

# English for Elementary School Teachers in Japan: Ways of Enriching Teachers' Experience in Learning and Using English

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore some of the important ways of learning that prospective and current elementary school teachers in Japan can use to improve their language proficiency in English. The government's new setting up of *Foreign Language* as a school subject for the elementary school curriculum may well lead to the real need of elementary school teachers to develop their own English proficiency. Then, how can they approach this seemingly difficult task in a realistic manner? I present a list of some possible ways of learning to use English, from the viewpoints of the teacher learning for and through classroom instruction and the teacher's development as a communicator in English in more general terms: 1) starting with learning instructional language; 2) learning to tell students a story in English; 3) learning to interact with students in English and some approaches to it; 4) a spiraled way of development between knowing about English and learning to use it; and 5) connecting to people from other countries.

Key words: elementary school English, *Foreign Language* as a school subject, teachers' English proficiency, ways of learning to use English

## Introduction

*Foreign language* as a school subject will be introduced to 5th and 6th grade students in elementary schools in Japan, and a motivational and attitudinal program that has been practiced for 5th and 6th graders with the name of *Foreign Language Activities*, or *English Language Activities*, will be lowered to 3rd and 4th grade students. This nationwide innovative phase of elementary school education may well shed light on an urgent need of Japanese elementary school teachers to improve their own language proficiency in English.

In response to this need, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT

henceforth) has dedicated one of the chapters of its comprehensive guidebook on elementary school *Foreign Language Activities* and *Foreign Language* (2017) to the development of elementary school teachers' English proficiency, through presenting a huge collection of English expressions usable for teaching practice, together with sound data on CD and YouTube MEXT channel. The collection includes "Classroom English" (i.e., various expressions used in different phases and aspects of classroom teaching), "Basic English Conversation" (which refers to a collection of expressions usable to communicate with ALTs and the kind of vocabulary needed to talk about educational matters), "Small Talk" (which includes the teacher's short speeches and the students' conversation patterns that are relevant to the target expressions in the textbooks developed by MEXT), and "Speaking Training" (which deals with some basic prosodic features of English).

This MEXT approach is intended to encourage elementary school teachers to improve their English mainly in the realm of their classroom teaching, by acquiring instructional language to conduct lessons, making it easier to communicate with ALTs by learning usable expressions for this purpose, and so on. The approach is worth exploring. In my view, however, the teacher's development as the learner and user of English in more general terms is of vital importance. How can non-native-speaking teachers educate students to learn to use English without taking on and going on with the process of becoming a real user of English? Not only ever-growing skills in English but also other things one can acquire in the process of becoming a better user of English could and should form the basis for his or her classroom teaching. Among them are the sense of language as a means of communication and that of English as a *Lingua Franca*, and some knowledge about linguistic features of English as obtained in the process of learning and using this language. It is an urgent need to explore how both pre-service and in-service elementary school teachers can be more motivated to develop their English proficiency.

## **1. Why teachers' good command of English?**

Unlike secondary school teachers of English, elementary school teachers have not been required to reach any levels of English proficiency in such tests as TOEIC and Eiken Step Test, except for the criteria used by some prefectures for their yearly examinations to employ full-time elementary school teachers. In fact, most elementary school teachers do not have any qualifications either in English proficiency or English education. According to a survey conducted by MEXT in the school year 2014, 83.2 % of the 3,181 respondent teachers in charge of *Foreign Language Activities* did not have any qualifications in English proficiency or English education, and more than 90 % of them did not have a secondary school teacher's certificate in teaching English. In addition, 86.6 % had no experience in learning English or another foreign language at home or a language school after graduating from university.

The undergraduate teacher's certificate program in elementary school education requires students to take a course in English communication. This has been the only requirement for skill development of their English. In light of the many hours estimated for mastery of a foreign language, as exemplified

in Vilke (1988, cited by Driscoll 1999: 11), it can be said that prospective and current elementary school teachers in Japan have not been trained to be proficient enough in English to communicate with people from other countries fluently and to conduct lessons entirely in English, unless they are/were English majors and/or are/were involved in the secondary school teacher's certificate program in English. This is related to low expectations on and generous attitudes toward current teachers' English use in the classroom, as shown in Akita (2011). She gives the following advice to elementary school teachers, especially to those who are not good at speaking in English: 1) "Don't aim at using perfect sentences and pronunciation."; and 2) Basically use Japanese, with as much English as possible mixed with it."

The start of English as an elementary school subject would inevitably require those concerned with this educational area to go beyond the above-mentioned level of expectation to focusing upon the real need for better English proficiency of Japanese elementary school teachers, as shown in the MEXT inclusion of a section for the development of teachers' English in its most recent guidebook (2017). Let us examine the actual proficiency level of current elementary school teachers.

Two of the elementary school principals I interviewed in my fieldwork (Fukushima 2013) suggested the need to develop the teacher's oral proficiency in English. The followings are the principals' statements quoted from my field notes, with my translation placed in parentheses.

「先生たちは英語の素地はあるが会話は訓練していない。日本人学校に勤めた人や留学をした人の経験は参考にならない。」

(Teachers have a good grounding in English but they have not been trained to converse in English. It is no use for them to consult those elementary school teachers who have worked at a Japanese school in a foreign country or studied abroad before.)

「担任がALT に頼りすぎる。もっと英語が話せれば良いのだから。」

(Homeroom teachers are too much dependent on ALTs. It might make a difference if they were able to speak English better.)

I, as an outside observer of lessons in my fieldwork (2013), encountered a scene which suggested a homeroom teacher's difficulty in interacting with her students in English. The teacher was going to conduct the lesson with an assistant Japanese teacher of English from their local area. Standing at the center of the front of the classroom, the homeroom teacher started with the question of "How are you?" Then, many students said, "I'm hungry," although it was an early afternoon class. Then, what did the teacher say? It was easy for me, as an observer present in the classroom, to understand that the teacher wondered whether or not the students had had lunch. However, she did not say anything. Instead, she used a gesture of eating food, moving her right hand (holding imaginary chopsticks or spoon) toward her mouth. It was clear to me that she wanted to ask the students if they had had lunch, but there were no clear answers from the students either in Japanese or English. I, standing at the back of the classroom, hoped to help the teacher to be able to say, "Why? Did you have lunch?" or "Have you eaten lunch?". From a grammatical point of view, this teacher and any other current

teachers of elementary schools must have learned these simple constructions of English when they were in junior high school. However it may be highly likely that many of them cannot spontaneously use such simple sentence patterns, according to their real needs. It should be a point of discussion or debate how long it will take the teachers to fulfil the gap between what they learned about English and what they actually can use for the purpose of oral communication.

For pre-service student teachers to learn about teaching each school subject at elementary school, two types of courses have been offered in the undergraduate teacher certificate program: a content course, such as *National Language* and *Science*, and a teaching method course, such as *Methods of Teaching Arithmetic* and *Methods of Teaching Music*. This will apply to the new subject of *Foreign Language* and two courses, namely, *Foreign Language (or the English Language)* and a method course in teaching *Foreign Language*, will be newly included in the elementary school teacher's certificate program from the academic year 2019 onward.

What is new is that MEXT has set up a core curriculum for each course in the teacher certificate programs, including the new two courses for elementary school *Foreign Language*. The subject of *Foreign Language* is designed to cover 2 categories. My translation of them: 1) the English proficiency that is needed for classroom teaching; and 2) English-related background knowledge. The former has four specific aims with regard to listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. The latter knowledge-based learning is concerned with four fields of study: English linguistics, second language acquisition, children's literature (e.g., picture books, children's songs and poetry, etc.), and cross-cultural understanding.

The method course in teaching *Foreign Language* to elementary school students is supposed to cover 4 categories. My translation of them: 1) knowledge and understanding of elementary school foreign language education; 2) knowledge about children's second language acquisition and making use of it; 3) teaching techniques; and 4) classroom teaching (inclusive of teaching materials, lesson planning, ITC, and assessment). There are two specific aims directly related to teachers' English proficiency under the category of teaching techniques. Again my translation: a) the skill in talking to children effectively so as to bring out their utterances; and b) the skill in drawing out children's utterances and carrying forward conversational exchanges with them.

No one would deny that these new courses could be helpful for student teachers not only to develop their teaching skills but also to make their English more workable, at least to some extent. However, in light of a long time span of learning and acquiring a foreign language in general terms, the new courses cannot be a sufficient condition for the teachers' fruitful development and mastery of English. Therefore, it is necessary to explore ways by which prospective and current elementary school teachers can enrich their own experience in learning and using English.

## 2. Elementary school teachers' perceptions on their English proficiency

There are some surveys and research studies conducted with a group of Japanese elementary school teachers which show their perceptions on the teacher's or their own English proficiency.

### (1) Inoi Shin'ichi (2009)

Inoi (2009) conducted a survey by giving 41 teachers (20 males and 21 females) a questionnaire. One main research question that Inoi put forward in this study was whether teachers' attitudes toward *English Language Activities* are related to the length of their stay abroad. There were 39 teachers who had been abroad and almost all these teachers, except for one, specified the length of stay. Inoue divided the 38 teachers into three groups, according to the length of stay: A) up to 10 days; B) from 11 to 20 days; and C) 21 days or more. In order to examine some of the influences of this difference in the length of stay abroad, Inoi compared the three groups by the percentages of the teachers who chose each answer in each item. It may be worthy to note that Inoi did not use a statistical correlational analysis.

The major results of his analytical examinations: Group C (the longest group) showed the highest percentage in the taking on of the main position in Team Teaching, on the negative answer about a feeling of burden, and on the positive answer in the likes about English, and the lowest percentage on ways of actually conducting *English Language Activities* as an uneasy element of teaching. Based on these results, Inoi makes a claim for offering the kind of workshops for teacher development where teachers can have enjoyable experience of communicating in English, as well as a request for administrative support for teachers to go abroad. These ideas have been partially put into practice in the sense that the government centralizes the supporting of regional leaders (who would be expected to influence other teachers well) and a few leaders chosen in each prefecture have been given special occasions such as going abroad, for example, to make observations on ESL classes in an English-speaking country. Most ordinary elementary school teachers have not been given such opportunities for learning overseas and/or communicating in English.

In Inoi's survey, more than 80 percent of the respondent teachers chose 4 items as their uneasy elements of teaching, and thus Inoi highlights the need to get rid of teachers' uneasiness on them: 1) the teacher's own English proficiency (at 97.6%); 2) yearly teaching planning and lesson planning (90.2 %); 3) actual ways of conducting *English Language Activities* (80.5%); and 4) developing and preparing teaching materials (80.5%). Inoi adds that teachers need to have a long time span of their own progression in learning English. As for the things to be dealt with in learning sessions for teacher development, the highest percentage of the respondent teachers went to "English conversation necessary for classroom teaching and Classroom English." This suggests that teachers may tend to hope to develop their English for and through classroom teaching practice. The direct connection of their thought to classroom teaching is shown also in the next highest percentage loaded on "teaching materials and examples of teaching practice for *English Language Activities* that can be used right away." In this item, Group C (i.e., the longest group in terms experience of staying abroad) showed a much lower percentage than other groups, which may be said to suggest that the teacher group have a

less passive and more independent attitudes toward participating in teaching *English Language Activities*.

## (2) Fukushima Mieko (2013)

In my fieldwork (2013) I interviewed 24 homeroom teachers to know what issues and problems they were concerned about with regard to *English Language Activities*. As a result of my categorical analysis of their statements, it was found that one third of the homeroom teachers mentioned the elementary school teacher's English proficiency: 7 teachers talked about their own English proficiency or the need to acquire a good command of English, as shown in the following examples quoted from my field notes, whereas one teacher expressed a feeling of burden as shown in the last example below.

「(問題は) 自分の英語への不安。」

(The problem is my uneasiness about English.)

「自身の問題としては、担任として英語力をつけなければと思う。」

(As my own problem, I, as a homeroom teacher, should acquire the ability to use English.)

「パソコンと英語を入れていかないと小学校教師として生き残れないと考えている。」

(I think I, as an elementary school teacher, will not be able to survive unless I cope with English and a personal computer.)

「突然新しい分野。担任が英語が使えないのにやらなければならない。」

(This new teaching area came all of a sudden. We, homeroom teachers, have to be in charge although we cannot use English.)

There was another group of 8 statements which were more directly concerned with the teacher's own behaviors in the classroom. Half of those statements were given by 2 homeroom teachers and 2 Japanese teachers of English from the local area, with regard to the Japanese teacher's language choice, as shown in the following examples.

「All English でいくのか、日本語を使うのか。」

(All in English or use of Japanese?)

「どこまで英語で指示のことばを出すか。普段使っていないから急には使えない。」

(To what extent should I give instructional language in English? I cannot use English promptly because usually I do not use it.)

The other half of the statements related to the teacher's classroom behaviors came from 4 native-speaking ALTs, and they cover three issues: 1) how one can have students understand meanings (of English words, phrases, and expressions) in English; 2) how one can have them understand his/her instructional language in English; and 3) how to talk to students in English. Examples from my field notes follow:

“Making everyone understand what you are teaching and talking about.”

“Talking to students naturally. I may be using too many new patterns.”

These are the kind of issues that any teachers who have started trying to conduct classroom instruction entirely in English should be faced with. The Japanese teachers I interviewed in my field study (2013) had not proceeded to this stage of teacher learning and development as yet.

### (3) Nahatame Shingo (2014)

Nahatame (2014) examined 40 pre-service student teachers' perceptions on *English Language Activities* by using a questionnaire with the likert scale. The questionnaire included a section to have the students evaluate 10 items as capabilities needed for teaching practice of *English Language Activities*. Nahatame found that the highest mean of 5-level-rating went to “speaking abilities” and “communicative competence and attitudes toward communication” Sample statements cited from the free writing part of the section includes those mentioning pronunciation and intonation as important elements of speaking abilities, as well as those referring to enjoyable experience to be given to children.

### (4) Sakui Keiko, Yamauchi Keiko, and Shiobara Frances (2017)

Sakui, Yamauchi and Shiobara (2017) elicited 36 teachers' self-evaluation of their English proficiency, in terms of 4 skills, by using a 6-stage Can-Do list for the ability to use “Classroom English” and that for “the ability to conduct team teaching.” The following table (made by translating Sakui et al's original tables into English and combining them into one) shows the results of the teachers' self-evaluation. I am responsible for any flaws of translation in this table.

	Classroom English	frequency		Team Teaching	frequency
1	Can say the first greetings (Hello. How are you?, etc.).	1	1	Can greet our ALT saying “Hello. How are you?” Other than that, I leave everything to the ALT.	7
2	Can give directions by using simple phrases (Sit down. Look at me. Listen to the CD., etc.).	9	2	Can conduct a lesson by asking the ALT to read (pronounce) the planned items.	4
3	Can introduce myself, and can use basic expressions in the classroom..	13	3	Can have children listen to a conversation by showing a role play with the ALT.	11
4	Can give directions entirely in English in the case of a routinized activity (playing Bingo in English, etc.).	8	4	Can show children natural conversations with the ALT by making free utterances to some extent.	3
5	Can rephrase what I said by using another expression when I cannot make my explanation understood well in English..	1	5	Can talk with the ALT in a relaxed manner not only for our classroom team teaching but also in our meetings before and/or after lessons.	3
6	Can conduct a lesson only in English in a relaxed manner, using gestures, in response to children's understanding.	3	6	When the ALT' s opinion is different from mine, I can explain it properly and can be engaged in lesson planning and preparatory meetings with the ALT in English, guiding him/her to my wishes and plans.	2

It is interesting and useful to note that this table shows the largest number of teachers chose Stage 3 and most teachers identified themselves residing somewhere between Stage 2 and 4 with regard to classroom English, and many of them, between Stage 1 and 3 as for team teaching.

### 3. Teaching English in English<sup>(1)</sup>

The idea of teaching a foreign language through the medium of the target language is not new. The major methodologies of foreign language teaching as described by Richards and Rodgers (1986) mostly assume the teacher's target language use in the classroom, whether exclusively, as in the Direct Method and the Audiolingual Method, or rather in a weaker form, as in Communicative Language Teaching for which "Judicious use of native language is accepted where feasible" (Finocciaro and Brumfit 1983, cited in Richards and Rodgers 1986: 67-68). A well-known exceptional practice is the Grammar-Translation Method. It values the learning of the target language through the medium of the mother tongue. In addition, Community Language Teaching and Suggestopedia employ translation as a useful element of teaching.

In the field of elementary school foreign language, there seem no claims for the teacher's extensive use of the mother tongue as in the Grammar-Translation Method, except for the awareness model described by Johnstone (1994). One key issue is whether one holds a strong-form claim for the teacher's target language use, as in Curtain and Pesola (1994), or a weak-form which allows for an insertion of the mother tongue use, as in Satchwell (1999). Satchwell suggests offering a five- or ten-minute deliberate mother tongue session, either for pupils to sort out their problems or for the teacher to explain cultural things. It is important to note that this instructional idea of Satchwell's is used on purpose and is not a language switch possibly made in a haphazard manner by a teacher who is not proficient in English.

Why is it necessary to teach in the target language? Halliwell (1992), who is concerned with elementary school English, discusses three advantages: 1) enhancing the children's ability to predict meaning and their own trust in it; 2) cultivating the sense of language as something being used for real communication; and 3) offering more exposure to the target language. The last issue, namely, the importance of input provision by the teacher is also discussed by Slattery and Willis (2001).

Kano and Ozeki (2015) revealed some perceptual changes that had occurred to Japanese elementary school teachers who observed student teachers practicing a special project over the period of time of 3 years. One conspicuous change was that teachers' perceptions had changed from the focus of students' clear understanding through the medium of Japanese (for instruction) and *Katakana* (for pronunciation) to the importance of cultivating "tolerance of ambiguity" which facilitate the state of being focused and the act of responding through guessing. It is important to note that if the teacher tends to relapse into the mother tongue based on a perception of a difficulty given to students through an English-medium instruction, it may easily delay the time when the students can develop the ability to predict meaning and trust in it.



The student project in Kano and Ozaki's study (2015) had three major characteristics of classroom teaching. First, a group of college students work together, for example, to show how to play a game by role-playing without any complicated verbal expressions. Second, the student teachers make use of visual aids. Third, they develop their class management ability, such as skills in giving instructional language clearly.

The teacher's target language use cannot be realized in an abstract form. Moon (2000) considers several factors which might make it hard for the teacher to use English all the time, such as the teacher's own proficiency and confidence and pupils' proficiency and motivation. If the teacher is not very fluent and competent in English, his or her maturity as a user of English is necessary. Fluency, however, does not guarantee that the teacher can offer effective instruction, and maturity as a teacher in general terms and teacher of English in particular, is needed.

Dickson's study (1996) from Britain is a rare study on what is actually happening in the classroom in terms of the teacher's target language use. It is a comprehensive survey on the teachers' perceptions of their own and their students' target language use. The survey was conducted with some five hundred secondary school foreign language teachers in England and Wales, inclusive of both native-speaking and non-native speaking teachers. Dickson's main observation from this survey is that some other factors than teachers' own proficiency level may affect their use of the target language and that teachers may be residing somewhere between the principle of maximizing the target language use and their own considerations in those factors (e.g., classroom conditions, such as disorderly behavior and lower achieving pupils, and the need for a rapport with pupils and its connection to pupils' motivation and learning).

I am not aware of any surveys on the teacher's actual target language use in the classroom that have been conducted with elementary school teachers in Japan, except that Sakui, Yamauchi and Shiobara (2017), which I mentioned in a previous section, suggest some things going on in the classroom. The issue of the teacher's actual target language use is open for further pursuit, not only for surveys but also for observational studies on classroom language use and classroom communication.

#### **4. Approaches to teacher development for better language proficiency in English**

I would like to present 5 approaches to teacher development in terms of English proficiency. The first three approaches refer to three different aspects of learning within the realm of classroom teaching: learning to use instructional language in English, learning to tell students a story in English, and learning to interact with students in English. All these approaches may be strengthened by the teacher's act of reflecting back on his/her own verbal behaviors in the classroom and also by that of getting information sources with regard to teachers' verbal actions and interactions. The fourth approach is concerned with knowing about the English language and how it should be related to the process of learning to use the language. The final approach is about how one might connect to people from other countries to experience direct associations and relationships with them.

## (1) Starting with instructional language

The kind of language usable to direct students to organize classroom activities might often be the first aspect of the target language focused upon by the teacher, once s/he decides to conduct instruction in English. The teacher's learning environment in this respect has been improved to a great extent in the sense that there are now sample inventories of instructional language from which secondary school teachers of English and elementary school teachers can pick up useful expressions for themselves.

I started my teaching career as a secondary school teacher of English in the late 1970's. At first I could not say "Can you hear me?" to the students sitting at the back of the classroom, like the previously mentioned homeroom teacher who could not say "Did you have lunch?" Then, I found the expression when video-viewing a live concert of Diana Ross held in a huge park. Diana started her concert by saying "Can you hear me?" in a loud voice to the large crowd of audience. I was successful in picking up this expression to own it as mine. How time-consuming it will be to pick up or work out useful expressions for one's classroom teaching! I still feel as if I were Diana Ross when asking my students whether they can hear me.

Hughes's handbook (1981) offers the most comprehensive collection of sample teacher utterances, covering various aspects of classroom English. The following is a list of his inventory I presented in my previous study on teaching English in English (Fukushima 2006).

- (a) Beginning of lesson (e.g., "Sit down and let's get started.", "Who is absent today?")
- (b) End of lesson (e.g., "I'm afraid it's time to finish now.", "We'll do the rest of this chapter on Thursday.", "No noise as you leave.")
- (c) Set phrases for apologies, thanking, warning, etc.
- (d) Textbook activity (e.g., "Take one and pass them on.", "It's in the top left-hand corner.", "Has anybody got anything for the last one?")
- (e) Blackboard activity (e.g., "Come up and write the sentence on the board.")
- (f) Tape activity (e.g., "Can you all hear?", "Let me just find the beginning again.")
- (g) Slides, Pictures, OHPs, etc. (e.g., "Switch the lights off.", "Roll up the screen.")
- (h) Games and songs (e.g., "These two rows are one team." "Let's listen to the tune first, then we'll look at the lyrics.")
- (i) Movement, general activity, and class control (e.g., "Put your desks together into groups of four." "Work in pairs.")
- (j) Repetition and responses (e.g., "Sorry, I didn't quite hear what you said.", "That's exactly the point.", "I'm afraid that's not quite right, because.....")
- (k) Encouragement and confirmation (e.g., "That's much better.", "You're almost there." "Have a guess if you don't know.")
- (l) Progress in work (e.g., "Who needs help?", "Who would like to do this?", "Which topic/subject would you like to work on?")
- (m) Language work (e.g., "It sounds better to say .....", "What is the noun derived from electric?", "Be careful with the 'sh' sound.")

In the field of elementary school English, Halliwell (1992: 15-18) encourages teachers to conduct activities with simple phrasing while making use of actions and facial expressions. This brevity should also be useful in other educational levels. Halliwell offers sample words and actions for a paired reading activity, and in this manner she invites elementary school teachers to a greater use of the target language in the classroom. Slattery and Willis (2001) offer a rich collection of sample instructional languages, from the phrases to be used in different phases of a lesson, such as how to start or end a lesson and how to organize the classroom, through those expressions usable for various instructional functions such as directing, turn-giving, explaining and demonstrating, to sample talks about particular topics. Among these three aspects of the teacher's target language use, the topic talk can be most enlightening if the teacher is concerned mainly with using the target language to organize students' activities and for classroom management.

The MEXT guidebook (2017) covers not only instructional language and the target expressions in the textbooks but also phrases and expressions that teachers can use to communicate with other teachers in English. For the real development of elementary school teachers' English proficiency, it is necessary to look into how they will internalize necessary expressions for themselves with reference to the MEXT guidebook and its sound data. I am not aware of any research studies which have explored this issue.

The teacher's motivation to learn from reference materials to make useful expressions their own may well affect whether and how they can work out their own inventory. In this respect, it is worthwhile to see what actual inventories of particular individual teachers or specific groups of teachers are like. A sample inventory available to me came from a high school which used to conduct the SELHi project. It includes a group of English items equivalent to thirteen Japanese utterances, such as "Turn your paper over.", "Make groups of four.", and "Who wants to go first.", as well as those equivalents to a collection of students' utterances, such as "How do you say ..... in English?" and "What does this mean?".

My field study (2013) shows a collection of utterances which were attested in a sporadic manner in my lesson observations. Among them are "Nice!"; "OK, good job."; "Big voice and speed."; "Last 2 minutes."; "はい、Stand up."; "じゃ Listen." ; "Any volunteer(s)?" ; "Everybody, please look at me."; and "These are in order."

In the context of making use of rich collections of useful expressions in such studies as Hughes (1981), Slattery and Willis (2001) and the MEXT guidebook (2017) it is necessary to consider the possibility that the teacher would own or internalize the much smaller number of expressions to conduct lessons in the classroom, in light of teachers' capacity and their patterned behavioral tendencies. In conjunction with this, pre-service student teachers who are not fluent enough in English to conduct lessons may even find it hard to have elementary school students play a simple game, let alone the games they might create. Therefore, it is instructive for pre-service teachers to make use of such teacher resource books as Yoshida (2010) which encourages teachers to learn to conduct 6 types of games, by using a DVD and the book containing transcripts of verbal exchanges between the teacher

and the students in each game. For instance, the book focusses the following five expressions of the teacher for *Fruits Basket*.

1. What color do you like?
2. Let's make a circle.
3. Today's topic is color.
4. Any volunteers?
5. Get up and move!

One way of educating pre-service student teachers to conduct a lesson in English is to start with practicing such simple expressions as the above for a game. Matsunaga (2012a) looked into the effects of the number of training sessions on giving game instructions on 49 pre-service student teachers, by comparing performance ratings of the control group with one 30-minute training session and those of the experiment group with five 30-minute training sessions. Matsunaga (2012b) further conducted a comparison between another set of control and experiment groups formed by 48 students from the same group to examine the influences of the level of English proficiency as shown in TOEIC scores. Based on the results of her statistical analyses in these studies, Matsunaga suggests students' participation in multiple training sessions may affect their improvements in their skills in giving game instructions, but this may not be the case with their English proficiency level. She argues that "teaching skills in some areas such as giving game instructions can be developed through multiple training sessions even when participants do not exhibit a high level of English proficiency" (2012b: 41). My own experience of having a group of 8 college students practice giving game instructions also suggests that a single practicing or training session is not enough for pre-service teachers to acquire the skill in giving particular game instructions.

## **(2) Learning to tell students a story in English**

Directions and instructions are not the only kind of language the teacher may use in the classroom. Another domain of the teacher's use of English in the classroom includes set activities which are related to storytelling skills. One is the "topic talk" recommended by Slattery and Willis (2001). I assume some Japanese teachers of English are using this technique, although they may not know Slattery and Willis. In a junior high school classroom I saw the teacher starting her English lesson with her informal talk about a big snowfall on the previous day and how her children helped her to get out of her car with a lot of snow on it. Another activity related to storytelling skills is called "oral introduction," or "oral interaction," which is used to introduce a new story or essay in the textbook. How to talk about the new story depends on the teacher, and an introduction to the story already offered in the textbook may or may not be available.

There may be many elementary school teachers who are not satisfied with their own English. It is a basic need of the teacher to make continuous efforts to improve his or her own English, regardless of the educational level. If the teacher is not happy about his or her own spontaneous speaking skills, it is instructive to note that the teacher can work out a mental image of what he or she is going to say in a lesson and make sure of uncertain words and phrases and/or grammatical points. The teacher may

even write their speech draft and do some rehearsing before the lesson. This also applies to “topic talk” and “oral introduction.” A session for an “oral interaction” contains question and answer exchanges between the teacher and students, and therefore it is less controllable than “oral introduction.” However, in an “oral interaction” as well, the teacher can predict what might be going on in those question and answer exchanges. In my view, novice teachers should not hold an all-or-nothing notion of their performance between an excellent spontaneous talk and his or her inability for that.

Wright (2008) gives teachers one way of positive thinking when he says, “One of the best ways of improving your English is to learn stories in order to internalize a ten-minute flow of English. .... if your English is not fluent and accurate, that is an excellent reason for telling stories to children!” (p. 15). It is also necessary for pre-service student teacher on the elementary school teacher certificate program to become competent in communicating a story to children in English. In-service teachers who are positive about using stories and storytelling may find a story told by a native speaker and recorded on a CD or presented on the Internet. They can use it as a model. Those teachers who were involved in reciting a story or making a speech in their school days can base their practice in storytelling on that past learning experience.

### **(3) Learning to interact with students in English**

The classroom is the place not only for learning but also for real communication between the teacher and his/her students and also among students. As I mentioned in a previous section, the homeroom teacher I met in her lesson wanted to say “Did you have lunch?” or “Have you eaten lunch?” to her students, but she could not use these simple expressions. How can she learn to have more verbal exchanges with students spontaneously in English?

Moon (2000) shows a reflective approach to teacher development in terms of acquiring English for elementary school teachers. Moon is oriented towards the development of the teacher’s own ways of interacting and communicating with pupils, while reflecting on his/her own classroom teaching practice. Moon (2000) gives us, the readers of her book with a CD, opportunities to look at various verbal interactions between a teacher and pupils, which in turn encourages us to reflect on how we usually interact with our students verbally. One useful way of looking back on one’s own linguistic behaviors is to identify his or her favorite classroom actions and interactions. For example, I, as a classroom teacher, know that I am fond of asking first-year college students how their new student lives are going. For this purpose I now can use a range of expressions such as “How’s everything going?,” “How many courses are you taking?,” and “What worries you most these days?”. I might increase my inventory by monitoring a native-speaking teacher’s interactions with his/her student/s. Another useful way of reflection is video viewing of one’s own lessons, through which we might also notice other behavioral features of our own, such as posture and usual movements in the classroom.

Along with reflections on one’s own behavioral tendencies and preferences, teachers need to draw on some information sources regarding the teacher’s verbal actions and interactions with students. Monitoring of other teachers’ behaviors could make one information source. Another useful way of

finding sample verbal exchanges in the classroom is to read the kind of recently published teacher resource books that I have examined in my study (Fukushima 2015). Although there has been a proliferation of teacher resource books in Japan, I rarely find a collection of such books at elementary schools. This is one of the issues for which municipalities' financial support is needed.

#### **(4) A spiraled way of proficiency development between knowing about English and learning to use it**

Knowing about the target language is an important element of foreign language learning. Naiman et al. (1978, 1996), in the part of its adult interview study, identifies “realization of language as a system” as one of the five learning strategies employed by good language learners. The other strategies are “active task approach,” “realization of language as a means of communication and interaction,” “management of affective demands,” and “monitoring of L2 performance.” The followings are the techniques exemplified in the category of “realization of language as a system.” Good language learners:

- (a) refer back to their native language(s) judiciously (translate into L1) and make effective cross-lingual comparison at different stages of language learning.
- (b) analyze the target language and make inferences about it; they guess by using clues.
- (c) develop learning techniques which make use of the fact that language is a system.

(Naiman et al. 1996: 31-32)

As mentioned in a previous section, linguistic knowledge about English will be cultivated through a content course in *Foreign Language* (or might be entitled *the English Language*) to be newly set up in the elementary school teacher certificate program in 2019. The basic linguistic knowledge included in the core curriculum for the content course covers “sound, vocabulary, sentence structure, grammar, orthography, etc.” Those who will teach this course need to select the linguistic features of English that they would like to cover. For learning sound features of English, for example, Sakai, Takizawa and Watari's book on minimum essentials for teaching English at elementary school (2017) deals with phonemes (vowels, consonants and consonant clusters), prosody (stress accent, rhythm, and intonation), sound change (deletion, assimilation, linking), the relationship between sound and spelling, etc. The book is written in accordance with the core curriculum for the course in the English Language, and therefore can be used as a reference book or textbook for the course.

It is necessary to note here that knowing about a foreign language and using it are different matters. The kind of written tests which examine the student's grammatical knowledge, for example, such as “fill-in-the-blanks” tests and some other types would not necessarily lead to the development of his/her oral fluency. The act of knowing about English as a foreign language should be intertwined with the learner's own process of learning to use English. This may require the learner to voluntarily check to see if his/her knowledge about English (e.g., grammatical characteristics and prosodic features) is well

reflected in his/her performance in English. Some learners are good at monitoring both their own and other people's verbal performance in the target language to improve their own proficiency.

### **(5) Connecting to people from other countries**

The context of foreign language learning would not give learners of a foreign language enough language input and ample opportunities to actually interact with people in that language. This has made a lot of schools and teachers develop special occasions and educational programs by which students can connect to people from other countries, such as having students participate in an international festival held in a local area, inviting international students to be guests or tutors in foreign language classes, and developing various kinds of study-abroad programs (e.g., intensive language study, cross-cultural study abroad, and overseas internship programs).

Direct associations and relationships with people from other countries, whether experienced inside or outside Japan, may well bring to students not only eye-opening experiences but also motivational cues for their further study of a foreign language. The followings are the reflective comments written by one of the students on a short-term cross-cultural study program conducted at my university's partner university in Canada this year.

「ホストファミリーが私に一生懸命話しかけてくれているのに理解できないことが多数あった。私は、その時間が嫌で会話することが憂鬱だと思ふときがあった。しかし、これでは自分は成長できないし、貴重な時間を無駄にしたくないと思ふ、その気持ちを押し込めて、英文が違っていてもいいから話そうと決め、自分から積極的に質問したり、会話するように心がけた。それ以来、何度かそのような気持ちになることもあったが、英語で会話することが楽しくなり、より英語のスキルを高めて、流ちょうに自分の気持ちを伝えられるようになりたいと感じるようになった。」

(I often could not understand what my host family members were talking about although they were making efforts to talk to me. I didn't like it and felt depressed about talking with them. However, I thought I should not waste my precious time and decided to shut up my negative feelings in mind and actively ask questions and converse with them, without minding my mistakes. Then, I have come to enjoy conversing in English and hope to communicate my feelings and ideas more fluently.)

「小学校で日本の文化紹介では、ホストマザーに発音の練習をしてもらい、子どもたちの前で発表する時のポイントを教えてもらった。発音は、正しくなるまで何回も優しく教えてくれた。唇や舌の使い方が難しく時間がかかったが、正しい発音ができると褒めてくれた。ホストマザーは、学校の先生だったため、非常に良いアドバイスになった。顎を使って大きな口を開け、ゆっくり話し、全体を見ながら発表することを学んだ。」

(In order to talk about Japan at an elementary school, I had pronunciation practice with my host mother and she taught me the points to bear in mind to make a presentation in front of children. She gently taught me until I got correct pronunciation. It was difficult and took time for me to learn to use the lips and the tongue, but she praised me when I was able to pronounce correctly. My host mother

is a school teacher and I think she gave me very good advice. I have learned to open the mouth widely, using the jaw, speak slowly, and make a presentation, looking at all the people present.)

Many in-service elementary school teachers may find that they are not given opportunities to connect to people from other countries, except for ALTs to work with, unless their schools have a sister school outside Japan or they are related to certain international events or projects in their regional area. It is in this context that voluntarily finding chances to talk with people from other countries who may or may not be engaged in teaching jobs would be of vital importance. Good news is that there have been associations through which one can communicate in English, or practice communicating in English, by exchanging emails with someone in a foreign country or a group of people living in various countries in the world.

### **Concluding remarks**

There has arisen the real need for the development of Japanese elementary school teachers' English proficiency, along with the launching of the new school subject of *Foreign Language*. However, for many teachers it may not be an easy task to gain oral fluency in English. They should be encouraged to keep taking small steps toward fruitful development and mastery of English and to enjoy their learning process. In this study I have presented some of the ways of learning that elementary school teachers might be able to use, focusing on their individual efforts to improve their English. There have been a lot more materials and data than before which both prospective and current elementary school teachers can use to develop their English proficiency. It is in this context that questions arise as to if teachers are greatly motivated to develop their own English proficiency not only to be a better teacher of elementary school students but also to be a better communicator in English, and whether they know how to make use of available materials, linguistic data, human resources and their own reflections for the development of their proficiency in English. If not so, what learning environments should or can be built for them?

### **Notes**

- (1) Information and discussion in this section is based mostly on this writer's previous work, Fukushima (2006).

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## (2) Publications in Japanese:

\*The asterisks indicate that the title was translated into English by this writer.

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