiar vocabulary, and language structure.
- Recognize highly predictable key words and phrases and familiar structures by using contextual clues with strong visual support.
- Rely on personal background experience to assist with comprehension.
- Rely on repetition for understanding.

3. What characterizes Novice Level Learners' performance in writing?

- Use memorized, short phrases and sentences in written form based on familiar material.
- Copy familiar words for labeling, identifying, and recognizing purposes.
- Supply simple biographical information on form.
- Reproduce familiar material in written presentation.
- Demonstrate some accuracy in pronunciation and intonation when presenting well-rehearsed material on familiar topics.
- Write personal journals and send brief messages to friends.
- Describe in written format basic information, such as, self, family members and friends, events, interests, school activities, and personal belongings.

4. What characterizes Novice Level Learners' performance in reading?

- Read isolated words when strongly supported by visuals.
- Recognize highly predictable key words and phrases and familiar structure by using contextual clues with strong visual support.
- Rely on personal background experience to assist in comprehension.
- Determine meaning by recognition of cognates, prefixes, suffixes, and thematic vocabulary.

These guidelines focus on all four skills and some teachers may feel that there is not enough time to teach reading or writing since the emphasis is usually on listening and speaking skills. But none of the skills can be taught separately since they are all interrelated and inseparable. Children first become exposed to their mother language through receptive skills, listening and reading, and it is after months of massive input and repetition that they start producing one or two word utterances. Krashen (1988) believes that recreational reading is the most powerful tool available for language and literacy development. He says that the amount of pleasure reading done in the second-foreign language is a strong predictor of performance on tests of writing, reading, grammar, and vocabulary. Recreational reading (and recreational listening) will ensure continuing progress in English long after coursework is over. He suggests that the key to success of such a program is to have easily accessible source of books and tapes. Finding interesting and appropriate reading materials for children in an EFL setting is not easy, but doable. There is no question that it is easier to find appropriate and interesting reading materials when working with children whose native language is English, but with some search and effort, it is possible to find stories that are both comprehensible and amusing to first time language learners.

Meyers (2001) is another expert who produces a list of topics and functions for a beginner's program (see Table 2). The list is long and comprehensive, but teachers and administrators can improvise and prioritize where needed.

Do We Need a Textbook?

The above recommendations and evaluation of the two best selling textbooks in Japan provide us with some knowledge and tools on what children need to study in the early stages of language acquisition. However, knowing what needs to be taught is one thing and having the resources available to meet those needs is another, especially if the teacher is not planning to use a textbook.

Prior to deciding on the teaching materials or a textbook, we ought to

Table 2
A Beginner's Program

Alphabet Skills	recognize capital and small letters, matches letters, sequences, dictionary skills.
Colors	can say, read, and spell
Numbers	up to —— can say, read, and spell
School Vocabulary	can say, read, and spell
Personal Information	address, phone number, age
Weather Terms	can say, read, and spell
Days, Months, Seasons	can say, read, and spell
Family Words	can say, read, and spell
Subject Pronouns	I, you, he, she, etc. can say, read, and spell
Verbs	common basic verbs, uses, reads, spells
Question Words	can use, read, and write
Prepositions of location	In, out, under, etc. uses, reads, and writes
Opposition	can say, read, and write
Animal Words	can say, read, and write
Vehicle Words	can say, read, and write
Food Words	can say, read, and write
Clothing Words	can say, read, and write
Money	coin denominations, counting, making change
Body Parts	can say, read, and write
Phonics	initial consonants, vowels, rhyme, medial sounds, digraphs
Compound Words	can say, read, and write
Homonyms	can say, read, and write
Cultural Celebrations	specialized vocabulary, Halloween, Valentines, etc.

Plus
- Daily buddy reading of patterned, simple readers
- Computer use, keyboarding, CD ROM stories, skills programs
- Sequence stories, writing simple sentences with help
- Picture Bingos, simple board games
- Listening Center with simple, visual books and tapes

make a decision as to what, why, and how we plan to teach. This means setting goals and objectives and then prioritizing them according to their importance. The goals of an English program could vary and depend on how frequent the classes meet and from what grade students are introduced to the subject. Nevertheless, administrators and curriculum designers have to strive for continuity, consistency, accountability, and a unifying thread where everyone involved is aware of the overall goal and specific objectives for each grade. A well-written syllabus or textbook could accomplish this.

Some teachers prefer not to use any textbook at all, while others do not feel comfortable being told what to use. This could be due to a variety of factors such as teaching style, teacher's approach to teaching, or even dislike of a textbook's layout or its pictures. However, having a textbook gives students a base to work with and according to Halliwell (1992, p.113), a course book helps the teacher by providing:

a. a clearly thought-out program which is appropriately sequenced and structured to include progressive revisions;
b. a wider range of material than an individual teacher may be able to collect;
c. security;
d. economy of preparation time;
e. a source of practical teaching ideas;
f. work that the learners can do on their own so that the teacher does not have to be center stage all the time;
g. a basis for homework if that is required; and
h. a basis for discussion and comparison with other teachers.

On the other hand, the idea of not having a textbook at all is not very attractive. In such a case, teachers will be forced to develop their own materials or copy pages from various books. Developing teaching materials is a time-consuming task that requires extensive knowledge and experience while making copies of various textbooks and resources raises the question of copyright violation and ethics. Furthermore, in the worst-case scenario, by using copies from other books, we force our students to make sense of what they have been learning by going through pages and pages of loose

materials and without much direction and help. Also, if a school has more than one English teacher, the task of coordinating and building continuity from one grade to another becomes very challenging when there is no common curricula and materials or little coordination among teachers. Parents also want to know what their children have been or will be studying. With scattered pages in the child's bag, neither the parents nor the student will have an easy job of knowing the goals of the course.
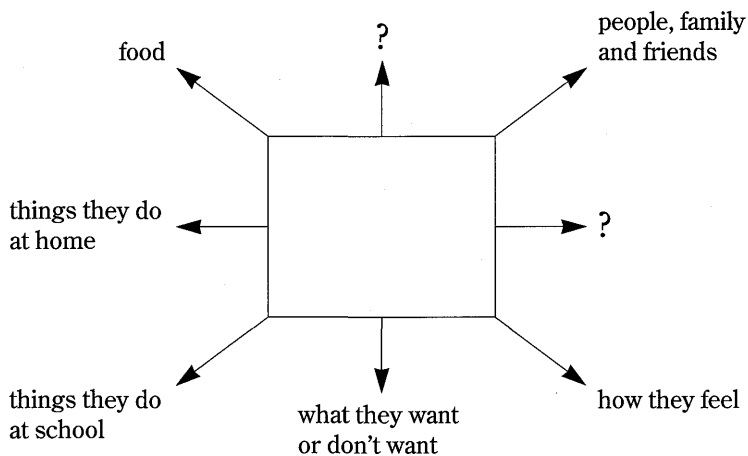
However, despite a large selection of teaching materials for children available on the market, finding a suitable textbook requires more than a quick glance over its pages and the table of contents. Language learning not only involves understanding of its mechanics, but also its socio-cultural process. Selecting teaching materials, for any age group, involves the contexts, the audience, and the purpose for present and future use of the language.

Choosing a Textbook

When evaluating a textbook and its content, the most important factor to consider is whether it is appealing to children. Nunan (1999) states that teachers should select "stuff" that learners are familiar with in their own context so that they can map what they know in their own language onto the new language. Children also have a very short attention span. They become attracted or distracted very easily, which makes the task of choosing appropriate teaching material challenging. By selecting the right "stuff," classroom time and its management can become very efficient. However, when the "stuff" does not work, the teacher has to improvise instantly and this may not be too easy to do, especially for an inexperienced instructor.

Halliwell (1992) says that not topics but areas of interest, concern, and experience should lead us in choosing what to teach to our students. She suggests the following map (see the map on the next page):

After deciding what to teach, Halliwell (1992) suggests considering how a child uses the language in each of these areas. For example, for "things at home", teachers should know how and what kind of language a child uses to

```
        ?                    people, family
 food                        and friends

        ┌──────────┐
        │          │
things  │          │
they do │          │              ?
at home │          │
        │          │
        └──────────┘

things they do   what they want   how they feel
at school        or don't want
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(Halliwell, 1992, p.123)

communicate. The example below for "things at home" may make it easier for teachers to design at least part of their syllabus.

What does a child use language for in each of these areas (things they do at home)?

- Expressing preferences
- Expressing approval/disapproval
- Suggesting doing things/asking to do things
- Saying what they like doing and don't like doing
- Saying what they can/can't do
- Saying what they want to do/don't want to do

(Halliwell, 1992, p.123)

As to what kind of language, phrase, vocabulary, or grammatical structure should be introduced and learned in the above-mentioned situation, Halliwell suggests the following list:

- I'm going to ...
- May I ... ?

- Let's ...
- Will you ... ?
- Why don't we ... ?
- What about?
- Shall I ... ?
- May I ... ?

The suggestions by Halliwell are not set in stone and may require changes or revision, depending on factors such as students' age, interests, and the practical use of the language. Nevertheless, the framework of what she is suggesting can be used to design an English course for children.

Designing a Syllabus Without a Textbook

Textbooks do not provide teachers with all the answers, and a number of factors contribute to the success of a course and its contents. Approaches to teaching and how each teacher executes his lessons require knowledge, experience, flexibility, and willingness to adapt. Krashen (1988) believes that the best methods are those that supply "comprehensible input in low anxiety situations, containing messages that students really want to hear." If a teacher does not have a textbook to work with or prefers to develop his own materials, he has to take some steps to ensure that his course is successful and produces results. It might be helpful to keep the following steps in mind: First, the teacher needs to decide what topics or functions he is planning to teach. This has to be based on theory, students' needs, teacher's knowledge and intuition, and the use of the language. Second, he or she should set clear goals and objectives that can be accomplished by the end of the year. Third, the teacher should set up an evaluation system where students' progress and suitability of teaching materials are evaluated and analyzed regularly. And lastly, the teaching materials should be of interest to students, carefully taking into consideration their age, level of interest, and practical use of the language. Having prior knowledge and experience in working with children is essential for teachers who want to use their own materials in the classroom.

Teaching children not only involves the above-mentioned requirement, it also entails knowing how to work with young learners. There are certain characteristics and techniques that adults use when communicating with children. These techniques are essential in working with children and should be reviewed frequently. According to Mason (2005), when "caretakers" speak to children, they adopt a certain number of verbal strategies. The characteristics of this kind of language are:

1. Simplified in grammar and meaning
2. Shorter sentences-from about eight words per sentence to four, when speaking to two year olds
3. More restricted range of sentence patterns
4. Expansion and repetition of sentence patterns
5. Slower speech
6. Use of special words and sounds
7. High pitch
8. Large number of questions and utterances with high rising intonation-looking for feedback
9. Embedded in the here and now

Having prior knowledge of these strategies could help teachers plan and execute their lessons more efficiently, but it might be interesting to know that Mason also points out that no one has yet found a close correlation between language used by caretakers, and language produced by children.

Conclusion

There are strong indications that English will continue to maintain or even expand its role in Japanese primary schools. However, experts are divided as to whether we should introduce the language at an early age or wait until the students have reached their early teens. Childs (2003) believes that to learn a language, earliest is best. On the other hand, Krashen (2004) argues that there is no need to begin English instruction "super-early" and that starting later is actually more efficient. He indicates that research shows

that those who begin foreign-language programs later (e.g. at age 11) eventually catch up to those who began early (e.g. at age 8), accomplishing just as much but in less total class time. Setting these arguments aside, educators are facing with the reality of thousands of primary schools offering English at their institutions. Without a proper plan and carefully designed curriculum, teachers and administrators can hinder or derail the future progress of the language in this country.

Most of the primary schools in Japan prefer to hire native speakers of English. Unfortunately, the majority of the foreign teachers do not stay longer than a few years and many of them are neither trained nor qualified to teach English. For a program to be successful, it must have clear goals, a well-planned syllabus, appropriate teaching materials, and teachers who are dedicated to their profession. Developing teaching materials that are eye-catching and attractive while containing appropriate speaking, listening, reading, and writing activities requires more than a computer and some graphic or art designs. Schools that wish to establish a successful English program should not leave the task of material development solely to the teachers. This is too much to ask and requires an enormous amount of coordination, planning, and manpower.

As mentioned earlier, in an ideal program there is continuity and consistency from one grade to another, with an evaluation system in place to measure students' progress as well as the suitability of the syllabi and teaching materials being used. Textbooks can give English programs a good foundation. A well-written book authored by a qualified writer or writers has a lot of qualities that could meet most or all of textbook requirements for children. Furthermore, it is much easier to improvise when using a textbook than writing everything from scratch.

A situation can exist where administrators and teachers develop their own teaching materials since they know their students better than anybody else. But as mentioned earlier, the reality is different. The task demands extensive knowledge and experience in the field and calls for an enormous amount of time and energy. The responsibility of starting and managing an English program falls on the school administration and it is the administrators' responsibility to ensure that a quality program is in place. Since many administrators at Japanese primary schools do not have the needed

experience in the field, it is in their best interest to hire a qualified person to manage their program. Educators responsible for English education at primary schools must be aware of language needs of students at various stages of learning and should have the skills and knowledge to choose textbooks and/or materials that could satisfy those needs. Investing time in designing a syllabus and evaluating or choosing the right textbook(s) is a responsibility that no one can afford to ignore.

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