

## **A Suggestion about English as a Subject in Elementary Schools: Teaching Reading with Picturebooks**

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### **Abstract**

From 2020, English will be taught as a subject to fifth and six grades of elementary schools in Japan, and reading and writing will be introduced as well as speaking and writing. The number of classes of English will be doubled. While there are some merits in this reform such as connecting smoothly to English learning in junior high schools or satisfying the capacity and needs of upper graders, there are also some issues such as additional work on teachers who already have anxiety in English teaching. This paper overviews this reform in English teaching of elementary schools, reviews some previous studies about teacher anxiety in elementary schools, and suggests use of picturebooks in teaching reading with some examples. Although the paper does not propose any practical plans using picturebooks, it provides insight about future English teaching in Japan.

In December 2013, Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) presented “Implementation plan of English education reform corresponding to globalization” (MEXT, 2014a). It showed mainly two changes about English Education in elementary schools. Firstly, the current Foreign Language Activities (FLA) in the fifth and sixth graders will be changed to one of the subjects from 2020 that includes teaching not only listening and speaking but also reading and writing. While the current FLA is taught 35 classes (one class takes 45 minutes) a year, the new subject of English will be taught 70 classes a year. Secondly, FLA will be taught in the third and fourth grades so that the students can smoothly start studying English from the fifth grade by becoming familiar with English sounds and expressions.

On the one hand, this change has been welcomed for several reasons. On the other hand, there are still researchers who posit questions of its effectiveness. Some say that the most important problem is “who” teaches English to pupils. There are plenty of survey results that show many teachers are feeling anxiety in English teaching. Along with training and hiring more Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) or Japanese-speaking specialist teachers of English, there is urgent need to train homeroom teachers so that they can teach English confidently. This paper will overview the reform of English Education, and review some

previous studies about teaching anxiety in elementary school teachers. Then, it will suggest using picturebooks for teaching reading to elementary school students.

### **Rationales for the Change**

MEXT (2014a) recommended five reforms of English education. One of them was about the reform of purposes and contents of education proposed by the nation. Below is the sentence about English in elementary schools in the new teaching guidelines starting in 2020, translated from Japanese to English by the author.

Start a foreign language activity from middle grades, and cultivate the basis of communication skills while familiarizing students with speech. In the upper grade, in addition to “listening” and “talking” by basic expressions about familiar things, cultivate the basis of communication ability including actively “reading” and “writing” attitudes. Therefore, it is appropriate to do it as a subject to give systematicity to learning (MEXT, 2014b) (underlined by the author).

The biggest change in the teaching guidelines from 2020 is clearly that English will become one of the school subjects in elementary schools. The fifth and six graders now take 35 FLA classes a year, or once a week, but from 2020 they will have 70 English classes a year, which is almost equivalent to two classes a week. The rationales for this change is two-fold. One is that the new subject of English will suit the needs of upper-grade pupils who have advanced cognitive skills. According to a survey by MEXT (2000), although FLA is functioning to some extent to encourage pupils to have positive attitudes toward English learning, it is not efficient enough to satisfy needs of upper-grade pupils. The survey shows that 75 % of pupils who took FLA “like English,” 90% of them “think English is important,” and that 68% of them “would respond when being spoken to by foreigners in either English or Japanese.” However, attention to differences among six grades reveals an interesting point. When they were asked what they enjoyed in English classes, most pupils in lower grades answered they enjoyed English songs; 91.9% in first graders, 89.4% in second graders, 87.3% in third-graders said they liked songs. However, only 55.3% of six graders answered they enjoyed songs. In contrast, interestingly, what fifth and sixth graders enjoyed more than lower grades was reading and writing English letters or words. 55.1% of six graders answered they enjoyed reading, but only 37.1% of first graders and 46.4 of third-graders enjoyed it. As for writing, the gap was even bigger; 48.4% of fifth graders and 53.4% of six graders enjoyed writing, but only 20.1% of first graders, 32.5% of second graders, 41.0% of third-graders and 43.4% of fourth graders enjoyed writing. It can mean that pupils in upper grades want to learn more reading and writing rather than singing songs or playing games.

Some researchers had already suggested teaching reading and writing in elementary school English. Allen-Tamai (2009) warned that learning the language without letters would decrease their desire to learn. According to the new teaching guidelines, the new subject of English will aim at having pupils become familiar with reading and writing English in order to nurture the basic qualities and abilities of communication. Thus, it can be expected that

changing FLA in upper graders to a subject can fulfill their needs. Arakawa et al. (1999) also suggested instruction of letters be launched in elementary schools for several reasons. One is that children's intellectual desire to learn letters will become higher as they become able to make more abstract and analytic thinking. Another reason is that letters will elevate children's motivation to learn the language because they will become able to read independently. In the new teaching guidelines, writing will be introduced by instruction of alphabets. Hopefully, it will motivate the pupils to learn English.

Another rationale for this radical change is that it will make a smooth shift for pupils from English in elementary schools to English in junior high schools. The leading company in education industry, Benesse (2013), used the phrase, "the wall of junior-high first years," which became famous especially among parents and teachers of cram schools. It can be defined as overall difficulties in subjects that first-year junior-high students face. Especially, in case of English, they feel a huge gap between English focusing on speaking and listening in elementary schools such as songs or games and English classes in junior high schools teaching grammar, reading, and writing. It is expected that if reading and writing were taught, or at least introduced, in English classes in elementary schools, the students might have fewer difficulties in learning English in junior-high schools. Yagihashi (2017) predicts that effective methods to teach alphabets that can raise awareness and interest in elementary school students will improve their understanding of English, and consequently, it will lead to smooth connection to English in junior high schools.

### **The Problem of Teacher Anxiety**

Although the new change in elementary school English has some merits, there are also problems. The biggest problem might be the problem of anxiety in teachers. Since English Education was launched in elementary schools, plenty of research has shown that teachers in elementary schools have anxiety in English Education. Inoi (2009) found that 97.6% of teachers felt anxiety about their English proficiency. Benesse's survey conducted in 2010 revealed that 68.1% of homeroom teachers ( $N = 2,326$ ) felt unconfident in teaching English, and that 62.1% of them recognized teaching English as a burden (Benesse, 2011a). Another survey of Benesse's held in 2011 show that 65.4% of teachers felt anxiety in practicing FLA, and that only 28.1% of teachers said they were good at teaching English and 59.4% of them said they were bad at it (Benesse, 2011b).

The question is what makes them anxious about English teaching. Matsumiya (2013), in his quantitative research, concluded that the main factor that causes teachers' anxiety in English teaching derives from their anxiety in their English proficiency. In other words, since teachers are not confident in their English ability, they also feel anxious about teaching plans or material development. If teachers are feeling anxious and unconfident about their English proficiency and about their ability to teach English, one can easily predict that changing FLA into a subject should be causing even more anxiety among teachers. If teachers are feeling anxiety, they will not be able to have effective classes.

Another anxiety that teachers are having is about time. In the survey by Benesse, many teachers answered that they did not have enough time for “material design and preparation (57.9%)” and for “meeting with ALT and other teachers from outside of school (39.7%)” (Benesse, 2011a). According to the new teaching guidelines, the change of FLA into a subject will result in 70 classes of English in a year (MEXT, 2014b), which is the doubled number of the current English classes. This will cause more burden on teachers who are already busy with class preparation, desk work to manage the school, handling school events or club activities and so on. MEXT (2014b) suggests that they could implement module classes, for example, spending 15 or 20 minutes in the morning for English study, but it is doubted that it will reduce the burden on teachers.

To sum up, many teachers in elementary schools have anxiety in English classes. Possibly due to lack of confidence with their English abilities, the majority of teachers think they cannot teach English effectively. Also, their anxiety is caused by the fact that teachers are too busy to prepare for English classes. There is an urgent need to solve the problem of their anxiety about English teaching.

### **Teaching Reading Through Picturebooks**

In 2016, the Foreign Languages Working Group of MEXT proposed three main aims of English teaching in elementary schools, as shown below (translated and underlined by the author). The term “foreign languages” can include other languages than English, but it is understood as teaching English in public schools, and the new subject for fifth and sixth graders will teach English.

1. Students understand the function and roles of languages and familiarize themselves with words or word order of foreign languages through reading and writing. They acquire the basic skills that can be utilized in communication situations.
2. Students read and write letters and words about things that are familiar and simple, while noticing the word order. They cultivate the basic ability to communicate their thoughts and feelings by listening and talking.
3. Students respect the diversity of foreign languages and their cultures in the background and cultivate attitudes to communicate in foreign languages with considering others.

As seen above, when English is started to be taught as a subject, reading and writing will be implemented along with speaking and listening. The author considers that this is positive movement because communication is generally conducted not only through speaking and listening but also through reading and writing. If English teaching has started in elementary schools to raise the level of communicative skills of Japanese people based on the reflection upon traditional teaching methods, it should aim at teaching communication through four skills. The author believes that a language should be learned holistically but not by separating different kinds of skills. However, the previous section showed that many teachers in elementary schools have anxiety about English teaching. Then, if they have more English classes, even with addition of reading and writing, how would they manage the classes? Conceivably, it could cause more anxiety in teachers.

Considering the teachers' anxiety and many other factors, the author believes that the use of picturebooks is one of the best ways to teach reading in elementary schools. This section will look at the definition of picturebooks and then show some reasons why picturebooks are suitable for English teaching in elementary schools. Although both reading and writing will be implemented, this paper will focus on reading. It is also true that using picturebooks to teach reading can be closely connected to effective teaching of writing as well.

### ***Definition of Picturebook***

Maurão (2015, p. 199) quotes Bader (1976) to introduce a definition which is commonly used in the field of children's literature.

A picturebook is text, illustrations, total design; an item of manufacture and commercial product; a social, cultural, historic document; and foremost, an experience for a child. As an art form it hinges on the interdependence of pictures and words, on the simultaneous display of two facing pages, and on the drama of the turning page. On its own terms its possibilities are limitless (Bader, 1976, p. 1).

The compound noun, "picturebook," rather than "picture book," is often used in academic publications dealing with this literature form in language teaching (Bland, 2013; Bland & Lütge, 2013; Birketveit & Williams 2013, cited in Maurão 2015). This paper also uses this compound.

### ***Reasons to Use Picturebooks***

The positive effects of picturebooks in language education have already been proved (Ellis & Brewster, 1991; Garvie, 1990; Hester, 1983, cited in Brewster, Ellis, & Girard, 2002). In Japan, they are widely used in different contexts of English teaching such as private English schools and family settings. Cameron (2001) lists seven characteristics of picturebooks for foreign language learning: (1) parallelism, (2) rich vocabulary, (3) alliteration, (4) contrast, (5) metaphor, (6) intertextuality, and (7) narrative/dialogue. This paper will not explain each of these characteristics, but instead, this section reviews some reasons why picturebooks are beneficial for language education and discuss they fit the context of the new change in English teaching of elementary schools in Japan.

***"A whole," not "parts"***. Picturebooks are excellent to teach English with meaning, or "as a whole." The current FLA uses mainly "parts" of the language, such as words or simple short sentences, possibly because it is expected that students might find it difficult if they have many sentences, and eventually, they will become bored. However, if English becomes a subject in upper grades, they should teach English with certain meaningful contexts, as a "whole." Children of this age have some degree of cognitive thinking, but their analytical skills are not yet matured enough compared to adults. Allen-Tamai (2009) claims that it will be more difficult for young learners if they are exposed to mere "parts." She says, "the real language learning does not happen when there is no "meaningful context for children" (p. 59). As mentioned above, the Foreign Language Working Group proposed that students are to

“notice the word order,” but if they only have parts of English, they will not have chances to notice the linguistic rules. In this sense, picturebooks are useful. They contain sentences with a context. Sometimes we can find picturebooks with only words or phrases, but still, they have contexts.

**Many resources.** Picturebooks are full of resources. It is a resource with meaningful contexts as a whole as mentioned above, but it is also possible to break it into parts. Teachers and students can find different colors, shapes, animals, foods, days of a week, and so on. “A Very Hungry Caterpillar” (Carle, 1994) that was first published in 1970 is probably the most popular picturebook all over the world among both English native speakers and English learners. This book contains names of foods, numbers, and days of a week as teaching materials. Another example is “Cat the Cat, Who is That?” (Willems, 2010). It is a story in which a cat meets her animal friends. Every time she meets her friend, she says “hi,” and the friend replies. Students can learn names of animals (eg., *Cat the cat, Mouse the mouse, Fish the fish*) and how to greet with their friends. Picturebooks have such plenty of resources for teaching that teachers can use them in various ways.

One might say that elementary school teachers who do not have much experience of teaching English will not be able to make good use of picturebooks even if they contain many resources. They might need to have some training sessions about how to use picturebooks in their classrooms. However, the author of this paper considers that they might not be experienced in teaching English, but they are qualified teachers of elementary schools, and they already have skills to teach young students who often lose attention when classes are boring. Sugimoto, Yukawa, and Mori (2010) compared the results of summary tests of two different classes of an elementary school. In one class, their homeroom teacher who did not have much experience of English teaching read a picturebook to the students. In the other class, a junior-high school specialist teacher of English read the same picturebook to the students. The researchers concluded that reading picturebooks to pupils is effective even when the reader was a homeroom teacher who is not qualified to teach English, and also, even when they read the book to the whole class but not to small groups. Moreover, they found that homeroom teachers did not spend so much time to prepare for classes when they used the picturebooks. The researchers conclude that once teachers have chances of proper training sessions, picturebooks are efficient materials for teachers and students.

**Cultural backgrounds.** Picturebooks provide pupils chances to meet other cultures. One of the aims that the Foreign Language Working Group (2016) suggested was to have students “respect the diversity of foreign languages and their cultures in the background.” To fulfill this aim, picturebooks are suitable. For example, students might see people in books are not wearing shoes inside houses and might notice some differences between Japan and some other countries. “Yo! Yes?” (Raschka, 2007) is one of the books used by many language learners, and its main characters are two boys, one Caucasian and one African American. Through this book, students might find that there are different races, which is easily overlooked in a relatively homogenous country like Japan. More interestingly, students might be able to find similarities between different cultures. The two boys cannot make friends

easily at first. The trouble between friends is universal among young students in different countries.

**CLIL.** Along with implementing English as a subject, the use of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approach in elementary schools is suggested by many researchers. Picturebooks can be good materials for this approach. For example, a picturebook titled “The Grapes of Math: Mind Stretching Math Riddles” (Tang, 2001) is a good math book in which students can see colorful grapes, fish, or snails and be asked, “How many grapes are on the vine?” In this book, students can learn how to count and how to do addition effectively by analyzing sets. Also, “The Very Hungry Caterpillar” can be a good book for teaching science because it is a story where a small caterpillar eats a lot, becomes a cocoon, and turns itself to be a butterfly. Homeroom teachers are experienced with teaching those subjects such as math or science, so they will be able to use these types of picturebooks more effectively even than specialist teachers of English.

### ***Choosing “Good” Picturebooks***

Sugimoto et al. (2010) state that which picturebooks to choose is often more important than how to read them. Cameron (2001, p. 167) mentions “real books” that are written by “real” authors with quality pictures and “specially written ones” that are made by educational publishers to teach children literacy. As for the latter type of books, Cameron says, “While not all these books are of the quality of the original “real” books, they are an improvement on the unimaginative books many children faced in schools” (p. 167). Brewster et al. (2002) also say more recent readers, or “specially written ones” in Cameron’s words, show improvement. Brewster et al. add that merits of using “real” books are that learners can be exposed to authentic words and expressions, and that they can be motivated by finishing reading “real” books.

Cameron (2001, pp.168-169) shows six questions to consider when choosing picturebooks of language learning.

- (1) “Will the content engage the learners?”  
Children can sympathize with characters of the book.
- (2) “Are the values and attitudes embodied in the story acceptable?”  
Old stories could contain problematic attitudes in gender or race.
- (3) “How is the discourse organized?”  
Stories with a prototypical format set such as a description of characters, clear plot, a problem, a series of events, and then a resolution of the problem, are often accepted by children.
- (4) “What is the balance of dialogue and narrative?”  
The balance of dialogue and narrative could influence the way to use the picturebook. Dialogue is good for acting out, and narrative is good for noticing patterns and learning grammar.
- (5) “How is language used?”  
Repetition of words and phrases is most helpful for young learners.
- (6) “What new language is used?”

## A Suggestion about English as a Subject in Elementary Schools

Whether the picturebook contains learned words or new words can influence teaching.

Based on the aim of the class, age or level of students, and time, teachers need to select “good” picturebooks for their pupils. They might need to take some sessions about choosing “good” picturebooks. Yet, since they are the teachers who understand the children most, and since they are professional teachers of young learners, it will not be so challenging for them to choose picturebooks.

### **Conclusion**

This paper looked at the reform in English teaching elementary schools starting from 2020. It showed that it will be changed to a subject with addition of class hours in fifth and sixth graders, and that reading and writing will be introduced. Due to this reform, fifth and sixth graders might be able to have more challenging and meaningful learning. Also, students will not feel the gap between elementary school English and junior high school English. However, the problem that many teachers in elementary schools have anxiety in English teaching will not be solved by this reform. It might become even bigger. This paper presented use of picturebooks in English classrooms as one of the ways to teach reading without such a large burden on teachers.

Making practical lesson plans was not the focus of this paper, but it will be necessary to consider how to practically use picturebooks in the subject of English. A possible question might be whether picturebooks should be used in a class of 45 minutes or smaller module classes such as in the morning or after lunch. Another is whether they could have the budget to buy picturebooks published by foreign publishers that tend to be a little expensive. Further research is needed to explore the ways to put picturebooks into a practice of teaching English as a subject. The decision to start the reform from 2020 has been made. Teachers and researchers are required to find ways to make English education to younger students better.



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