

Verbal Interaction in the Primary EFL Classroom:

A Review of Some Recent Studies

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Abstract

The present study examines a small number of recent studies on verbal interaction in the primary English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom in order to identify some of the major issues that have been explored and points of relevance to the Japanese context of primary school English. The issues include: 1) pre-service teacher education and in-service teacher development in terms of interactional skills; 2) teachers' verbal interaction with pupils in the classroom; 3) peer interaction among pupils; and 4) the use of the mother tongue (L1) for classroom communication, either by the teacher or by the pupils. It is necessary for further research to obtain interactional data from primary classrooms in Japan and transcribe them so as to discuss these issues with regard to the Japanese context.

Key words: verbal interaction, primary foreign language classroom, EFL, teacher education and development, primary EFL in Japan

Social background

Foreign language as a school subject has been introduced to 5th and 6th grade students in elementary schools in Japan, and a motivational and attitudinal program that was practiced for 5th and 6th graders with the name of *Foreign Language Activities*, or *English Language Activities*, has been extended to 3rd and 4th grade students. In this nationwide innovative phase of elementary school education, Japan's education ministry (MEXT henceforth) has newly set up two required courses in the primary school teacher certificate program: *Foreign Language* (or English Language) and *Foreign Language Teaching Methods* (or English Language Teaching Methods).

As mentioned in my previous study (Fukushima 2018), the MEXT core syllabi for these two new courses for pre-service teacher education suggest what is expected to be cultivated in each course. *Foreign Language* is designed to cover 2 categories: [in my translation] 1) the English proficiency needed for classroom teaching; and 2) background knowledge about English. In the former domain

there are four specific aims regarding listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. The latter domain of knowledge-based learning is concerned with four areas: English linguistics, second language acquisition, children's literature (e.g., picture books, children's songs and poetry, etc.), and cross-cultural understanding.

The methods course is supposed to cover 4 categories: [in my translation] 1) basic learning about elementary school foreign language education; 2) knowing about children's second language acquisition and making use of the knowledge; 3) cultivating teaching techniques; and 4) classroom teaching (inclusive of teaching materials, lesson planning, team teaching with an assistant language teacher, ICT, and assessment). There are two specific aims directly related to teachers' interactional skills in English under the third category of teaching techniques: [in my translation] a) development of the skill to talk to children effectively so as to bring out their utterances; and b) development of the skill to draw out children's utterances and carrying forward conversational exchanges with them. In my view, these classroom interactional skills go beyond merely learning to use instructional language (which often takes the form of a command) in order to organize and conduct planned activities.

Classroom interaction is a daily matter for school teachers. In this sense, in-service teachers with a lot of daily experiences in talking with their students in the classroom may well find it rather easy to conduct foreign language lessons. What they usually do in the classroom includes: giving instructions (e.g., to organize classroom activities), encouraging and praising, giving feedback, disciplining, and more. A big issue is that they are expected to do these things in the foreign language. Furthermore, there may be some interactional activities peculiar to foreign language education, such as introducing new vocabulary items and conversational patterns, responding to students' L1 answers in the target language, and encouraging students to be willing to talk, or to say what they want to say, in the language they are learning. Accordingly, how might those Japanese elementary school teachers who are engaged in the new field of teaching English develop these skills to interact with pupils in their English lessons effectively?

There have been fewer studies on classroom interaction conducted with primary school students than with secondary school and university students (Oliver and Philip 2014, Loewen and Sato 2018). The present study will provide an overview of a number of recent studies on verbal interaction in the primary EFL classroom so as to identify some of the issues that have been explored therein.

1. Pre-service teacher education and in-service teacher development

It is likely that pre-service teachers in a teacher's certificate program tend to start with learning instructional language to organize and conduct classroom activities, along with how to work out lessons either in their pre-practicum sessions or during their teaching practicum. In order to look into

the development of verbal “instruction-giving” (i.e., instructing students to understand what they are supposed to do to carry out a planned activity) Glaser (2020) analyses two recorded lessons for 3rd graders that were delivered by two German student teachers, dealing with several aspects of oral instruction-giving. Comparing a successful instruction-giving by one of the student teachers with an unsuccessful management by the other, Glaser highlights both favorable and unfavorable factors for effective instruction-giving.

Favorable factors shown in the transcript of the lesson by the successful student teacher include “securing student attention for instance by clear phase demarcation....and assuming a central position in the classroom,” and “sequencing and break-down into manageable steps” including giving directions only for the immediately subsequent activity (p. 79). It is worth noting here that in her lesson plan, the successful student teacher made detailed preparation of her particular wording for instruction-giving and of accompanying gestures. This can be deemed to have led to the kind of clarity, brevity, easiness, and fluency of the student teacher’s verbal behaviors which are shown in a transcript of the activity called “animal riddles” (where the teacher gives some hints on a particular animal, one by one, and the students guess what animal it is) (pp. 74-75).

On the contrary, the other student teacher’s instruction-giving was more imprecise, and therefore vague, and occasionally confusing or contradictory. It showed the student teacher’s weak points about using artefacts and reacting to student non-understanding. In addition, Glaser notes that neither recourse to L1 nor request to repeat the teacher’s instructions worked well with pupils. Glaser’s concluding remarks are encouraging to those university teachers who are involved in pre-service teacher education: “the ability to give effective instructions is not something teachers have to ‘wait for’ until they have gathered a certain experience on the job, but something that can be learned – and thus trained – during university teacher education.” (p. 79)

Moon’s approach to classroom interaction in her prominent study entitled *Children Learning English* (2000) is more for in-service teachers. It is oriented towards the teacher developing his or her own ways of communicating with pupils, while becoming more aware of his or her own verbal and non-verbal behavior through reflecting on how he or she usually interacts with pupils in the classroom. Moon emphasizes the importance of creating a supportive classroom environment where “pupils are willing to take risks and make mistakes” to experiment with the language they are learning (p. 71). For this purpose, Moon presents five interactional strategies: showing interest in pupils’ responses; using language at a level they can understand; helping them to express what they want to say without initially worrying about their mistakes; choosing familiar and meaningful contexts; and working in partnership with pupils to achieve common goals (p. 74).

These strategies suggest that the teacher’s purely linguistic competence in the foreign language should not be the only factor for his or her classroom interaction, but the teacher’s attitudes are also of vital importance. Moon says: “If your style is open, friendly and sympathetic to pupils, they will feel more confident and freer to make mistakes, which is important for their learning and language learning” (p. 68). Furthermore, Moon advises the teacher to be explicit about his or her intentions or

thoughts to the pupils. For example, if the teacher feels pupils want him or her to teach in L1, Moon advises him or her to “talk to them about the reason for using English” and to “get agreement to try using English for some activities” (p. 73).

2. Teachers' verbal interaction with pupils in primary EFL lessons

Limberg (2020) is concerned with German teachers of English in primary schools in Northern Germany. With the use of “The Primary English Classroom Corpus,” he summarizes that classroom verbal interaction is led largely by teachers and that the teachers are engaged in such acts as modeling, asking display questions and selecting pupils to respond to the questions, having pupils make choral repetitions, and recasting and fine-tuning (i.e., expanding or slightly changing/correcting) what a pupil says. Limberg reports that he did not find more elaborate interactional acts of teachers, such as encouraging pupils to extend their turns, facilitating free talking, and describing a pupil's message in a more detailed manner. Limberg presents a list of possible reasons for this lack of more elaborate interactions. First, if space is created for extended turns, it can be conducive to foreign language learning, but teachers do not know that. Second, they may not trust what pupils can actually do. Third, teachers do not have language and interactional skills in the target language, which prevents them from offering “spontaneous and meaningful responses to pupils' contributions” (p. 52). Finally, it is highly likely that pupils' responses consist of single-word utterances, and this keeps teachers away from extending or elaborating what they have said.

The lack of more elaborate interactions may also be the case with many Japanese teachers of English in primary schools in Japan in light of a similarity in the time allocation to primary school English. Limberg (2020) says, “Optimistically speaking, learners who are introduced to English in Grade 3 and have two lessons per week can have up to 160 lesson hours of English (à 45 minutes) during primary school” (p. 39). Primary school students in Japan are supposed to receive 210 lesson hours of English over the period of 4 years from 3rd to 6th grade. Despite this similarity, however, it is necessary to examine if there are any cultural or social differences in what German teachers do and what Japanese teachers do in the English classroom in terms of verbal interaction with pupils.

Limberg examines the corpus data from the viewpoint of what he calls CIC (Classroom Interactional Competence). Limberg's first point is whether teachers promote “rich exposure to the target language” (p. 39). He highlights this favorable feature by showing and explaining in detail a transcribed sequence from his data where a teacher makes an action- and object-oriented introduction of some winter clothing such as a coat, a woolen hat and gloves.

His second point is whether teachers facilitate learner-centered “interactional space” (which includes giving individual pupils time to think and rehearse to form a response). Limberg points out that “space for learning in primary school classroom discourse can be filled with opportunities for whole-class participation,” for example, whole-class active involvement in Total Physical Response, songs and rhymes, and dances and action stories (p. 44). Limberg mentions other examples also, such

as choral repetitions and a small-talk activity where every pupil asks his or her neighbor an informal question in turn.

The third aspect of teacher competence is “facilitating and shaping learner contributions” (p. 46). Limberg refers to some of a large number of techniques to elicit utterances from pupils. Among them are: showing a picture of an object or a place with which the teacher can elicit an act of naming (that may be followed by the teacher’s and then the whole class’ repetition); reshaping what a student has said in a single word or another incomplete form to extend or improve it; and scaffolding for language performance such as offering some choices for a response to a question.

The last aspect of interactional competence is whether the teacher can be aware of the possibility of having a situation where a student wants to express a thought spontaneously and the teacher knows how to deal with the situation in the target language, without drawing on L1. Limberg says, “Simple, but unplanned questions and comments can be easily dealt with in the target language if pupils get a chance to try out their English” (p. 49).

3. Peer interaction among pupils in primary EFL lessons

Lázaro Ibarrola and Hidalgo (2017) conducted a research study with forty Spanish 11-year-old learners of English as a foreign language being taught at the same school with a CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) methodology. It should be noted here that this student body is different from German pupils in Limberg (2020) and Japanese pupils in Japan in the amount of time allocated to English and the extent to which pupils are exposed to English. The Spanish pupils had much more exposure to English not only in EFL lessons but also in all school subjects. In light of this difference the question arises as to whether and to what extent it would be feasible to conduct similar research to Lázaro Ibarrola and Hidalgo’s with German or Japanese pupils who are learning English in their home countries.

Through an analysis of recorded peer interactions in pairs in a picture placement game (where each pair is expected to work out the same posters with the same pictures placed in the same places, without seeing each other’s poster), Lázaro Ibarrola and Hidalgo (2017) confirm the EFL pupils’ less frequent use of communication strategies than adults and ESL (English as a second language) learners and their moderate use of L1. They point out that the Spanish pupils used strategies for peer assistance widely to complete the assigned task, such as “utterance completions, acknowledgements and mere repetitions” (p. 98). In summary, Lázaro Ibarrola and Hidalgo present the basic functions of all strategies they identified: 1) preventing communication breakdowns (with comprehension checks or mere self-repetitions); 2) confirming successful communication (by acknowledgements or utterance completions); 3) repairing communication breakdowns (through clarification requests or confirmation checks); and 4) focus on form (with explicit corrections or corrective recasts) (p. 98).

4. L1 use in primary foreign language lessons

One of the teacher's key roles in a foreign language classroom is being an important source for language input in the classroom. For this purpose of input provision, the teacher should avoid using L1. As discussed by Moon (2000), there are some factors for the teacher to consider regarding the use of L1. In the context where the teacher and pupils share a language as their common L1, one factor is whether the teacher is confident in his or her own proficiency in the target language. Another factor is the teacher's perception of pupil's motivation. Still another is the teacher's consideration of pupil's comprehension. Where the teacher does not share an L1 with his or her pupils, there may be no other option than using the target language unless he or she can use the pupils' L1. If the teacher can use it, certain considerations and thoughts may lead to using it in the classroom. However, it is always important for the teacher to ask how much target language the pupils are exposed to in the classroom. This inquiry is essential, especially in the foreign language learning context where classroom input provision is of vital importance because of a lack of target language use in the wider social milieu.

With regard to the teacher's use of the pupils' L1, some studies point out its efficacy (e.g., Limberg 2020). On the other hand, the unsuccessful use of L1 by a student teacher, attested in Glaser's study (2020), suggests that it depends on the context (e.g., the teacher, the situation) whether the teacher's L1 use can be effective for pupils.

L1 use by pupils is another issue. Showing two contrastable transcribed teacher-student interactions, Moon (2000) draws attention to the importance of accepting pupils' L1 use, regarding it as their willingness to communicate with the teacher. It is also important to give pupils chances to try to use the target language, as they "need to have opportunities to experiment and be creative in order to develop their internal language system" (p. 68). Lázaro Ibarrola and Hidalgo (2017) presents an interesting finding about structural transfer from L1 which might lead to a detrimental communicative effect by bringing into English forms that are ungrammatical to it. They ask for further research.

Summary

All of the studies reviewed in this report are highly valued in that there are few research studies on verbal interactions in primary foreign language classrooms. All of them are based on the tenet that classroom interaction comprises "an optimal context for the development of foreign language proficiency" (Lázaro Ibarrola and Hidalgo 2017), and discussions in those studies are based on time consuming recordings and transcriptions of interactional events in particular foreign language lessons.

Important issues can be identified from the viewpoint of primary English teaching in Japan. Glaser's study on two student teachers (2020) reasserts the importance of preparing for one's own verbal behaviors in detail starting at the stage of writing a lesson plan. Moon's work (2000) is instructive by

drawing our attention not only to how teachers might develop their own interactional skills linguistically but also what attitudes towards pupils they should have. Moon orchestrates a relaxed and supportive classroom environment for pupils so that they can internalize the target language through experimenting with it freely. Moreover, she encourages teachers to be open with pupils and tell them, for example, why they think it is necessary for them to use the target language in the classroom.

The findings of Limberg's study (2020) can be used for an examination of classroom interaction in primary EFL classrooms in Japan. Less elaborate interactions found in his study may well be the case with Japanese teachers of English in light of similar time allocation to English. Furthermore, Limberg's discussions on the four features of teachers' classroom interaction (which are presented along with transcribed interactional events) and particular techniques for each feature can be useful for Japanese teachers of English at primary schools.

Lázaro Ibarrola and Hidalgo (2017) focus on peer interaction, which has been promoted in communicative approaches by using such social forms as pair and group work. Their findings suggest that pupils were collaborative enough to accomplish a shared aim. They conducted their study with pupils who had been taught by a CLIL methodology with much more exposure to English. This raises the question of whether these types of communication strategies can be replicated in Japanese primary schools.

L1 use in a primary foreign language classroom is a delicate matter. The teacher needs to be aware of the importance of his or her own role of offering ample language input. Pupils' L1 use needs to be accepted positively as something that shows their willingness to communicate with their teacher and fellow class members. It is necessary, however, to invite them gradually to use more and more of the target language. Also, Lázaro Ibarrola and Hidalgo (2017) suggest the need to explore the problem of L1 structural transfer.

All in all, this writer hopes that interactional events in primary classrooms in Japan will be recorded and examined on a large scale so as to investigate whether and how Japanese primary school teachers' classroom behaviors are linked to characteristics of their instruction such as the use of an authorized textbook and ritualized methodological patterns, ways in which they might be able to develop their interactional skills in English, and what best they could do for the development of their pupils' proficiency in English.

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