

# 早期英語教育とその利益

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## English Language Learning in Early Childhood

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**要 旨** 2002年から初等教育における「総合的学習の時間」の一環として英語が導入された。日本の継続的繁栄のためには英語力は不可欠であるものの、新たに英語という授業が小学生に負担を与えるばかりか、この教科導入に伴う他教科の授業時間の減少による学力の低下が懸念される。本稿は早期英語教育の利益を立証するために、なぜ英語は幼児期に導入されるべきか考察する。さらに、幼児がもっとも生活を共にする存在である母親がいかに幼児の英語教育に重要な役割を果たすことができるかということを提唱する。

### INTRODUCTION

Beginning in 2002 English language education is being introduced to Japanese elementary schools as part of the Sougougakushu program (Total Education Program). While educators and economists both agree that English communication skills are indispensable for the continuity of Japanese society and economy, there is concern that adding an English language program as a new subject for Japanese elementary students may create too much of a burden for these students. Adding English studies may reduce the ability of the children to have some latitude in their subjects studied. Unless there is evidence that early language learning is effective, there is no need to add to the students' burden. There is a difference of opinion, however, as to the effectiveness of introducing English language learning at this early an age.

Not only is English being taught to children in the elementary grades, some private schools and some mothers are teaching English to preschool children. Using mothers to teach their children English is not a new concept. A number of English language schools with English programs for preschool children require mothers to accompany their child to the English class and expect that the Japanese mothers will become English teachers for their children. Considering that children learn languages and behaviors by imitating family members, it is possible for Japanese mothers to work with their children to teach them English communica-

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tion. Japanese mothers do not need extensive knowledge or fluency in English because infants deal with limited phrases and words in their daily life.

This paper explores and attempts to answer the following two questions:

1. Why do children need to learn the English language at an early stage of their life?
2. Are Japanese mothers who are not fluent in English able to successfully teach their children English and teach proper pronunciation if they themselves cannot correctly pronounce English words?

In order to answer the first question it will be necessary to examine the ways young children learn how to speak their own language and how that knowledge can be used to help them learn a different language. A section on the development of sounds and sound patterns will be included. Based on the information gathered, the benefits of learning a second language at an early age will be presented. Problems unique to Japanese children using a second language will also be discussed.

In order to answer the second question, information gathered in the beginning sections will be considered. Three programs for teaching English to preschool children will be examined in order to illustrate the level of English instruction that Japanese mothers can give to preschool children and make any evaluations possible of those programs. The first of the three programs was developed by a mother for her own use. The second is the Shogakukan Home Pal Program. The third is the Junior ECC program of the ECC Language School.

## **DEVELOPMENT OF THE SOUNDS AND SOUND PATTERNS OF A LANGUAGE**

One of the major elements of language acquisition is the pronunciation of the sounds and sound patterns of the language. Young infants are capable of pronouncing and do pronounce all available sounds in their early babbling stage. They progressively lose the ability to pronounce non-native sounds. However, they learn how to pronounce their native language properly and with the proper intonations and emphases. Native in this case means the language spoken in their environment. It is not related to their racial heritage. An English child raised in a Japanese family would speak Japanese as his/her native language and would be unable to understand or speak English. A Japanese child raised in an English family would speak English as his/her native language and would be unable to understand or speak Japanese.

The development of language skills is due to natural physical development in all children regardless of their native language. The changes take place in the brain. As children age the area where language is learned begins to atrophy. In addition, it becomes physically harder to pronounce new sounds. Some sounds are not heard by the language learner because they are very close to native sounds. When the child hears one of these sounds, he/she automatically translates that sound into the closely related native sound. These problems in learning a new

language are common to all children.

However, Japanese children, in particular, have a special problem with learning the English language. English has a wider vocal band than the Japanese language. Japanese researchers believe that after children reach the age of puberty it becomes more difficult for them to recognize English sounds spoken with a higher frequency band. For this reason many believe it is crucial for Japanese infants to be exposed to the sounds of the English language at an early stage of life. The earlier they are exposed to the sounds of the English language, the more ability they will develop to recognize and reproduce these sounds. Most Japanese parents, however, are non-English speakers who cannot accurately pronounce English sounds. Therefore, it is desirable to introduce English sounds spoken by native English speakers to their children as early as possible. The use of phonics toys is one way to accomplish this. The toys make English sounds when the children play with them. In addition, showing the children English videos and movies will also give them a chance to hear the proper pronunciation. Therefore, this author advocates the use of phonics toys and videos to allow children to become accustomed to hearing English pronunciation.

The frequency band of the Japanese language ranges from 500 to 2,000 hertz. Most Japanese are capable of hearing frequencies of up to 1,500-hertz, while only some are believed to be capable of hearing frequencies of up to 2,000 hertz. When most Japanese listen to English sounds that have a higher frequency band than they are accustomed to, they have difficulty in recognizing certain sounds, such as “r” and “l” and “th”. That is because the sounds of American English range from 800 hertz to 3,800 hertz. (Murase, p. 81)

Furthermore, Sakamoto and Houshito think that based on brain development early English education should be introduced by the age of six. Particularly from birth to three years old, the cerebral cortex of the child reaches its peak in development. If one lives to age seven with the Japanese language as a native language, the ability to pronounce consonants not used in the Japanese language deteriorates. As a result, for Japanese people without early English education, it becomes extremely difficult to pronounce English sounds. If Japanese people are exposed to the English language in their infancy, they can develop pronunciation skills as well as English vocabularies. And they can acquire grammatical skills for English communication. Furthermore, they are generally able to learn other languages with ease, since learning a second language early in life seems to stimulate the language learning ability so that it lasts beyond puberty. It has been shown that children who learn a second language before about the age of twelve are capable of learning it more easily and speaking it more fluently than those who start learning it at a later stage. In addition, pronunciation and phrasing is also more readily acquired. Scientists are not in agreement with the reason for this, but most believe that the stimulation of the cerebral cortex by the early learning of a second language helps that area retain language acquisition skills. (Sakamoto & Houshito, p. 6)

## **MOTHER TONGUE INTERFERENCE**

Saeki points out that mother tongue interference makes it difficult for Japanese to hear

English sounds that are not found in the Japanese language. For Japanese who are learning English a small number of Japanese phonemes (20) get in their way. European languages have many more phonemes than the Japanese language. The English language has 45 phonemes, 25 more phonemes than the Japanese language. He also indicates that most Japanese do not have channels for them to recognize and distinguish English sounds not found in the Japanese language. As a result, they cannot recognize the differences between “b” and “v” or “r” and “l” in English. The vocal organs of most Japanese people do not know how to pronounce the sounds. The muscles do not know how to move for the sounds not found in the Japanese language. Accordingly, they pronounce those sounds with the closest sounds available in the Japanese language. (Saeki, p. 6)

## **THE BENEFITS OF REQUIRING JAPANESE CHILDREN TO LEARN ENGLISH AT AN EARLY AGE**

As mentioned above, some educators are concerned that adding an English language program as a new subject for Japanese elementary students may add too much of a burden to their studies and may reduce the ability of the children to have some latitude in their subjects.

One reason, however, for beginning the study of English language before puberty is that, as shown by the stages of language acquisition, by puberty most children begin losing their ability to easily assimilate another language so as to become fluent in that language. They lose the ability to incorporate the language as they did their mother tongue. They are more able to learn the grammar but it is more difficult for them to learn to speak the language as a native speaker. In addition, by puberty or earlier, children also lose the ability to learn how to pronounce the language properly and with the proper intonations and emphases.

A study conducted by Minomura shows the following data regarding learning English by Japanese children. This study was conducted with Japanese children of varying ages who moved to the United States in an attempt to find the age at which the children most readily learned to speak English as fluently as a native speaker.

Of 18 six-year-old Japanese children who went to the United States, 83 per cent (15 children) were able to improve their English to such a point in a year and a half that it became superior to their Japanese. They showed rapid improvement once they started preschool and kindergarten. Japanese children who went to the United States between the ages of seven and ten were able to converse in English and handle their school subjects in English within two and a half years to three years. However, the degree of improvement varied widely from individual to individual.

Regarding their retention of Japanese, those under eight years old were highly likely to become more fluent in English than in Japanese. However, children who arrived in the United States after nine years of age were able to maintain their Japanese communication skills. As a general finding, some of the children over nine were fluent in both languages, but before nine years of age one of their languages was largely forgotten. As a result, Minomura believes that the age of eight or nine is the critical point for children to learn languages. Furthermore,

although children aged 11 or over learned and spoke in English in a second language class, many of them did not speak English in regular classes. (Nakajima, p. 31)

From this study it appears that it takes about two years for most children to be able to communicate on at least a functional level in English. At the end of their third year they were, for the most part, over any difficulties they previously encountered in communicating in English. By their fourth year they seemed to have assimilated English thoroughly enough to overcome the language barrier to the point where some of them were able to earn high grades in school.

Since one of the problems Japanese adults have in learning English is their inability to correctly and easily pronounce all the English language sounds it is appropriate to initiate young children into the learning of English at the age when they are capable of imitating all sounds. Because very young children are able to imitate all sounds, English education should be introduced to children at this stage.

Togo explains the benefits for children to start learning English pronunciation at an early stage of life. Not only the English language but any second language should be taught from the infancy period to the early juvenile period, from two to ten years old. He believes that whatever infants listen to stays in their brain as memories. This process becomes most active around two years old, which is the beginning of acquiring language skills. Before this most infants only react to tones and sounds, not to words of their first language. And from two years old on they not only start identifying tones or sounds of the language but also they start understanding the meanings of words. And they begin to utter words around that time and try to communicate with others. From the ages of two to ten the human brain is capable of absorbing words naturally regardless of the language. If their mothers are native Japanese speakers, they naturally pick up Japanese words and learn the Japanese language. If a Japanese child is put out to nurse with an American mother, then he/she learns the English language. Thus, it can be seen that humans are not limited in their ability to learn only one language, but have a specific skill to learn any language they are exposed to. Their environment determines their native language or languages. It is, therefore, important for children to be exposed to the English language during their infancy in order to acquire the language. Togo also states that after about ten years old their native language starts blocking other languages from entering and that the older the child becomes the more difficult it becomes for him/her to master pronunciation of the English language. (Togo, pp. 83-84)

Penfield's findings support the idea that there is a critical age for children to start learning a second language and after this age it is more and more difficult to acquire the language. Penfield indicates that children under nine who have damage to or operations on their cerebral cortex have more potential for full recovery than children over nine due to the flexibility of the cerebral cortex of children under nine. This flexibility is part of the physical structure of the natural language learning ability of all children. Therefore, children under nine are more likely to become bilingual when exposed to two languages than children over nine. From this point of view it is desirable for children to be exposed to the sound of the English language before nine years of age. (Nakajima, p. 29)

## **Bilingualism**

An infant in a bilingual environment who learned two languages and communicated in both languages if moved to a monolingual environment could quickly lose one of the languages. It is often said that children's brains are like sponges that absorb anything, but at the same time they can lose whatever learned just as quickly. Also, there are two categories for infant bilingualism. Simultaneous bilingualism is when an infant acquires two languages simultaneously at an early stage of life. For example, the mother speaks to his or her child in one language and the father speaks in a different language. In contrast to simultaneous bilingualism, there is sequential bilingualism. Infants first learn one language and at school they learn another.

Four different aspects affect bilingualism in infancy:

1. The language spoken by the children's parents and whether or not it is spoken by a majority of people in the society or only a minority of the people.
2. The language spoken to the children.
3. The language the relatives of the children use when speaking to them.
4. The language spoken in the community. (Baker, pp. 88-89)

## **PROGRAMS FOR USING MOTHERS TO HELP THEIR CHILDREN LEARN ENGLISH**

In order to see if there is any real benefit of having mothers help their children learn English, three different programs using mothers as helpers or teachers in teaching children English will be presented. One is a program by Ikuko Tobari who invented her own program with the help of two friends and wrote about her program in the book, *Kodomo Wa Eigo De Shitsukenasai* (Train your Child in English). The second is the Shogakukan Home Pal Program. The third is the Junior ECC Program of the ECC Language School.

### **Ikuko Tobari's English Conversation School for Mothers**

Ikuko Tobari, the author of *Kodomo Wa Eigo De Shitsukenasai* (Train Your Child in English) advocates that Japanese mothers train their children in English. She has an English conversation school for mothers with children and teaches three classes: the first class is for mothers with a preschool child, the second class is for mothers with a second grade child and the third class is for mothers with an elementary school child above third grade. The focus of these classes is to help the mothers learn to teach their children. The mothers are taught to teach their children everyday English commands.

Tobari developed this idea when she was raising her children. She wanted to introduce the learning of the English language to her children. English schools were expensive so she decided to develop her own method to teach her children English.

She wondered why her children were able to acquire the Japanese language within a short period of time. Although she never used special materials for her children to learn the

language, her children were able to discuss subjects with adults on an equal footing. And this was not limited to her children. Most of her children's classmates at kindergarten managed to speak as well as her children, although individual children varied in fluency levels to some extent. Then she discovered that Japanese competency of kindergarten children was greatly influenced by their mothers. She realized that the children used feminine expressions during this period because they spent most of their days with their mothers who naturally used these expressions.

One day a former co-worker friend, who was bilingual, visited her with one of her sons. Her friend spoke to her son in English. Although he was not capable of speaking, his mother was talking to him in simple English phrases. She asked, "What do you want?" and then "Milk?" Then her son nodded to her. She also said to him, "Close the door." After he closed the door she said to him, "Good job!" When Tobari saw this scene, she thought that she had hit upon a truly effective method for teaching English to young children. In order to familiarize children with the sounds of English, mothers can speak to them in English. This was a great discovery for her. She knew that she was unable to say difficult things in English but she also knew that she could handle domestic expressions at home. Without making her children become conscious about English, her children would be able to pick up everyday conversational English words from her. She first made a list of Japanese expressions that she used at home with her children and asked an English native speaker to translate them into English and correct her English pronunciation. In order to familiarize her children with the sounds of the English language she also used English videotapes such as Disney movies and Sesame Street programs which had not been dubbed into Japanese.

If this mother can develop a successful program for helping her children learn English, how much easier it would be to have professional guidance for mothers wanting to help their children learn English. Since many Japanese mothers stay home and these programs do not require formal teaching, the children would readily learn what the mothers are teaching them without realizing they are being taught.

### **Home Pal Program**

Yoshimi Yamada has worked with the Shogakukan Home Pal Program for two and a half years. This program has the mother accompany her child to the English classes. The children range in age from two to four years. In an interview she gave on June 30, 2002 she explained that the first objective of the program is to help the children, especially the youngest ones, feel at home in the class. The program designers felt that by avoiding creating anxiety in the children they would be better able to learn English. Once this is accomplished the mother is able to take a more active role in the child's learning.

At present there is a 60-minute session once a week. The children and their mothers learn words in the classroom and practice what they learn at home. For instance, they might learn simple verbs while listening to music. If possible, hand gestures accompany the repeating of the word. For example, the word "wash" would be accompanied by making a washing gesture with their two hands. Both the mother and the child say the word and perform the gesture. The

teachers act as leaders in the activities while the mom works with and teaches her child.

The program was designed to introduce young children to the sounds of the English language. Even though the youngest children may not be very fluent in Japanese, it was felt that the children would benefit from hearing and pronouncing English sounds.

After two and a half years, some of Ms. Yamada's students now attend a regular English language course with native English speakers as teachers. Her former students often surprise the teachers with their ability to repeat English expressions. Another benefit of having attended the Shogakukan Home Pal Program is that the children are not shy about saying things in English.

### **The ECC Language School Junior ECC Program**

In this program Japanese mothers are recruited as teachers of preschool children. However, in this program, in contrast to the first two programs discussed, the mothers are formally trained as teachers and have primary responsibility for teaching the children. Also, they are not teaching their own child exclusively. Instead, they set up a language school in their home to teach other children, although they could include their child in the class. They have the support of ECC in setting up this school.

ECC recruits Japanese housewives as teachers of preschool children because they feel that the teachers, being Japanese mothers, can understand and relate better to the young children than native English speakers. They feel the children would feel less anxious and more relaxed when taught by a Japanese mother. This relaxed atmosphere would have a positive influence on their learning ability.

In order to qualify for the training as a teacher the mother must pass a test. Once she is trained she can put out a sign in front of her house advertising her school. The course is called "English Course for Pre-school Students." It is for three-year olds and meets once a week. The theme for the class is: I want to speak, listen, and have fun in English at ECC Junior.

The program operates under the premise that during infancy kids are very curious about everything and it is during this period that they enjoy learning. They do not need to be forced to learn. Thus they are able to have fun learning basic linguistic skills of a second language. The program takes advantage of the fact that three-year olds grow rapidly physically, mentally and linguistically. They are in the period where their language ability is highly developed.

All instruction is in English in an attempt to provide a close approximation of the environment in which native English speaking children learn the language. The program helps the children to become familiar with the language. The children learn the language in a natural way while playing, just as they do when they are learning Japanese. The material is matched to the emotional and physical development of the three-year old using everyday themes of interest. Activities include songs and physical response games. Flash cards help improve vocabulary. The process includes listening, talking, and reviewing.

The written information about the program provided by ECC indicates that their program is successful. They feel their success is due to their using Japanese mothers and to the natural setting that is the background for the teaching.



## CONCLUSION

The first question that this paper attempted to address is: Why do children need to learn the English language at an early stage of their life? The consensus of opinion of experts on language acquisition is that the time between the ages of four and six appears to be an ideal time to learn a new language. This is due to the physical structure of the brain. From that period to the age of puberty the language learning capability continues but lessens thereafter year by year. The ability to learn grammar is enhanced with age but the ability to learn to produce native-like sounds deteriorates. Therefore, if the goal is to learn to speak and understand English at or approaching the level of a native speaker, children need to begin learning the English language at an early stage of their life.

The second question is: Can mothers teach a language they are not fluent in? The first example given shows that mothers who are not fluent in English have the ability to help their young children learn the proper sounds of English by teaching them simple commands and familiarizing their children with the sounds of English by utilizing English-speaking phonics toys, videos, and movies. The second example given shows that students, after two years with the Shogakukan Home Pal Program and being taught English by their mothers, were better at learning English later on with native speakers than students who had no early exposure to the English language. The third example given, the ECC Junior Program, shows that Japanese mothers who are trained to teach English to pre-school children can successfully teach children. Therefore, it appears that this avenue of teaching English to children is worth exploring.

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