

Establishing Constructivist Principles for a Preschool English Curriculum in a Japanese University

— A foundation study on activities in a newly formed early childhood English program —

日本の大学における就学前の英語カリキュラムのための構成主義的原理の設立

— 新しくできた幼少期初期の英語教育プログラムのアクティビティにおける基礎的学習について —

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要旨：2015年，IPUの子ども発達学科が一年目の学生が学科の授業構成枠内から選択できる「子どもへの英語レッスン」を始めた。参加学生が最初の頃に志している流れは，自分たちが卒業した後，インターナショナルスクール，就学前教育機関，又は語学の専門の大学の英語教師になるというものだ。この研究の目的は，クラス内の実践的なアクティビティやグループ内での環境が言語発達の構成を理論どおり支援できるかについての，基礎的な調査プロジェクトを始動させることである。幼少期初期の英語学習の基準は，教育というものの枠内だけの解釈に留まっているように思えてならない。故に，この研究は将来のシラバスの評価基準やそれを判断するための柱石になり得るものだとはいえる。

1.0 Introduction

“The best way to learn is through teaching”, this phrase has been commonly expressed in education circles since the ancient Roman times when the Philosopher Seneca said “while we teach, we learn”. In the modern era the same sentiment remains with the importance of learning by doing (practically). With the onset of the inaugural English course through the Department of Child Development at International Pacific University (IPU), syllabi content has been adopted to create a cutting edge program to inspire young learners to become leaders by facilitating appropriate activities. This research will endeavour to conceptualize the choices of activities selected to design the syllabi for preschool content based classes. Ideally, instructional techniques would not be passive in nature or less effective in accordance

with modern styles of teaching for practical use. Since the early 1990s, higher education has focused on “Active Learning” as the basic foundation to learning to ensure engagement occurs. Activities allow the students to work in pairs or groups to develop knowledge, improve their skills or to assess each other’s attitudes for peer encouragement (Bonwell & Eison, 1991).

Looking closer at a less popular archaic principle known as the Direct or Grammar Translation Method, academics in Latin and Greek used for intellectual pursuits of reading and writing in the 1500s and 1600s without any intention to use the material as a means of communicating through listening or speaking. However, this classical method has been modified adjacent with the change in times in language usages. According to Blankmeyer and Williams, (1977) indicate the Grammar Translation

Method can provide effective results when adapted correctly. The Berlitz system of language instruction focussed on translating target language as the key concept in its curriculum and can be suitable for teaching groups for specific purposes. Nonetheless, to be able to adapt to the needs of pre-schoolers and toddlers, the child centred approach the Maria Montessori adopts is one that is popular within preschool education programs internationally. Gutek (2004) indicates the Montessori Method cannot be ignored due to its globalized technique that is systematically embraced around the worldwide. Therefore, preschool training programs would benefit from mirroring current global practices.

1.1 Background / Overview

The participants and or pre-service English teachers (PSET's) intend to become English as a second language (ESL) practitioner after they graduate from IPU. Optimistically, they are looking for roles in international schools, language institutions or in preschools. Those PSET's are native Japanese students from various parts of Japan. Their ages are either eighteen or turning eighteen years of age at the commencement of the course. Within this group, no mature age students had enrolled thus far. All of these inexperienced at teaching ESL members have naturally, studied English throughout their kindergarten, primary, junior and senior high school days. As these students have had considerable English language exposure, they will draw on this experience to lead games and activities to extend their language competence. Constructivist Learning Environments (CLEs) outline that students can develop higher levels of ability through reflecting on knowledge previously acquired. The IPU students have considerable knowledge of English language though their personal education in K-12, yet they would require more training to overly display leadership skills in front of group. This prior knowledge of vocabulary and grammars are referred to as schema. The role of the teacher is to breakdown this previously learnt schema within a lively learning environment to enhance opportunities to build ESL

communication capabilities (Jonassen, 1999).

In the first semester of 2015, 16 PSET's attended a non-credited class once a week for 15 weeks. By the conclusion of the final week, only 8 students remained in this class. Within IPU, the writer has experienced high absenteeism in English extension classes in the International Department program, particularly if the students are not on scholarships or have nothing to lose by not participating in weekly sessions. As the attendance record suggest, almost 50% of students only remained in the course at the end of the 15 weeks. Exploration into motivation, Dornyei (2001) suggests there are many factors affects motivation. He attests factors include, students speaking in a foreign language with friends may be a contention, as well as pressure of learning difficult content in an environment not suitable needs to be factored. Also, the materials could cause some lack of interest. In this case, further inquiry would need to be made to assess exactly the reason attendance dropped off at the end of first semesters extension class.

2.0 Curriculum and Syllabus Thumbnail:

In the second semester of 2015, PSET's met 3 times a week. Additionally, students are given the option to enrol into Foreign Exchange class. In total, they could have four classes with the writer as well as core English classes all first years are required to take, making it five or six, ninety minute classes a week. The Foundations, Application and Practical classes are all mandatory; all students are required to elect the 3 classes to be part of the course. So, this suggests the students are motivated to learn English and want to present in all classes.

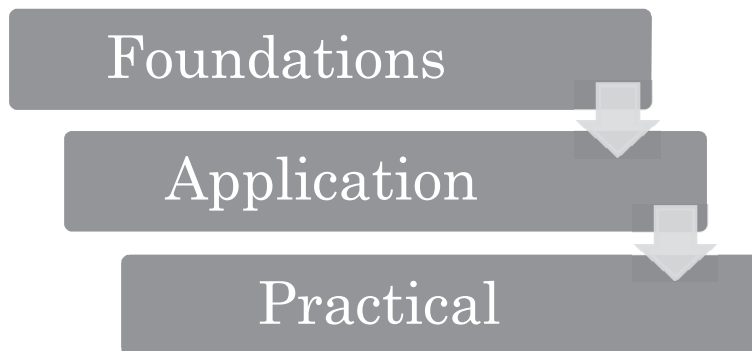
In the Foundations subject of Kids English is the first step in launching their teaching career. PSET's develop their comprehensive English skills, in particular speaking and listening skills. Moreover, they will review the connections between language framework they have already studied. The main source of material was the Firsthand Success textbook, produced by Pearson Longman which is also compulsory in English 1 class. In the listening section, students were given a listening test from the

extra listening resource at the back of the textbook. As can be seen in figure 1.0, 18 students scored between 60 to 68 points. This is the maximum that can be achieved. This high score suggests the test

didn't evaluate the student's true listening ability adequately, yet did not force excessive pressure on anybody either.

Leaving aside the tests have not accurately assess

● Kids English Graphic Organizing Chart:



20 Student's Listening Scores

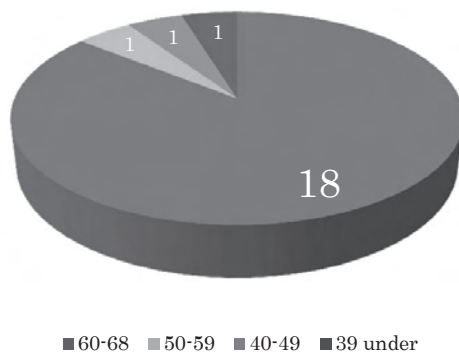


Figure 1.0

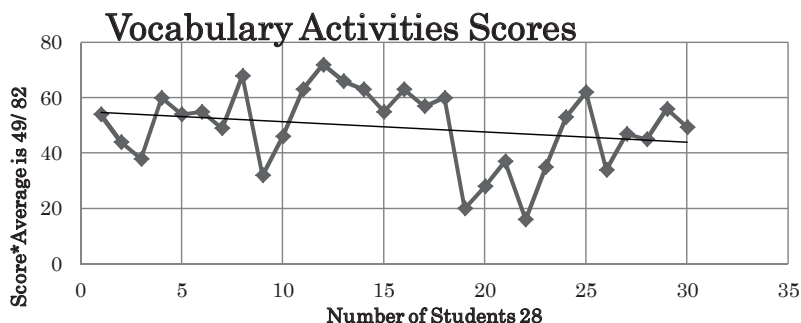


Figure 1.1

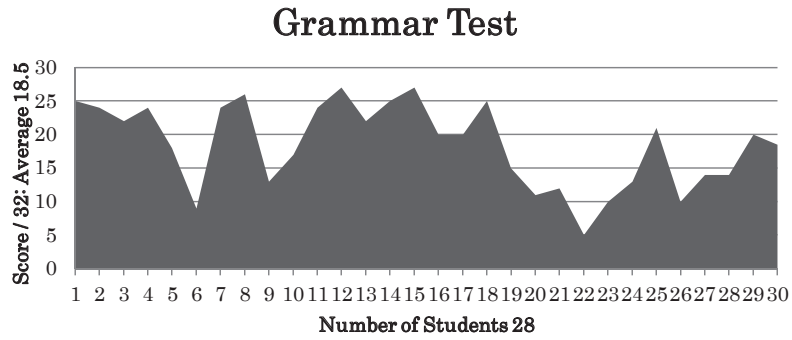


Figure 1.2

individual true listening ability, it does point out the students have a basic foundations of English ability to build on as a group with similar levels of foundational English communication know-how. In accordance with the aforementioned factors in motivation Dornyei (2001) points out if the content of the course is too difficult then students would be inclined to lose interest. The key area to grasp here is that the students can master the language they have already learnt and this graph in figure 1.0 proves this was achieved. In figure 1.1 and 1.2, students' vocabulary and grammar is again consistent, when taking out the top 3 students with the lowest 3 students.

3.0 Application of Pre-School English

As seen in the vocabulary test from early on in the 2nd semester, 2015, scores in Figure 1.1, the first group of test elicited information on language suitable

for young children, yet are academically challenging, so as the PSETs have an opportunity to master the language. The test was broken down into separate parts starting with the following dictation. A typical level of dictation would include vocabulary from everyday language such as seen in Figure 1.5 on the following page.

Dictation provides details on input / output skills. Listening comprehension is supported by writing output. The teacher can gage the student's arithmetic skills, yet this first year group has the task of learning information which can be applied into a specialist area and therefore requires specific language. Figure 1.4 shows questions on animals as well as their offspring and sounds which are made. Only the first questions 'kangaroo' and 'bees' have been answered.

PowerPoint or picture card activities can assist in

Dictation

How's the weather? It's Sunny today.
 What's your sister's name? Her name's Jill.

Figure 1.3

Animals

Kangaroo	• -A baby is a Joey	Bees	• Buzz
Lion	• -A baby is a C_ b	Lions	• R _ ar
Horse	• -A baby is a Foa _	Horses	• Neig _
Cat	• -A baby is a K_____	Cows	• M _ _

Figure 1.4

Choose the correct word

Did you _____ a good time on vacation?			
a. had	<input type="checkbox"/> b. have	c. haven't	d. has
Hey, I have to make a phone _____			
a. bill	b. calling	<input type="checkbox"/> c. call	d. called

Figure 1.5

- Part 1. Individual presentation
 - i. Read aloud (Presentation style)
 - ii. Ad-lib topics (30 seconds)
 - iii. Describe the picture like a sports commentator (30 seconds)
- Part 2. With a partner (no time limit was given)
 - i. Answer a telephone survey
 - ii. Propose a solution
 - iii. Express an opinion

Figure 1.6 Speaking Test Overview

group learning of categorizing animals. In Figure 1.5, there were 32 questions with two of them provided in this example of “Choose the correct word”, above. Both Figure 1.5 and 1.6 are typical examples of questions which identified the student’s foundation skills. Whereas in Figure 1.7, students were required to participate applying their ESL communication skills in speaking tasks.

Within the Application section that tested speaking, student’s spoke in front of a video. The two part presentation consisted of three sections. The categories were loosely drawn from the TOEIC speaking test. Students were given the recording after to analyze their speaking patterns for themselves as to make personal judgments on their pronunciation or other aspects of language discourse. Once members have applied their verbal skills, they are then ready to perform in leadership roles.

4.0 Practical

After the Foundation and Application classes comes the meaningful rite-of-passage for this group of PSETs, the practical section. Within this CLE, PSETs are required to use as many different methods to teach language previously learnt. With support from IPU teachers, PSETs can potentially reach

higher levels than trying to learn alone. According to Vygotsky’s “Zone of Proximal Development” maintains the learner can achieve more with support from a supportive teacher ability to do “scaffolding”. This is achieved through providing a guide in modeling text, supplying hints and setting up informative activities (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009).

From the management and advice of the teacher the students achieve deeper understanding. An example is shown in figure 1.8. The “Hello Song”, has been made to be used in twenty or more different ways from the teacher in charge of the class. The students are required to create more variations of leading this activity. Without the prior examples, students would most likely do one or two different styles of “Hello Song” only.

Once the students start adapting language to different context they start to think about expressing themselves supported by body language. Asher (1966) introduced the concept of “Total Physical Response” (TPR), a method of language training by expressed body language. At an early stage of learning practice, TPR can provide PSETs with a foundation to consider building activities as seen in the “Hello Song” list above. Using actions to make activities fun and would appear to be clearly advantageous. On the next page in Figure 1.8, after

1. Standard
2. Standing
3. Sitting on chairs
4. Sitting on the ground
5. Kneeling down
6. Laying down
7. Upside down
8. Sitting back to back
9. Small groups
10. One by one
11. In a group circle
12. With puppets
13. Using different Emotions
14. Slow / Fast
15. Different starts
16. Missing word YOU
17. Lip Sync
18. Handshake
19. Adapt into Japanese
20. Now it's your turn to make it up!

Figure 1.7 “The Hello Song in 20+Ways”

	Song title	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8	Total scores
1	Hello Song	1	5	3	1	3	3	8	4	28
2	See you again	2	4	2	2	2	8	4	3	27
3	I love you Barney	7	2	5	4	1	9	3	0	31
4	My name's Song	5	1	4	5	5	5	5	2	32
5	Hokey Pokey	10	10	9	9	10	1	10	9	68
6	This little piggy	8	8	10	8	6	6	0	8	54
7	1234567	0	6	0	0	4	2	1	6	19
8	Head Shoulders	6	7	7	7	8	0	6	1	42
9	Finger Family	3	9	1	6	7	4	7	7	44
10	Ency Wincy Spider	4	0	8	3	0	7	2	5	29
11	Eny Meany Miny Mo	9	3	6	10	9	10	9	10	66

Figure 1.8

the first semester students were given a survey to assess which songs they enjoyed the most. It indicates the “Hello Song” only scores 28 points, compared to the Hokey Pokey that scores 68.

As well as using music and movement in practical training, students also read and adapted books. The Eric Carle publication “The Very Hungry Caterpillar” was the main text used. Below this paragraph you can see 3 pages from the book starting with “On Monday”, the storyline is easy to read and comprehend. An example is as follows:

Using the storyline above as a students are able to make their own stories. An example has been written and a picture book created by one first year student as seen in Figure 1.11 storyline “The Very Hungry

Pluto”, and from Figure 1.12 picture book “The Very Hungry Cub”.

Throughout the practical stage of the curriculum, producing a Productive Pedagogy (PP) would provide leverage to producing confident teachers. Therefore, to have a PP, students are required to go out into the field and practice this material with preschool children. Students need to feel like they are self-reliant to use the teaching practice in the same way that they performed in class with fellow students. They should also know the difference between good learning and poor learning or proper textbook English teaching and common mistakes (Gore, Griffiths, & Ladwig, 2004).

*“On Monday he ate through one apple, but he was still hungry.
 On Tuesday, he ate through two pears, but he was still hungry.
 On Wednesday, he ate through three plums, but he was still hungry.”*

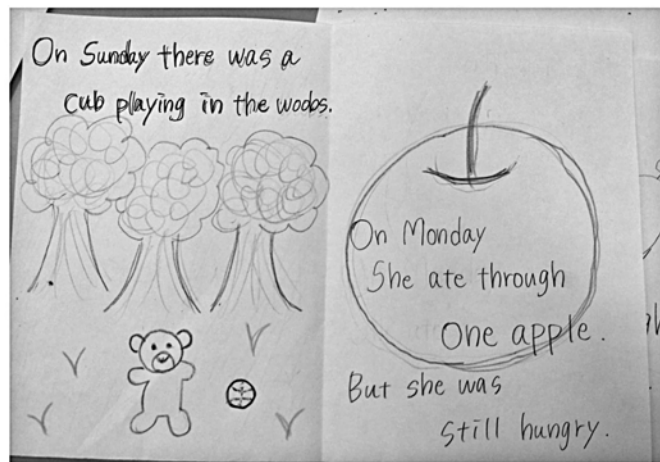
Eric Carle: *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (1989)

Figure 1.9 “The Very Hungry Caterpillar”

*On Sunday, there was a puppy called Pluto playing in the garden.
 On Monday, he ate through one ham sandwich.
 On Tuesday, he ate through two cheese burgers.
 On Wednesday, he ate through three hot dogs.
 On Thursday, he ate through four rice balls.
 On Friday, he ate through five pieces of chickens.
 On Saturday, he ate a piece of apple pie, a slice of
 carrot cake, a piece of cheese, a slice of chocolate cake
 and a bowl of grapes.
 BUT HE WAS STILL HUNGRY!
 After that, he was tired and had a big sleep.
 Then
 On Sunday, he turned into a big dog and went Woof WOOF Woof
 He protected the whole family every day.
 The end.*

Written by 1st year student in the Department of Child Development at IPU

Figure 1.10 “The Very Hungry Pluto”



Created by 1st year student in the Department of Child Development at IPU

Figure 1.11 “The Very Hungry Cub” Page 1 and 2

5.0 Results

Factoring in the plan for this study was to develop constructivist principles into developing the newly formed curriculum for early childhood English training; the results are ambiguous in terms of concrete evidence. In building on previously learnt knowledge, Vygotsky’s “Zone of Proximal Development”, implies with the teachers support,

the learner would be able to achieve more than they could if they were learning by themselves. In that respect, guided by teacher observations student engagement continues to remain. Additionally, activities produced across the board high results in comprehensive language tests. The few students that scored poorly may have had additional factors getting in the way of their true ability which effected grades. The results on the music study shows songs

like the “Hokey Pokey” were popular, which was a surprise to the writer, since many students did that song and dance for the first time. Despite the foregone tests, students still require considerable support before this program can boast a productive pedagogy or can be considered as cutting edge. Yet, the overall curriculum does show the principles of a constructivist form of methodology.

6.0 Conclusion

Considering the foundation, application and practical classes have provided students with the fundamental requirements to understand language content, it is fair to say the curriculum is moving in the right direction. Nevertheless, traditional translation methods do not need to be totally dismissed. All activities can be slightly adjusted as mentioned in the Berlitz program. Whichever, activities are assigned within the subsequent syllabi; it would be beneficial to reciprocate a productive pedagogy. Therefore, students will be expected to confidently facilitate and then adapt rhythmical and engaging English activities to accommodate the needs of their future workplaces. In addition, IPU Kids English program will need to reflect the needs of society and produce clearer evaluation methods in order to produce noteworthy standards of practice.

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