短　報

The importance of using language activities which enhance noticing in elementary school L2 classes

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小学校の第二言語授業における「気づき」(noticing) を促進する言語活動の重要性

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Abstract

English language education in Japanese public elementary schools was introduced in 2002. The primary objective of introducing English language education in elementary schools is to create a positive attitude towards English, thereby motivating students to learn English. Accordingly, the focus of English language education has been primarily aural/oral skills. To further motivate students and enhance the learning process many lessons use songs and games. An important component in L2 acquisition is noticing, and this paper suggests that the use of songs and games encourages the process of noticing. Songs and games not only reinforce grammar structures introduced in a lesson, but also enable students to notice gaps in their interlanguage. Songs and games, accordingly, are an integral part of Japanese public elementary school English language education, as they not only create a fun L2 learning atmosphere, but also create opportunities for noticing, which further establishes a language acquisition situation.

Key words: elementary school, language acquisition, noticing, songs and games

要　旨

2002年，小学校における英語教育が導入された。この英語教育導入の第一目的は，生徒の英語に対する肯定的かつ積極的態度を養うことであり，それにより生徒の英語に対する学習意欲を高めることである。そえゆえ小学校英語教育では，英会話能力の育成に焦点が置かれてきた。多くの授業において，生徒の英語学習への意欲をさらに高め，ならびに学習過程の促進をはかるため，歌やゲームが取り入れられている。この論文では，第二言語習得における重要な要素である「気づき」(noticing) に着目し，歌やゲームの使用が「気づき」の過程を促進することを議論する。歌やゲームは，授業で紹介される文法構造をより内在化させ，中間言語おいて生じるギャップを生徒に気づかせる。歌やゲームは，第二言語習得において楽しい雰囲気作りをするだけでなく，言語習得の情況を生み出す「気づき」の過程をも作り出し，日本の小学校英語教育において重要な要素となっている。

キーワード：小学校，言語習得，気づき，歌やゲーム

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Introduction

Reforms in English language education in Japan have led to the introduction of teaching English in public elementary schools. At junior and senior high school, students often have a negative attitude towards the learning of English. It is hoped that by introducing English to elementary school students the attitude towards learning English will become positive; that the attitude held by many students of "I can't do English" can be changed to "I can do English". The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (2002; 2000) (hence *Monbukagakusho*) suggests that at elementary school the change in attitude towards English can be realized through singing songs and playing games. While literature on the benefits of using songs and games in the language classroom is not typically empirically based, teaching experience can justify their use for linguistic reasons. Songs and games offer an opportunity to present a topic, a language point, or lexis as well as opportunities to practice the language. The learning of English through songs and games creates a non-threatening language atmosphere where aural/oral skills can be improved. This is an ideology that many researchers have discussed (Lo & Li, 1998; Adamowski, 1997; Domoney & Harris, 1993; Griffee, 1992). Songs and games are therefore useful teaching techniques in that they can increase the confidence of students by familiarizing them with English, and they can also increase students' ability to notice differences between English and Japanese, which is an influential part of second language acquisition (SLA).

The teaching of English in public elementary schools focuses on meaning-based lessons, and the use of songs and games are influences which effect noticing and are supported by *the Monbukagakusho* in its current policy on English language education. Ideally, in the English language classroom, the teacher presents the lesson and reinforces the content of the lesson with customized songs and games. While many Japanese elementary school teachers may be unable to customize their English classes to particular language forms, and use songs and games without changing them just for fun, a few exceptional Japanese elementary school teachers and Assistant Language Teachers (ALT) do attempt to customize

their lessons both to the needs of their students and the goals of the lesson. Through these teacher's efforts in repeatedly emphasizing the focus of the lesson, noticing can occur as a causal variable or through detection. If the noticing occurs as a result of a causal variable, it is due to the frequency that the form is presented in the materials. Students notice the form and process it. Detection, however, occurs when students first detect information from the lesson and then use this information to both formulate and test a hypothesis regarding the second language grammar, which consequently facilitates second language acquisition. Noticing however, involves not only detection, but also awareness. Through awareness and consciousness-raising students notice the gaps in their interlanguage, which may lead to language acquisition. The following discussion concentrates on how English language acquisition in public elementary schools through the use of songs and games as suggested by *Monbukagakusho* could also enhance noticing. This will be explored through three interrelated hypotheses in SLA: Long's Interaction Hypothesis, Swain's Output Hypothesis, and Schmidt's Noticing Hypothesis in terms of noticing.

Interaction Hypothesis

The importance of meaning-focused communication as part of comprehensible input is emphasized in Long's Interaction Hypothesis (1985). The premise of the interaction hypothesis is that language acquisition can only occur when students receive comprehensible input. Long states that student interaction with other more efficient or native speakers of the target language is essential for language acquisition to occur (Kasper, 2001; Long & Robinson, 1998; Mitchell & Myles, 1998). This is where the use of the ALT becomes important. While these teachers primarily teach English at the junior and high school levels, *Monbukagakusho* states that one third of English classes held as a part of the Period for Integrated Studies at elementary school, should be "conducted by foreign instructors, fluent English speakers, or junior high school teachers" (*Monbukagakusho*, 2002). In the absence of an ALT or fluent Japanese speaker of English, songs are an important teaching method, as they can develop students'

listening and speaking skills (Saricoban & Metin, 2000) as well as provide exposure to authentic English, which is important in language acquisition. Accordingly, even with limited opportunities for elementary school students to interact with more efficient or native speakers of English creating the potential for interaction with comprehensible input between teacher and student, students are still exposed to authentic English through songs.

Long's Interaction Hypothesis may appear as an extension of Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1982), in which comprehensible input from any source is viewed as important. The Interaction Hypothesis however differs from the Input Hypothesis in one particular way: it recognizes the significance of adjustments in conversation to make input comprehensible. These adjustments occur when there is misunderstanding in communication and the interlocutors must negotiate for meaning and find comprehensible input. Misunderstanding in communication, accordingly is a pre-requisite for noticing. As English in elementary school focuses solely on aural/oral skills, misunderstanding in communication will most probably occur between teacher and student, unless students are encouraged to play games that focus on a specific language form so that they must negotiate the language together. With these types of games, students may pay greater attention to conversational adjustments, and noticing may increase as students are given many opportunities to notice the gaps between their Japanese and English, as well as notice new terms and grammatical features. Teachers can also use songs, as Eken (1996) states, as a direct tool for focusing on common learner errors. Currently, however it is common for errors to be generally ignored at Japanese elementary schools as many teachers themselves have poor English skills, therefore games and songs are not intended to direct student attention to a particular language form. Furthermore, as most schools have limited access to ALTs, it is unlikely that there is any continuity from one lesson to the next lesson taught by the ALT. Accordingly, it is impossible for the ALT to mediate language use with each student. With English kept at a level of i+1, the input students receive is slightly above their current level, it is slightly challenging and not so easy that they become bored; but it is also not so difficult that they lose interest. This type of input may create conversational adjustments, which aim to make input comprehensible.

Even within the confines of elementary school English classes it is possible for students to make adjustments in interactions and to negotiate for meaning. This type of negotiation typically involves negative feedback. Negative feedback occurs in the corrective feedback given by the teacher using the target language, without distorting the intended meaning of the actual utterance(Doughty & Williams, 1998; Long & Robinson, 1998; Mitchell & Myles, 1998). Negative feedback not only assists students in noticing differences between the targeted use and their actual use of English, but it also activates the noticing of forms, which may not have been sufficiently understood or corrected in class. However, at present there is a lack of fluent Japanese teachers of English, and ALTs at the elementary school level. Furthermore many Japanese teachers of English have not spoken English since they themselves were in high school, and accordingly lack both the skill and the confidence to speak English. Therefore it is unlikely that these teachers would be aware of mistakes that their students make in English. Furthermore, due to a shortage of ALTs, it is common for an ALT to visit an elementary school only for a few weeks each year. In this situation, it is essential that ALTs maintain student motivation to learn English. Therefore, the ALT may choose to ignore mistakes that students make or they may correct students, but due to a lack of frequent interaction, the student may forget. In the absence of an ALT or fluent Japanese teacher of English, songs enable the elementary school teacher to present a specific topic in a relaxed classroom atmosphere (Lo & Li, 1998; Eken, 1996). It is possible that a few students may be mentally challenge and encouraged to use the targeted form due to the use of games that emphasize meaning-focused communication and songs in class, resulting in acquisition aided by production.

Output Hypothesis

Production-aided acquisition is the foundation of the Output hypothesis. According to Swain's

Output Hypothesis (1985), as described by Swain (2000), Swain (1998), and Ellis (1990), students must use the target language to become grammatically proficient. In keeping with the goals of a lesson, the use of songs and games enables elementary school students to practice targeted forms in a controlled environment . The use of songs encourages extensive and intensive listening (Saricoban & Metin, 2000; Eken, 1996), while games enhance creativity and imagination. Elementary school students are able to become familiar with English through targeting specific forms in class. By controlling students' output through games that are specifically customized for the lesson, opportunities for noticing can be enhanced especially when students encounter the same expression in multiple activities, and thus further develop their grammatical competence . This is important, as a form must be noticed in the input before it can become acquired. Students may discover that they have to focus on a particular input in order to produce an output with the meaning that they wish to convey. This then triggers the process for new linguistic forms to be acquired. Through practicing the language that they have already acquired, students can use feedback to form and test hypotheses based on their language knowledge (Hedge, 2000; Swain, 2000). Students are then able to refine their knowledge, which assists in the construction of their developing language system. Accordingly, students may subconsciously use output, among other factors, to increase noticing, thereby strengthening their language knowledge.

Noticing Hypothesis

The basis of Schmidt's Noticing Hypothesis (1990) is that noticing is required in order for input to be converted into intake. Not all input is of equal value, and it is only the input that is consciously noticed which can lead to a sufficient condition for second language acquisition. Before input can be added to a developing interlanguage system Schmidt suggests that a certain degree of awareness is important for processing to occur effectively. Noticing is the recognition, by students, of the occurrence of a particular form. This is different from understanding, which Schmidt describes not only as the recognition of the occurrence of a form, but also the rule

or pattern that is applied to it (Long & Robinson, 1998). The distinction is very clear: noticing has to do with what linguistic form is stored in memory whereas understanding has to do with a linguistic form becoming a part of the linguistic system. According to the Noticing Hypothesis, linguistic forms may only become intake if they are actually noticed by the student in the input.

At elementary schools, *Monbukagakusho* states that it is only the interest in English that is to be taught. Even in meaning-based classes, the teacher can emphasize the fact that English, unlike Japanese, is a subject-verb-object language . This can be done with casual variable noticing. Using various methods to keep the attention and interest of students during a forty-five minute lesson the teacher teaches the target language. The combination of first teaching the target language in class, and then reinforcing this through the use of songs and games, which by nature are consistent and repetitive (Gatbonton & Segalowitz, 1988), keeps the lessons not only on an upbeat note, but the frequency of the use of the target language increases . Overtime students, through repeated use, may become aware of the language forms present in the songs and games and this awareness is noticing. It is therefore possible that students may notice the more salient grammatical forms in the targeted language from the input. Although instruction can stress particular language forms so that they are more likely to be noticed by the student, it is the singing of songs and the playing of games that create a positive language learning experience for students, making them more susceptible to language awareness and subsequently language acquisition, which as Schmidt claims "...more noticing leads to more learning", (Mitchell & Myles, 1998, p. 139-40). English is then viewed by the students both as something fun, and something that they "can do". By creating a positive language-learning atmosphere, students develop a positive attitude to learning English, and more noticing is likely to occur.

Factors Which Influence Noticing

The concept of noticing is a factor in each of the Interaction, Output, and Noticing Hypotheses. In these hypotheses, noticing may be enhanced

through awareness and consciousness-raising activities such as songs and games, which specifically relate to the lesson, and students have many opportunities for language intake in a positive environment. This in turn can assist students in noticing the gap(s) in their interlanguage. This type of environment encourages students to be aware of language forms and lexis as well as develop aural/oral skills (Saricoban & Metin, 2000; Eken, 1996), which then leads to the processing of linguistic forms.

While at present elementary school teachers do not focus specifically on English grammar, it is difficult to teach a second language without including grammar. Therefore, even while stressing aural/oral English skills, through the introduction of any conversation game or song, the teacher is also exemplifying English language forms and lexis (Lo & Li, 1998; Eken, 1996). Accordingly while the topic of the lesson might be activities students do in their free time, the subvert goal of the lesson might be the correct usage of the *ing* clause. While maintaining awareness of word order in English and using the *ing* clause, the teacher may choose to play a conversation game focusing on this grammar point whereby various free time activities are exemplified. Or the teacher may wish to restrict language use to only one activity, such as playing. After teaching the vocabulary for various activities using the *ing* clause with the simple text "I am ....", the teacher can place a variety of activity cards using the *ing* clause on the blackboard. Behind each card is either a positive or negative point, which students' collect after they have chosen a card and spoken the phrase. Students, divided into teams, in turn then say the phrase for example "I am playing badminton" and collect or lose a point for their team. The teacher replaces used activity cards and points on the blackboard to maintain a variety for students until everyone has had several opportunities to participate in the game. A simple game like this enables students to practice English, but it may also enable students to notice how word ordering in English differs from Japanese. Using such a game, students may obtain an understanding of linguistic forms, which is precisely the goal of consciousness-raising. It does not, however, follow that students internalize the language forms or use them correctly. Although,

students may use this new knowledge to internalize other language structures and it is in this way that consciousness-raising can assist in language acquisition (Ellis, 1992). The above game may also encourage students to notice the use of personal pronouns in English, which in Japanese are extensively omitted . Awareness, therefore, increases due to attempts to negotiate for meaning. In the controlled environment of a game the use of negative feedback in terms of corrections increases the student's awareness and attention to these language adjustments. In the case of this example, corrections could be in terms of the use of a personal pronoun or correct word order, as well as pronunciation. Corrections can therefore trigger the process for new linguistic forms to become more salient in future output and increase opportunities for noticing (Gass & MacKey, 2002; Swain, 1998). While it is difficult to assess if students are actually noticing new language forms, as noticing is essentially a process of self-discovery, it can be stated that the process of consciousness-raising, awareness, and noticing the gap are circular. Each function facilitates the other and is an integral part of second language acquisition.

Summary

The Interaction, Output, and Noticing hypotheses are a few of the many hypotheses that claim that noticing forms is a necessary part of SLA. The current *Monbukagakusho* English language program at elementary schools, encourages singing songs and playing games to create a positive opportunity for elementary students to learn English. This has the added benefit of increasing opportunities for students to become aware of English language forms and lexis, and it is this awareness that leads to the noticing of targeted forms. Students' awareness of English can be elevated through songs and games that reinforce the day's lesson, and this can lead to consciousness-raising which then has the possibility for students to notice gaps in their interlanguage. However, songs and games can only be successful in increasing noticing if they are both relevant to targeted forms and repeated often. As English language education at the elementary school level is not intended to be a prerequisite to junior high school English, teachers have enormous freedom in

what they teach their students. Keeping within the guidelines of teaching aural/oral skills, teachers have countless opportunities to not only create a positive experience for students to be introduced to English, but also to have students notice English. Furthermore, the enjoyment factor of using songs and games directly relates to the *Monbukagakusho's* current English language focus at public elementary schools. By introducing only aural/oral English skills at elementary schools, the *Monbukagakusho* has potential for several beneficial outcomes. First, when students complete elementary school, they have some ability to speak English, and second, students can then face the new challenge of learning how to read and write in English at junior high school. Therefore English may be viewed as something new and exciting by both elementary and junior high school students and the motivation to learn English is kept high. Although the *Monbukagakusho's* intention of introducing English at elementary schools is to create a positive attitude toward foreign language learning, the by-product of the manner in which English has been introduced is noticing, and noticing can lead to language acquisition.

Notes

1) After learning the song "It's a small world", focusing on the concept of small and big the teacher can create a board game with various pictures of small and big objects. Judged by their peers, second or third grade students have to declare an object as either small or big in order to advance to the end of the game. Or with first grade students the song "Two little dicky birds" can be used to introduce English greetings. This song has repeated lyrics and is easy to remember. It is possible to customize this song to use other types of greeting words and the students' names.

2) Opportunities for noticing can be enhanced through multiple activities such as learning words, singing a song, and then playing a game. For practice in the present tense, after teaching the song "Old MacDonald has a farm" with the different sounds that animals make, the teacher can then create a board game with different pictures of animals. The student has to correctly say the sound the animal makes in order to advance to the end of the game. Other students in the group can judge if their classmate is correct or not.

3) Japanese is a subject-object-verb language. Therefore, in Japanese as the verb always comes at the end, the listener must accumulate all the words in the sentence before they are able to understand what to do with them.

4) Once they have been taught "The family song", students can be given magazines. They then look through the magazines to find and cut out various pictures to represent their family members. In small groups they can then introduce their 'family members': this is my mother, this is my father, etc. The repetition of song and game increases the use of the targeted language.

5) In this lesson, while maintaining emphasis on English word ordering, the teacher would also be introducing the *ing* clause. Therefore students may notice the subject-verb+*ing*-object word ordering.

6) Japanese is a subject-object-verb language. The English "I am playing (baseball)" translates as " baseball asobimasu" (baseball play). Note that the personal pronoun "I" is omitted in the Japanese, and the object (baseball) comes before the verb (playing).

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