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STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE CHILDREN'S ENGLISH SPEECH PRODUCTION IN KINDERGARTEN IMMERSION SETTINGS

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Abstract

This study examines the strategies teachers employ to enhance children's English speech production in kindergarten immersion settings in Japan. Reflecting global trends in early English education, many Japanese pre-primary institutions have incorporated English into their curricula. At this developmental stage, a primary learning objective is increased English verbal output, yet this goal remains challenging, particularly when this is instructed as a foreign language. Therefore, understanding the methods teachers use to stimulate verbal engagement among young learners is crucial. For this research, teachers of immersion classes for children aged three to five were interviewed. Interview data were transcribed and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2022) reflexive thematic analysis approach. Findings indicated that teachers focus on creating a positive and supportive environment for English learning. In doing so, they consider the roles of four primary stakeholders in the learning process: children, parents, colleagues, and themselves. To support children, teachers employ strategies such as choosing topics that match children's

interests, systematically introducing new vocabulary, and building trusting relationships. In their interactions with parents, teachers prioritize frequent and transparent communication, fostering a collaborative approach to language learning. For their colleagues, teachers utilize cooperative techniques to promote teamwork and maintain a cohesive learning environment. Concerning their own practices, teachers engage in regular reflection, account for individual differences among children, and maintain realistic expectations regarding children's English retention at this stage. In summary, this study suggests that teachers take a comprehensive approach to meet the needs of all stakeholders, ultimately centering their practices around the best interests of the children. These findings imply that teachers in English immersion programs implement child-centered strategies, even within educational frameworks that prioritize target language acquisition.

Keywords

English, Speech Production, Kindergarten, Immersion, Strategy

1. Introduction

The trend to introduce English as a foreign language (EFL) from a young age has seen an enormous increase in many countries (Robinson et al., 2015). This trend is prevalent in Japan as well. According to a report released by Benesse (2019) which compared the percentage of pre-primary institutions that conduct English language activities during regular childcare hours between 2012 and 2018, all saw a notable increase (Table 1). The number of institutions that participated in the survey each year is as follows. In 2012, “Kindergartens (Public)” 456, “Kindergartens (Private)” 921, “Nursery Schools (Public)” 1326, “Nursery Schools (Private)” 2343. In 2018, “Kindergartens (Public)” 606, “Kindergartens (Private)” 888, “Nursery Schools (Public)” 840, “Nursery Schools (Private)” 1481, “Certified Children’s Center (Public)” 148, “Certified Children’s Center (Private)” 602.

Table 1.1: *The Percentage of Pre-primary Institutions that Conduct English Activities during Regular Childcare Hours*

| | Rate of Implementation (2012) | Rate of Implementation (2018) |
|--------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Kindergartens (Public) | 17.1% | 26.1% |
| Kindergartens (Private) | 58.0% | 62.4% |
| Nursery Schools (Public) | 10.7% | 16.1% |

| | | |
|--|-------|-------|
| Nursery Schools (Private) | 33.8% | 44.4% |
| Certified Children's Center (Public) | - | 42.6% |
| Certified Children's Center (Private) | - | 66.4% |

(Source: Authors' Own Illustration)

Comparing the rate of increase according to age, this rose as children grew older, with the percentage of 5-year-olds being the highest. This may be explained both by children's development of languages and preparation for primary school. Starting in 2020, Japanese primary schools have implemented *gaikokugo katsudou* "foreign language activities" in third and fourth grades for 35 class periods annually, and *gaikokugo* "foreign language" in fifth and sixth grades for 70 class periods annually (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology, 2017). While children who go to primary schools in Japan start learning English from third grade, many municipalities start teaching English from first grade. Therefore, pre-primary institutions may be gradually increasing the amount of English exposure children receive to get them ready for their next step in formal education. In fact, in a questionnaire conducted by Benesse (2024), all types of pre-primary institutions that were investigated (kindergartens, nursery schools, and certified children's centers) said they had increased the number of collaborative projects they do with primary schools in 2023 compared to 2018.

As the number of pre-primary children who are exposed to English rises in EFL settings, there is a need to conduct research in this area. While Nikolov and Djigunović (2023) identified 74 empirical studies on learning and teaching foreign languages in pre-primary institutions in 25 countries, this is not enough to capture the growing dynamics and complexity of the field. Therefore, this study researched the strategies teachers employ to enhance English speech production in kindergarten immersion settings in Japan.

2. Previous Studies

Research concerning speech production in kindergarten children in EFL settings such as Japan reveals both opportunities and challenges which are unique to early language acquisition. Young learners have cognitive flexibility allowing them to be adept at learning new languages. However, their performance can be greatly affected by the context and quality of exposure (Bialystok & Hakuta, 1999). Thus, it is important that teachers be aware of their use of effective

strategies. A strategy introduced by Pinter (2006) involves play-based learning, which is concerned with incorporating structured play activities within the classroom such as storytelling and role-playing. These allow children to practice language in a natural and enjoyable setting and the authentic environment provided can encourage children to experiment with the language by challenging the use of vocabulary and sentence structure.

Another strategy used by teachers to enhance children's verbal production seen in previous research is interactive read-aloud. Wasik and Bond (2001) discovered that when teachers engage in interactive book reading by posing questions and encouraging children's feedback, children's use of vocabulary and their fluency in this improves. This assists children to internalize the language they hear and to respond to this, which encourages verbal output.

Furthermore, some studies point to the possibility that incorporating songs into lessons stimulates the production of speech in the target language for children (e.g., Murphey, 1992). For example, Kumar et al. (2022) conducted a descriptive study on previous research concerning using music in EFL teaching. They found that music may help alleviate the anxiety children feel in learning foreign languages and mention that this appears to be a beneficial tool in learning vocabulary, syntactic understanding, and pronunciation.

These collectively imply that careful application of teaching strategies may have a positive impact on children in EFL settings. However, a recently published systematic review that studied the use of songs to teach second or foreign languages to pre-primary, primary and secondary learners proposes that appropriately designed studies are needed to fully support this claim (Hamilton, 2024). This suggests the need for further investigation into this area of study.

3. Methodology

For this research, three teachers of immersion classes for children aged three to five were interviewed. All acted as the main teacher in the classroom. Two were female, and one was male. The average years of teaching experience was 6 years, although there was a difference of 8 years between the least and most experienced. Two teachers identified their first language as Japanese, and one answered this as English. Teachers differed in their types and levels of second language competency. Although all were certified to be early childhood education and care practitioners, the country of their certifications varied. Table 2 shows the demographics of the

teachers. T3 represents “Teacher for the 3-year-olds”, T4 represents “Teacher for the 4-year-olds,” and T5 represents “Teacher for the 5-year-olds.”

Table 2. *Demographics of the Teachers*

| Class in-charge | Gender | Years of teaching | Native language | Second language (competency) | Country of ECEC Certification |
|------------------|--------|-------------------|-----------------|------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 3-year-olds (T3) | Female | 6 years | Japanese | English (intermediate) | Japan, Australia |
| 4-year-olds (T4) | Female | 2 years | English | Japanese (intermediate) | Japan |
| 5-year-olds (T5) | Male | 10 years | English | Japanese (fluent) | Australia |

(Source: Authors’ Own Illustration)

Interviews were semi-structured, with questions pertaining to how teachers worked to increase children’s speech production. The longest interview lasted for 58 minutes 47 seconds, and the shortest interview lasted for 42 minutes 17 seconds. On average, the interviews were 52 minutes 58 seconds. This was conducted after the first academic term in July. The interviews took place in a meeting room during the summer when the children were on break. The room was on the same floor as the faculty room, but the door was closed for privacy. Ethical considerations were verbally described before the study and all participants agreed to be interviewed. The investigation was approved by the ethics committee of the affiliated college (Approval number: 2024-1).

The English immersion classes are conducted in a government-certified kindergarten in Tokyo. Children can enroll in this program starting at the age of 3. Classes are held five days a week in the afternoon for four hours. The immersion classes are treated as an extracurricular activity and are held at the same time as other extracurricular activities such as dance, soccer, and gymnastics, which are conducted in Japanese. Some children in the immersion class who also participate in other extracurricular activities leave in the middle of class, join the other programs in Japanese, and then come back to the immersion class. Therefore, the number of children in each class varies according to the day of the week.

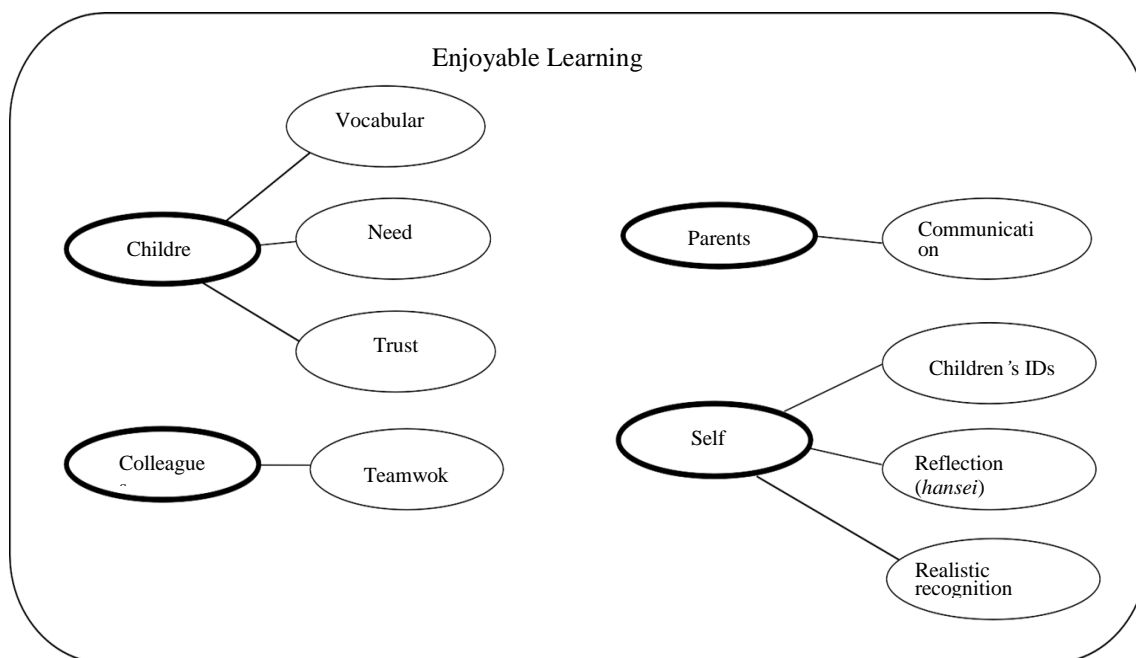
Interview data were transcribed and analyzed using Braun and Clarke’s (2022) reflexive thematic analysis approach. For accounts that were given in Japanese, these were translated into English by the researcher. The six-phases of the approach were followed: familiarizing oneself

with data, labeling using codes, identifying themes, checking the validity of and refining themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up the results.

4. Results and Discussion

Analysis revealed the existence of specific strategies that teachers use and the challenges they encounter in promoting English speech of children. Figure 1 is the thematic map that was created from the analysis.

Figure 1: *Thematic Map of the Strategies Used by Teachers Note.*



(Source: Authors' Own Illustration)

ID refers to individual difference. It was found that at the center of the teachers' concerns was creating an enjoyable learning environment for children. There were four stakeholders involved: children, colleagues, parents, and interviewees themselves.

4.1 Children

Towards children, teachers appeared to choose topics according to the children's interests. T3 made the following comment. Children nowadays especially like to dance and sing, and once they learn certain words, they like to use them right away in conversations. *So...I try to incorporate a lot of activities pertaining to these words. Also, last year's children really liked show-and-tell so I made templates for both questions and answers so children could speak easily. I'm not sure what this year's children are interested in yet though...I changed the activities we did*

last year and the year before too according to children's interests, so I really don't have fixed activities that I do every year. T4, who was in her second year as a teacher, mentioned that at first, she taught children what she thought they should learn. However, she quickly found this approach to be unsuccessful and altered her approach. At first, I kind of rushed into it because I only thought about preparing and what activities I should conduct. But I realized that children are not going to learn that quickly. And I think the first month or two I saw them kind of struggling to write their names and speak English. And I think there could have been a lot of improvements with that. But you know, it was an error and I learned from that mistake. So what I base the theme on now is from what they're interested in.

The importance of educating children according to their interests is an idea which has been emphasized in previous research (e.g., Dewey, 1938; Piaget, 1952; Vygotsky, 1978). Doing this further engages children in their learning and fosters deeper inquiry and understanding of things (Hedges, 2014). Both comments suggest that the interviewed teachers are doing this in their classrooms.

Teachers also appeared to be mindful of the order of instruction and content of new words that they introduce to children. T3 said, *Children first memorize days of the week and the names of objects, so first I teach them these. Once they get used to English, then I introduce colors and emotions. I teach emotions such as happy, sad, and angry towards the beginning and encourage children to tell me how they're feeling.*

Furthermore, teachers seemed concerned about building a trusting relationship with children. This was seen in T5's comment. *I really think, especially small children, that their relationship with their teachers and friends really affect their verbal output of English. If they feel they're in an environment where they can talk...want to talk to someone...I really think this has an enormous impact. This importance of a trusting relationship with teachers is also emphasized in previous studies (e.g. Hashimoto & Nakamura, 2021).*

4.2 Colleagues

Teachers focused on building teamwork with their colleagues. This sometimes helps teachers reflect on their own practices. T4 said, *I have to watch myself because the words that I use may not be what they understand. Because these children...they're just starting to learn the language. Other teachers show and tell me how to break words down so 4 and 5-year-olds will understand.*

Teamwork also seems important to increase understanding of the children. The following is a comment from T5.

I pick up on what children are interested in from watching them in their Japanese classes or through what the Japanese class teachers tell me the children are interested in now.

In addition to the positive effects of collaboration mentioned above, this is also beneficial by allowing teachers to take risks, resolve issues, and manage uncertainties (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

4.3 Parents

Parents appear to help teachers understand how the child is at home and their enthusiasm for English. This was mentioned in the interview by T4. T4 talked about a parent's reply as to why her daughter was good at English.

When I asked her mom one day, she said...the mom said, she doesn't really know either. But I think she may have mentioned that maybe she watches like some kind of English program at home. Sophia, I think, the Disney Princess? Sophia, I think, and I think she just watches it and learns all this English. I think that's where she got that from.

Collaborating with parents is acknowledged as essential to promote the best interests of children (Epstein, 2013; Oppenheim-Shachar & Berent, 2021; Willis et al., 2021). This applies to EFL situations as well, where parental involvement can increase children's motivation and engagement (Zhou & Ng, 2016). Moreover, parents' positive attitudes towards English learning have proven beneficial for children's affect (Alexiou, 2009; Prošić-Santovac & Savic, 2021).

4.4 Self

Regarding strategies used by teachers themselves, this involves being mindful of the individual differences (IDs) of children, regular reflection on one's practice, and realistic recognition of the amount of English retention children will have. Individual differences of learners have traditionally been known to play an influential role in language learning (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015; Saito et al., 2023). As this effect appears to be greater at an early age (Courtney & Graham, 2017), teachers of pre-primary and primary learners need to be mindful of this in classroom management. An example of an ID seen in the classroom was given by T3.

Sometimes there are children who are silent in certain situations. There was a child in this year's class who I thought might have this characteristic...I had really never heard him utter a word. But this boy started speaking all of the sudden during summer school. This is probably the most

shocking thing that happened this summer! Once he started talking, he also started to repeat the English words I say.

Keeping children's IDs in mind may provide children with a comfortable environment in which to voluntarily speak English at their own pace. Another strategy employed by teachers in the English immersion classes was regular self-reflection. T4 made the following comment.

I've been having those days recently where as a native speaker who knows English and then when I come across children, it's like it doesn't come out the way that I want it to. Which...nobody's perfect, but when it comes out, it's like...I could have done this better. I could have done that better. And it's like...as a native speaker who knows English, it's kind of embarrassing to not know proper English words that are very simple.

This theme was also seen in T3's account.

At the end of the day, I always think in my head and reflect on how the day went and how I can improve the next day or the following day. It is worth noting that self-reflection is a philosophy which may be more highly-valued in Japan than in other parts of the world. Self-reflection is known as hansei and taught from childhood in Japan (Izumi-Taylor, 2009). A study conducted by Izumi-Taylor et al. (2010) which compares this concept between Japanese and American pre-service teachers who major in early childhood education, found that perceptions of reflection varied between the two countries. Thus, the value placed on this by teachers could be unique to Japan.

The final strategy focused on by teachers was the realistic acknowledgment of the extent to which children will retain English. The teachers seemed to believe that children may forget the English they learn through their immersion experience in early childhood. T5 made this comment.

I want children to remember that English is fun. As an early childhood educator, I want to be part of a special experience for children...that's why I decided to be an English immersion teacher. But I realize that it's going to be difficult for most children to continue with their English after learning it here for 1, 2, or 3 years...I mean, it's pretty expensive to continue. Considering this, I think one goal of this English immersion class is...well, my goal in this class is that children remember how fun their English experience was. If they have this, when they decide to start learning again, or when they go to elementary school, they might have more confidence in it than children who have never learned English. Since they have English skills, they may be able to teach others, and this could lead to self-confidence which in turn would contribute to their well-being and growth.

This realistic recognition was also echoed by T3.

I sometimes wonder whether I really need to emphasize English output...I mean, even if I teach children how to output in English, if they don't use the language, they're going to forget how to. While the goal of immersion education is to acquire the target language, it may be necessary for teachers to focus on educating the whole child instead of excessively focusing on their second language acquisition due to this practical acknowledgment, a concept also noted by previous studies (e.g., Hashimoto & Nakamura, 2021).

5. Conclusion

This study focused on strategies that kindergarten teachers in immersion settings use to improve children's English speech production. To support children, teachers employ strategies such as choosing topics that match children's interests, introducing new vocabulary in a well-thought out way, and building a trusting relationship with rapport. When interacting with parents, teachers were careful to have close and frequent communications, which fostered a collaborative approach to the children's education. Teachers use cooperative techniques with their colleagues to foster camaraderie and maintain a harmonious learning atmosphere. In terms of their practices, teachers conduct regular introspection, considering children's individual differences, and set naturalistic expectations regarding children's English retention at this young age. In conclusion, this study indicates that teachers adopt a holistic approach to address the needs of all stakeholders, with a primary focus on the well-being of the children. The findings suggest that teachers in English immersion programs employ child-centered strategies, even within educational frameworks that emphasize target language acquisition.

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