

Practice and Analysis of Produced Uttered Language through English Language-mediated Activities in LEGO Work Project

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1. Introduction

The fast pace of “Globalization” has highlighted the importance of learning English for Japanese. Since 2011, all grade five and six students at elementary school in Japan have been required to take English language classes and related ‘activities’. “English Education Reform Plan corresponding to Globalization”, introduced by MEXT in 2014, stated the importance of English education ‘activities’ from as early as grade three, to be effective from 2016.

Regarding the present state of current foreign language activities, many problems have been raised. Previous approaches to English teaching were overly focused on pattern practice and rote learning, and AETs were not able to function effectively. Further, the qualification of AETs in general has not been sufficiently discussed. The current situation of English language activities in elementary school fails to meet the objective of the Course of Study, which is to foster a positive attitude toward effective communication. However, few studies have focused on how to activate students’ learning in the activity indicated. It is proposed that in this context, practical activities should be implemented. The purpose of this study is as follows:

- 1) To clarify what kind of activities are suited to enhance elementary school students’ learning of English;
- 2) To evaluate the effectiveness of a mediating artifact with elementary English language proficiency; and
- 3) To propose an instructional approach to foreign language learning which will prove more effective than previous approaches.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Twelve fifth graders,
Four instructors

Two English-Japanese bilingual AETs, One English-Japanese bilingual college student, and One Japanese-English bilingual college student

Period of Data Collection

June to December of 2015

2.2. Place of Data Collection

Waseda University (100-628) and an activity room in a local primary school

2.3. Instrument used

LEGO StoryStarter (LEGOR Education)

2.4. Method of Data Collection

All the conversation produced during the activity was video- and audio- recorded. All the elementary school students were briefly interviewed after the activities.

2.5. Procedure

1. A brief instruction regarding the activity was given individually to the participants
2. One minute was allowed for each student to generate an idea relating to the LEGO creation activity
3. Collaborative work between a student and an instructor using LEGO was conducted for 20 minutes
4. A post-activity interview was conducted individually in another room right after the activity

2.6. Data Analysis

The recorded conversation and follow-up interviews were analyzed by using the GTA-based qualitative method. The quantitative data of all the participants’ utterances were compiled and examined by The Observational System for Instructional Analysis (hereinafter referred to as OSIA)-based method.

3. Results and Discussion

1) The bilingual approach by the teacher was found effective.

Compared to the AET, the instructor speaking bilingually was able to facilitate the student’ s speech. Instructors who use English and Japanese bilingually can stimulate the students’ speech and ideas because of a richer speech interaction.

2) Students’ learning was effectively activated.

One of the students mentioned, ‘I just play games and memorize English expressions in a school class. This LEGO activity is more difficult than a school class.’ This comment suggests that the school classes do not activate his learning well enough. Students’ active learning was observed in this situated learning.

3) LEGO clearly functioned as a mediating artifact

While the student explained “Kendama” to the AET, he made use of LEGO blocks for more effective communication. For learners with elementary English language proficiency, LEGO and language are used interchangeably to maintain communication.

4) Collaborative activities increased conversations.

Collaborative peer interactions were observed during LEGO activities. An increase in the production of meaningful targeted utterances was observed, in the form of casual conversation, which is not generally observed in school classes. Casual utterances triggered purposeful language-based activities, as seen by observing the transcribed interactions.