

Observations on English Education in Elementary Schools in China

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Abstract

This paper examines English-language teaching in the People's Republic of China through visitations to some elementary school grades in two large urban centres, Beijing and Dalian, in March 2008. Observations of English classes in China for students in grades 1 to 6, provide the basis of what we feel needs to be addressed for the implementation of English-language teaching in lower levels of Japanese elementary schools (grade 5 and above) from 2011. After giving a brief overview of the development of English education as outlined by the Chinese Ministry of Education, this paper reports on the present situation in Chinese urban elementary schools with regards to teacher qualifications, teacher methodology, class sizes and facilities, textbooks, private school English classes and parents' expectations. Also discussed, are the main differences between the approaches Chinese and Japanese primary schools have toward English education and what Japan should learn from the Chinese English syllabus and teacher qualification policies.

I. Introduction

Prior to 2001 English had not been a compulsory course in elementary schools in China except for certain key schools in major urban areas of over 27 provinces (Qiang, 2001). The teaching of English had not been standardized because of the limited number of qualified teachers and the lack of appropriate teaching materials. The emphasis was on grammar and pronunciation, characterised by situational dialogues taking up the main form of the textbooks along with learning the International Phonetic Alphabet to ensure correct pronunciation and intonation. There were no standardized textbooks either as each district was left to choose between using locally produced materials or the few licensed foreign textbooks that were available, some of which were designed for use in secondary school English classes.

Since 2001, however, the Chinese Ministry of Education (MoE) has been increasingly concerned with improving the development of English education for all its citizens. It decided in 2001 to make English compulsory from the primary level starting in cities and then gradually advancing to rural areas (Ministry of Education Document, 2007). In recent years, English has been introduced into the primary school curriculum in an increasing number of cities all across China. The basic design issued by the MoE makes it clear that elementary school English classes begin in grade 3 (age 8), the recommended frequency of classes is 4 times a week, and the minimum is 80 minutes per week. However, more and more urban areas

are starting English lessons in Grade 1. Qiang (2001) outlines the primary school English curriculum's main aims:

- ◆ to develop pupils' interests, self confidence and positive attitude towards learning English;
- ◆ to cultivate the pupils' language sense and enable good pronunciation and intonation;
- ◆ to develop the pupils' preliminary ability to use English in daily exchanges and lay a good basis for further study.

The syllabus is divided into two levels. Level 1 is for grades 3/4 and Level 2 is for grades 5/6. The instruction involves an activity-based approach encouraging teaching and learning through listening, speaking, singing (Level 1), playing and acting, doing, reading, and writing to provide the children opportunities to experience the language. Children are allowed to do things in English, and the learning process is expected to be a playful, happy experience.

In this paper, we first report on our observations of three visitations we made to urban elementary schools in Beijing and Dalian which include teacher education, teaching style, class sizes and facilities, students' responses and materials and textbooks. Next we will discuss the popularity of "juku", or cram school, after-class English activities and people's expectations for their children to acquire a suitable level of English. Finally, we compare the differences between Japanese and Chinese approaches to teaching English in elementary school and what Japan should learn from what China does.

II. Observations of Elementary School English Classes

Teacher Education

Teacher education in China receives a considerable amount of attention. The MoE, teacher training institutions, teachers' universities and English language teaching publishers have all been involved in organizing training programmes (Wu, 2001). Universities offer a degree for training primary school English teachers and each province is required to work out their own plans to implement primary school English teaching. Sometimes, colleges in the district or city conduct workshops to explain certain teaching methods or invite teachers from schools with a high rate of achievement to share experiences with other teachers. In our interviews with the primary English teachers in Beijing and Dalian, we learned in each school, teachers hold in-house group conferences (as often as twice a month all through the school year) to discuss teaching methodology, the teaching material and student assessment. Some schools invited teachers from other primary schools in the district to their conferences twice a month to discuss the planning of lessons, exams, curriculum matters, and arrange workshops to use technology (Power Point software), etc.

The teachers we observed were all female, as is usually the case in China, and taught only their specialty subject—English (Ashmore, 1997). The teachers were all university graduates who have degrees/certificates, according to the grades they teach, i.e., in the "teaching of English for primary school". There was usually one teacher for each grade, but in the largest school in Dalian, because of its large

student body size in relation to its low number of English teachers, some teachers were teaching English to other grades as well.

Teaching Style

In the 4 classrooms—3 classes ranging from Grades 3-6 and a Grade 1 class— (at the 3 schools visited) we observed that each teacher used the *oral method*, sometimes also referred to as the *direct method*, which Japanese teachers are very familiar with. This methodology is based on the well-known EFL teaching style called *PPP—presentation, practice, and production*. The oral, or direct, method is primarily characterised by the teacher teaching English ‘in English’. We observed all 4 English classroom teachers using only English in their lessons. They never once reverted to Chinese language support with the whole class while conducting the lesson. Whenever Chinese was used, in the two or three times we noticed it, it was always spoken to individual students to explain specific vocabulary, and always while the other students were writing in workbooks. The teachers stood in front of the class, introduced words or expressions orally, with flashcards, via CD or cassette tape or by software projected onto a large screen, and asked for volunteers to repeat it. Most of the children raised their hands, and the child who was chosen stood to respond. Students repeat exactly what the teacher says, and how she says it, i.e., parroting her intonation and pronunciation patterns. The teachers provide feedback in the form of yes, good, or try again, and then the student is told to be seated. The teacher would continue like this asking 4 or 5 more students to volunteer. Then the teacher would ask pairs or groups of students to speak, and finally, she would call on individuals to speak. Finally, the teachers directed their students to a page in their textbooks. She then asked again for volunteers who when called upon read confidently and loudly. Lots of vocabulary was repeated with students mimicking the teacher’s pronunciation and intonation patterns. It was both interesting and enjoyable to note that the learners were excellent imitators of the speakers on the cassette tape. The classes usually ended with the teacher assigning homework in the form of memorizing more vocabulary and phrases from the students’ workbook or doing listening tasks from their textbooks’ CD’s.



1/2 Classes are teacher-fronted and teachers make use of large screens and software to introduce vocabulary and expressions that children repeat orally.

One of our observations was a large Grade 1 class of about 55 students. As they were very young learners (although some had experience taking English lessons in kindergarten) the teaching method used involved a lot of TPR (Total Physical Response), whereby the teacher showed coloured objects to the students (colours were the unit topic) that they could see or use or touch. Along with oral repetition initiated by the teacher the children were singing and chanting.

In summary, paying attention, whole class instruction (presentation), repetition (practice), and drills (production) characterise classroom instruction. Zuo (2008) verifies the ideal teacher's role is to create a *student-centered* classroom where interaction is required for assessment of teaching work. Students are expected to be active participants in classroom interaction. Details and facts are expected to be memorized by the students.

Class sizes and Facilities

The schools we visited offered students 2-3 English classes per week. Depending on the school and grade each class was 30-40 minutes and there were anywhere from 30-60 students in each class. One teacher informed us she taught 3 classes/day for a total of 15 classes per week. Two schools had lessons with a native English speaker—Australians or Canadians mostly—who was assisted by the regular Chinese elementary school teacher. These special English classes were only for Grades 4 and above. The students remain in their own classrooms and the English teachers change rooms.

On average, the 40 or 50 students occupied four or five rows of two-person wooden desks, six or seven deep. In some schools the children wore casual clothes while in others they were dressed in uniforms. Each classrooms' cement walls were decorated with either posters bearing slogans or the school motto such as—"Your first step to success" or "Success starts here"; and, "Being a good man is more important than being a talented man"— or photos of famous communist leaders, e.g., Xiao Deng and Karl Marx. Large windows on one side of the room provided natural light and sometimes ventilation for large classes of warm bodies; florescent lights hung from the ceiling.

Furthermore, in all the classes we observed, teachers were supplied with blackboards, CD players, cassette tape recorders (usually as a backup if the CD player or software malfunctioned) and the latest in hardware technology that projected compatible textbook material onto a large screen at the front of the classroom. The classrooms all had large screens for Power Point software instruction and the teachers made use of flash cards as well.

Students' Responses

In order to answer a question from the teacher or volunteer, students always raised their hands. Never did they voluntarily call out answers. Also, their hand-raising was restrained and systematic. Their arm was outstretched and stationary. If not raising their hands, the students positioned their elbows on their desktops or folded their arms behind their backs. During our visits the students were always volunteering enthusiastically, paying attention, were respectful, and very well-behaved. Obviously though, not everyone was confident in their ability to speak in English or had the personality to seek attention by

volunteering so often. This was where the teachers' expertise came through and they would call upon the more reluctant students by name. Therefore the students knew very quickly that they could be called upon at any time to participate in the lesson.



3 Students raise their hands whenever they want to interact with the teacher.



4 Students get further language support through oral practice in their textbooks.

Textbooks and Materials

In cities like Beijing and Dalian textbooks are published locally to suit the standards of their students. Each school district assigns the same textbooks to each of its elementary schools and their respective grade levels. As is done in Japan. There are 4 or 5 companies producing 32 types of English textbooks in Beijing—the most of any subject. The publishers follow the guidelines laid down by the Ministry of Education and then the publishers promote their own books for sales. The MoE feels if different sets of textbooks compete against each other, the development of school textbooks will be greatly enhanced (Ministry of Education Document, 2007). The publishing group in Beijing supplies the textbooks free to primary schools, but the cassette tapes, CD's and software are charged to the teachers for their personal use after they are ordered. This publisher also provides teacher training for the books. In Dalian, the students had to buy the books.

In both the cities we visited the publishing companies produce textbooks with the same recurring themes. The textbooks adopt a functional and situational approach. They focus on communication—by talking about China—whereby characters in the dialogues meet foreigners or talk about foreign cultures. The series are similar in that they follow a set of characters growing up all through the different grade levels. New characters are added in each grade (book level). The layout of the texts was similar in the three schools we observed too—cartoon characters introduced as a friend—a new character and cultural topic introduced in each unit. Furthermore, each lesson includes a theme and a function, which are relevant to the students' daily life. Word levels for the 6th grade: 500-800w (in Japan this would be 200w). The format of each lesson consists of listening and speaking practice, a writing section and a homework component done in an accompanying workbook. There is a high premium placed on communicative competence and listening and speaking get a lot of attention. In addition to the workbooks, teacher's

books, cassette-tapes, CD's, videotapes, and wall charts also accompany the textbooks.

In regards to pronunciation they follow the IEPS sound system. For the lower level grade 1 we observed, the publisher included bilingual text support for mostly the exercises students were singing and chanting. It should be noted though, that the Chinese language support was only for the instructions of how to do the exercises and not for any explicit translation of vocabulary.

Exams are made from the textbook content by the respective grade level teachers and evaluate students' speaking or conversation skills, listening skills, and, writing skills. All the English expressions are found in the students' textbooks and are presented through the use of flash cards, CD's, cassette tapes, and Power Point presentations. Hence all of the software is compatible with the textbooks. With the development of such textbooks, the emphasis of the teaching items remains on vocabulary, speaking and listening, and sentence patterns and therefore the methodology reflects the current trend of communicative language teaching.



5 Lessons are followed up with reading, writing and listening homework assignments from the student workbooks.

III. The “Juku”, Cram School, After-School English Classes and Parents’ Expectations

According to Britannica Online Encyclopedia, *cram schools* (juku in Japanese) “are privately run, after-hours tutoring schools geared to help elementary and secondary students perform better in their regular daytime schoolwork and to offer cram courses in preparation for university entry examinations. *Cram schools* range from individual home-based tutorials to countrywide chains of schools and are staffed largely by retired teachers, moonlighting teachers, and university students.” They are specialized schools that train their students to meet particular goals, most commonly to pass the entrance examinations of high schools or universities. Cram schools are usually privately owned. They are prevalent in East Asia, where rote-memorization education plays a greater part in adolescent education. In fact, there are so many cram schools in Japan, mainland China, Taiwan, South Korea, and Hong Kong, that they have become a de facto parallel educational system, and high school students may need to attend cram schools after regular school to master certain important courses, like English, mathematics or natural sciences. In China, English is

rapidly growing in importance and popularity and is frequently being introduced at younger and younger ages. Many parents who can afford it, send their children to cram school-like English classes at privately run businesses during the afternoons, after regular public school has ended. In some cities students are enrolled in these additional private English classes at night or on weekends (Smith, 2007). These private English schools are increasingly tailoring their programmes to “this large and profitable market of young Chinese students” (2007, p. 4). Smith further reports that over a quarter of primary parents thought private English schools are necessary to supplement the failures of large size public school classrooms (2007, p.5). Therefore, what makes these schools so attractive to parents is that they offer reduced class sizes. Some even employ native English speakers as instructors (Yu, 2006). The popularity of English cram schools is a direct reflection of Chinese parents’ attitudes toward their children’s future. Many parents think much of their child’s future and by having them master English outside of the public school system, they feel their children will achieve the first step of climbing the ladder of a severe career-oriented society in China. Generally, the object for parents to have their children go to a cram school is to give them more time to study English in a smaller class size setting. If they have more time to study and achieve a higher level of English proficiency, the parents feel the children will achieve a higher English assessment at public school, which in turn, will enable them to go on to university and enhance their future career prospects. Since the Chinese government established the “one-child per couple policy” wealthy parents have a lot of expectations for their children and spend more and more money raising them. This is why Chinese society is sometimes called a “child-centered” one. The child is treated like an emperor of sorts in the family. This tendency is another cause of the rise of cram schools in the urban areas of China.

In China, there are a lot of cram schools, especially in urban areas. There are 600-700 types of these schools in Dalian, specializing in many subjects — with 60-70 focusing on English (second only to mathematics and science). Most only offer classes for primary-aged children to junior high-aged children, and they have become an important source of revenue for the owners of these schools.

In the Dalian school system, Wednesdays and Saturdays are only half-days. Public schools end around noon, so cram schools start in the afternoon on those days as an after-school supplement of the students’ regular studies. Some students are eager to study due to their high interest in English, but other juku students are not very motivated to study. The latter are forced to go to cram schools because of their parents’ too high expectations of their own children or their self-satisfaction in the fact they can afford to send them to a cram school.

We had a chance to visit one English cram school while in Dalian. We were fortunate enough to observe one class and talk with the principal and some teachers (thanks to the arrangements by our local tour guide whose child attended this school). The cram school is situated on the 2nd floor of a building in the city and had 3 or 4 classrooms. The children are driven to the school by their parents and spend 120 minutes in one English lesson. None of the teachers had a teaching license to teach primary school English yet, and some were in training to get their license.

There were 20-30 students in the class we observed. The teaching style was in the same oral approach format that we observed in the public schools we visited previously and again the teacher was a young woman. However, it was very difficult for the students to maintain their attention for the full 120 minutes, so she sometimes tried playing English games in order to motivate the students.

In summary, again teachers follow the exact same approach to teaching English, as do the public school teachers. However, as the classes have much more mixed levels of English learners, the 20 or so students are required to go to these classes by their parents, and they tend to employ less experienced teachers (at a lower salary scale). In addition, discipline and motivation of the students are often lacking. Hence, classroom management problems tend to occur frequently.



6 “Juku”, cram schools, are popular with parents who hope their children will receive a higher level of English proficiency.

IV. The Differences Between Japanese and Chinese Approaches to Teaching English in Elementary School

It is difficult to judge the general situation for primary English education in China from only a week’s observation. China is a huge country and it is impossible for us to give a general opinion on the matter as to whether they are successful in teaching English to elementary school students or not. Even in the urban areas, there remains a difference between higher-class schools and lower-class schools. It is like a blind person touching an elephant—we cannot grasp the whole general situation of English education in China. We happened to visit the schools that might well attain very high goals in English education. So, we have to refrain from giving a simple generalization due to our limited experience and time in China. However, there are some points that remain on what we should or should not learn from the practice in China on English teaching in elementary schools.

Starting Age

At present, there is an on-going debate about at what age Japanese children should begin learning a foreign language such as English. Many academics criticize beginning English studies in elementary

school because they feel it will interfere with Japanese children's first language development. Chinese English teachers do not believe this whatsoever, that elementary school English studies have any effect on the students' Chinese language development.

In summary then, we have observed in China, that the situation is in sharp contrast to the corresponding future primary school English curriculum plans for Japan. As it is well known to us these days, English is taught as a compulsory subject in Korea, Taiwan, and China (city areas) usually starting as early as grade 1, and much more class time is spent on English per week. So, as for the situation in Japan, teaching English should start earlier than Grade 5 due to outside social pressures and parents' expectations in the future as well.

Japanese English Teachers

In 2011, Japanese classroom teachers will be expected to teach English to their students, even if they do not have a license to teach English. In some schools, they will share the class with an assistant English teacher, but they will be the main suppliers of teaching English in the elementary schools.

In summary, according to the interviews with the teachers we met during our trip, China faces the same situation in regards to the shortage of qualified teachers of English. However, once the plan for primary English education was established, universities and special licensed schools started producing licensed teachers to cover the demands for qualified English teachers for public schools. These days, in almost every school in the large urban areas, these licensed teachers teach English. Furthermore, we would like to point out that in all subjects in Chinese elementary schools, teachers only teach the subjects they have a special license for. In other words, licensed English teachers only teach English; licensed math teachers only teach math; licensed computer science teachers only teach computer science, and so on.

Similarly, judging from the situation in China, it would be better to create special licensed courses for teaching primary school English at universities throughout Japan. It would be a much more desirable situation whereby every elementary school should have some teachers who specialize in teaching English.

It is clear Japanese educators and researchers are trying to do something about changing the EFL situation in Japan. Besides the issues regarding licensing and starting age there are other challenges to be faced. How will Japanese teachers deal with large classes? How can an assessment system characterised by intense exams be perfected more for social functions than for memory work (Zuo, 2008)? From our observations we feel there is a need for upgrading the professional competence of elementary school teachers (Hu, 2002). Then, the course of action for expanding English into the lower levels of primary school would be made on an informed and principled basis.

A Comprehensive English Education Curriculum in Japan

In Japan, the school curriculum has been changed and it has been announced by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (文部科学省 Monbu-kagakushō), or MEXT, that the commencement of the teaching of English in elementary schools will start from 2011. In particular, elementary school children in Japan will start studying English from Grade 5 and above; one class per

week (in total, 35 hours in a year). However, apart from other subjects, English will be introduced as an activity, not as a core subject (except in special districts where they will study English as a core subject). Getting used to the target language—English—and cultivating an attitude towards another culture (other than Japanese) have been set as the main goals.

Furthermore, we feel there has to be an emphasis on the establishment of a whole consistent and comprehensive curriculum for English education in Japan extending from the fifth grade (or in some cases, from grade 1) to the university level. In China, they have already set the entire compulsory English curriculum from grade 1 to grade 9, and when students finish their university education, they have to take the English proficiency test as a requirement of their graduation (Ministry of Education Document, 2007). The situation in Korea is the same; they have a comprehensive English curriculum from elementary school to university. On the other hand, the curriculum on English education in Japan is emphasized mainly from secondary education and higher, but English education at the university level depends on each university's own developed curriculum and does not set clear goals for itself. In addition to that, MEXT has declared that the start of teaching English lessons will be at the level of grade 5. In 2011, continuity from the elementary level to the secondary level should be taken into account thoroughly, and a smooth transition all the way to university is needed for the success of English education in Japan in the future.

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