Issues Concerning Classroom Practices in Fostering Japanese Elementary Students' English Communicative Competence

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1.　Introduction

Teaching English to young leaners (YLs) remains one of the largest growing areas of EFL education and research worldwide. With a deeper understanding of how developing communicative skills from a young age positively affects later foreign language development, more and more research is going into revealing pedagogies that effectively foster young learners' communicative competency. Educators and parents are eager to see their children develop English skills that would offer them better opportunities in a more global future.

From April of 2018, Japanese public elementary schools will enter their tenth year of teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) to students. Some schools have an even longer history with teaching EFL, as many opted to incorporate English lessons for their students as far back as 2002.

Although the last 10 years of official elementary school English lessons have focused exclusively on fifth and sixth grade students, from 2018, English lessons will be introduced to the third and fourth grade levels with 15 annual class hours, increasing to 35 hours by 2020. Additionally, fifth and sixth grade English lessons will be boosted from the current 35 class hours to 50 class hours per year, and doubling to 70 class hours by 2020 (MEXT, 2017).

In 2011, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) established the official objectives for elementary school English education with a focus on using the language and developing communicative abilities (MEXT, 2009b: 2):

1. Deepen experiential understanding of foreign language and culture through the foreign language.
2. Become familiar with the language in a proactive manner.
3. Cultivate communicative abilities.

Despite some curriculum changes and starting from the third grade level, from 2018 and onwards, MEXT's stated goal for English lessons in focusing on developing elementary students' *communicative ability* remains largely unchanged (MEXT, 2017: 15):

Through use of the foreign language in communication, establish a viewpoint and way of thinking in the foreign language. Through language activities, such as listening and speaking in the foreign language, the aim is to cultivate the qualities and abilities for the foundations of communication.

This paper will consider the actual classroom efforts utilized to achieve these stated language goals by contrasting established communicative EFL pedagogy with observations from an actual classroom. After reviewing some of the core theories and research behind YLs' learning preferences and teaching practices that focus on developing YL's communicative competency, I will analyze interactions between teacher and students from a Japanese EFL lesson in order to highlight issues concerning teachers attending to cultivating their students' communicative abilities.

2.　Communicative EFL Pedagogy – Young Learner Preferences

There is much research available that helps to establish core pedagogies that are conductive in the development of YLs' communicative abilities. The main consideration that would seem obvious yet often glossed over, is that the ways in which YLs learn is inherently different from how older child learners learn, some of which are identified in Table 1 below. As such, elementary classroom pedagogies must also always be designed to reflect this fundamental difference.

Table 1: Differences in Younger and Older Child Leaners
（adopted from Pinter, 2006: 2）

Younger Child Learners	Older Child Learners
- understand meaningful messages, but cannot analyze language	- growing interest in analytical approaches and language as an abstract system
- lower awareness of the process of learning	- greater awareness of themselves as language learners
- more concerned with self than others	- greater awareness of others and their viewpoints
- enjoy imagination and movement	- show interest in real life issues

I will now briefly touch on a few of the key young learner learning preferences related in particular to EFL pedagogy and developing communicative skills in English.

Originally proposed by Lev Vygotsky in 1962, *sociocultural theory* proposes that children's language develops through social interactions and, within these interactions, children use language to construct their understanding of the world around them. In a way, young leaners are 'hardwired' to learn language through interaction with others, much like toddlers develop their own first language ability.

With this understanding of social learning then, we can imagine knowledge of language

as a puzzle, which YLs must piece together for themselves by means of interacting with others. Such a style of knowledge dissemination, which involves noticing and creating one's own understanding of the language through interactions, can be seen as a method of *indirect teaching*. Of this teaching style, Paul recommends that 'instead of being clear, (teachers) should create deliberate confusion' in order to 'stimulate the children to mentally reach out towards the new words and patterns' (2003: 16-17).

Conversely, *direct teaching* methods, where the puzzle of language use has been pre-assembled and is directly transmitted to students, would be comparably ineffective in helping YLs develop communicative competency. Wells defends this key pedagogical difference of YLs as he states that 'however unequal the balance of knowledge between teacher and learner, there is no way in which the knowledge of the teacher can be transmitted directly to the learner' (2009: 113).

Another of Vygotskys' concepts directly applicable to YL pedagogy is that of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). In simple terms, ZPD offers that the area of knowledge just beyond a child's current ability level can be learned through guidance and social interaction with an adult. Knowledge more advanced, and well beyond a child's current ZPD, is cognitively inaccessible, with or without an adult's assistance. Attempting to teach at a level beyond the child's current ZPD leads to frustration, while teaching below their ZPD level results in no learning growth.

As the child grows cognitively, so does their ZPD change and grow. Children at the same age and educational level may all be at varying ZPD levels, and only through interaction with the student may a teacher know and adjust their teaching to fit the child's current ZPD level. YL's are unable to recognize what it may be about something that they don't understand and need assistance with. Additionally, as children are always eager to receive praise, many will feign understanding to please the teacher. Understanding YL's L2 language learning in this way, we can see that interaction, specifically a 2-way dialogue between teacher and student, is essential for both the child's own L2 development, as well as allowing for the teacher to recognize and adjust their teaching to match their students' needs.

For many elementary school teachers, this may represent a paradigm shift in how they employ themselves in the language classroom. The teacher's function needs to shift to that of exercising *assisted learning,* to become a co-partner in the child's discovery and creation of L2 knowledge. Such a role is much less attune to the more traditional image of a teacher, but more representative of a *coach,* preparing and training the children for the activity through demonstration, interaction, and practice, yet ultimately allowing for the children to actually attempt to do the L2 activity on their own, in order to grow and develop. Bruner states that 'language is acquired not in the role of spectator but through use… being exposed to a flow of language is not nearly so important as using it in the midst of doing' (1990). There are many basic classroom techniques such as scaffolding, eliciting, paraphrasing, and recasting that naturally lend to this style of teaching.

Along with the understanding of YLs as social leaners, we must also consider childrens'

learning preferences in regards to the actual L2 presented and used in the classroom. As identified at the beginning of this section, YLs are most interested in talking about themselves, as well as things immediate to them and their everyday lives. Therefore, in order to tend to this preference, the L2 presented and used in class should hold immediate *communicative value* and interest to the YL, as these choices impact *learner motivations* to use and learn the L2.

Unfortunately, this is an area where many classroom activities may come up short. To be relevant and of interest to YLs, the L2 should be presented and used as a tool to communicate new information that is of interest to the leaners. However, often the L2 is presented as the subject of study of the lesson, used solely for display purposes, and separated of any real immediate communicative value. Wells identifies that 'learning occurs through using language to explore new ideas and solve authentic problems that are of importance to everyone involved' (2009: XV). In many YL EFL classroom activities and games, teachers may mistakenly interpret students' laughter and active enthusiastic participation in such activities as interest in the language itself, or even as a sign of students' learning. However, many times the YLs' motivations for such tasks is instrumental, such as receiving a reward, winning a game, showing-off, or merely to please or avoid a negative reaction from the teacher. By creating classroom contexts that provide YLs opportunities to communicate in meaningful ways, teachers can not only positively affect students' communicative skills, but also enables integrative motivations to learn the L2.

Equally as important are the language choices that the teacher makes in the language classroom. Although it is essential for the teacher to interact meaningfully with the students to encourage the development of communicative ability, the format of the interaction must also be considered. Quite common to the language classroom are interactions between teacher and student that follow the *IRF pattern,* where the teacher *initiates,* the student *responds,* and the teacher *follows up,* typically with some sort of feedback on the student's language use.

The IRF exchange is uncommon outside of the classroom, as in everyday speech, either party may *initiate* or *respond* to the others *initiation*. Additionally, in everyday speech, it would be very odd, and even condescending, for either party to provide *follow up* feedback on the other's language use. Although many teachers may not even give second thought to such IRF interactions, we must question what type of communicative skills we are offering to students who are never given the opportunity to initiate, or always, and perhaps nervously, expecting some sort of feedback on the accuracy of their language use. Indeed, IRF in the classroom is a 'closed rather than an open discourse format... it cannot be a valid candidate for interaction... its value in terms of motivation, attention, and self-determination must be questioned' (Van Lier, 1996: 152).

As we can see even from the few examples of YL learning preferences presented here, the way EFL teachers must approach their classes is fundamentally different from teaching older learners is many ways. Certainly YL EFL pedagogies cannot simply be glossed over or filled merely with random songs and games if teachers hope to truly attend to helping develop

their student's communicative competency in English. In the following section, we will look at interactions from an actual elementary school EFL lesson to reveal how the teacher attends to their own YLs' learning preferences in the development of their communicative abilities.

3.   Observations from the Classroom

In this section I will analyze interactions between a teacher and their students in a Japanese elementary school English classroom. Examining selected excerpts, I will consider and contrast some of the learning preferences of young learners and communicative language learning pedagogy that were introduced in the previous section. In doing so, it will be easier to gain insight into whether students' English communicative abilities are actually being attended to in this Japanese EFL classroom example.

The class observed is a fifth grade lesson that uses the English Notebook syllabus (MEXT, 2009a). The lesson is from unit eight of the English Notebook, and is lesson number 29 out of the 35 total English classes allotted for the academic year (MEXT, 2009b). As with many EFL textbooks, each unit in English Notebook has a theme, and the theme of this particular unit is entitled 'let's make a schedule!'. As with most of the other units in the English Notebook, this unit is split into four class hours, each class hour being 45 minutes long.

I shall start off by looking at interactions from the very beginning of the lesson. As with every lesson, the teacher and students start by exchanging standardized greetings. Please note that for all excerpts in this section, English utterances are marked in bold, Japanese utterances in italics, with English translations for the spoken Japanese in brackets.

Excerpt 3.1

> T: **How are you today?**
>
> Ss: (in unison) **I'm fine, thank you. And you?**
>
> T: **Uh...I'm … tired. Hungry** *de ha nai desu yo* [I'm not {hungry}.] (Ss laugh)…
>
>   **tired**…*tsukareta* [tired]… *chotto tsukaru to iu imi desu* [it means I am a
>
>   little tired.]…**Thank you**…*ahhh, shukudai wo wasure ga ookute* [{I'm
>
>   tired because} so many of you forgot your homework.]

Here, the teacher addresses the class as a whole, and students respond in unison. Due to the teacher's initiation of the exchange as well as the formulaic question response pattern, the exchange could hardly be considered conversational. As identified in the previous section, IRF interactions such as these actually have little conversational merit. The teacher also immediately sets the tone for the remainder of the class when they switch to Japanese,

providing a translation for the English they just spoke. The teacher continues their turn by explaining why they are tired, information which actually holds some communicative value for the listeners. As such, it is unfortunate that the teacher follows it up in Japanese.

Excerpt 3.2

T: Ummm, **OK. How is the weather today?**

Ss: (in unison) **Sunny**.

T: **Sunny. OK**. *Hareteiru, ne* [It's sunny, right.]

In this excerpt, another formulaic question is posed in IRF format, and the class as a whole demonstrates their understanding of the teacher's question in correctly answering it. It is curious as to why then, in the teacher's feedback here, that they decide to also again translate their own spoken English into Japanese. Perhaps it is possible that this is a conscious language choice by the teacher to 'cover all their bases' by providing the meaning for students who may not have understood. As mentioned in section 2, YLs learn most effectively through noticing through *indirect teaching* rather than *direct* instruction. Therefore in this instance, it would seem an ideal chance for those students who possibly did not understand the meaning of the word *sunny* to have picked it up from the context of the situation, given that all of the students looked out the window before answering, and that the teacher as well looked out the window as they provided their feedback to the response.

Excerpt 3.3

T: *Ehhhto* [Um] **What… What's the date today? Today… what?**

Some Ss (in a low, uncertain voice): **February**. (can also hear other students

counting in English in low voices to themselves)

T: *Eh, ni gatsu wa?* [Um, what is February {in English}?]

Some Ss: **February**

The turns here also exhibit another common trait that is witnessed continually through this entire lesson. Although they did not seem totally confident in their contribution, it is clearly audible that a few students do understand the question and know the answer in English. For whatever reason, the teacher decides not to acknowledge these contributions.

Excerpt 3.4

T: **February… OK**… *Ehhh, jyuu-roku nichi wa?* [So, what is the 16th {in

    English}?]

Most Ss (in unison): **sixteen**

Here again, the teacher continues to ask the same questions about the L2 in Japanese. From this early stage of the lesson, the teacher is already establishing that the English used, no matter how formulaic, or how many times the students may have used it before, is not for the purpose of communication, but as a way for the students to demonstrate their knowledge of individual lexical items.

Excerpt 3.5

T: **Sixteen… OK**…Ehh, **what day is it today?** *Youbi ha?* [What day?]

Class (in unison): *Sasudei* [Thursday.]

T: *Sasudei* [Thursday.]… *Sasudei* [Thursday], OK… *Jya* [Well then,] **sit down.**

The final excerpt from the class opening above shows the teacher is no longer even waiting for students to respond to English questions before they provide students with a Japanese translation for it. All need for communication using English has been removed. Also, in the response, the students show that they understand the item *Thursday*, however, their pronunciation is marked with Japanese pronunciation, as the 'th' sound is a difficult one for Japanese speakers. Although the teacher would be aware of the correct pronunciation of this word, in their feedback contribution here, rather than using recasting to allow the students a chance to notice the correct pronunciation, they restate the students' marked contributions.

As the lesson continues after the initial greeting exchange, the teacher initiates a session intended to review the English names of school subjects, which the students studied in the previous lesson. Some of these exchanges are shown below. The teacher here is asking students what classes they have today and has listed numbers on the blackboard to fill in as students provide the answers. In this extract we find only IRF exchanges and teacher prompts in having the students repeat individual linguistic items in chorus.

Excerpt 3.6

T: *Saa… sann-ban-me?* [So, what is the third {class}?]

Some Ss: **mouse**… mouff… mass…mass…

T: **Math… Ok, math…. math** (some students repeating)… **math** *ha dou kaku*

no? [How do you spell math?] …(as writing) … math (some students

still repeating)…**math**…*ato? Tsugi ha?* [Next? What's next?]

Above, the teacher forgoes even asking a question in English and asks it Japanese, although students have already studied how to say numbers. We also see a few students struggling with the correct pronunciation of 'math'. This could have been an ideal opportunity for the teacher to *redirect* the question and elicit some peer scaffolding, yet the teacher perhaps decided it was more efficient to provide the correct pronunciation themself. deBoer reports success attending to YLs' communicative abilities in using question redirects in L2 interactions, as shown in the following excerpt from his study (2009: 48).

S3: Eh? **Eight… how do you say** *san-jyu-go* [fifteen] **in English**?

T: **I don't know. Does anyone know?**

S1: **Thirty five.**

S2: **Eight thirty five.**

As we continue looking at our own classroom interactions in the next excerpt, it becomes evident that the only English used are the individual linguistic items that have been set as the target language for the class.

Excerpt 3.7

> T: *eh? mazu wa* [what? well first {was}] … **lunch time** *data yo ne?* [it was lunch
>
>   time, wasn't it?] *doko itta yo ne?* [Where did it go?] (looking for
>
>   something) …*ah, minna no dai suki no* [everyone's favorite]… **lunch
>
>   time**…*soshite?* [and then?]
>
> Some Ss: **recess**
>
> T: **after… after lunch lime… lunch time** *no ato ha* [after lunch time]…
>
>   **recess**….*yasumi jikan datta.* [it was recess.]… *Ii ka na? Jya, kore igai?*
>
>   *kyou yatta igai no ha? Donna kyouka dake?* [OK?, So, {what else is
>
>   there} other than these {subjects}? {what else is there} other than{ what
>
>   we've already} done today? What subjects are there?]

It seems quite obvious throughout the exchange that, apart from some pronunciation issues, the students were familiar and confident with these items, and pose seemingly little challenge in their ZPD. Cameron points out that 'a teacher who uses the foreign language only for content of the lesson, and not for other purposes, reinforces the idea that the foreign language is a subject of study rather than a means of communication' (2001: 203). The objective seems only to proceed through the lesson plan as it has been plotted on paper. Five minutes of class time were spent on reviewing 12 separate linguistic items in this way.

As the lesson carries on, less and less English is used, and this is reflected in the next extract. However, I feel this extract is an important example for number of reasons.

Excerpt 3.8

> T: *machingu gemu yatte ikimasho*….[let's move on to the matching game]
>
>   *jya, kaado, hito-kumi dake wo dashite*…[So, please take out only one
>
>   set of cards]. (students getting cards from their desks)
>
> T: eh… *san-nin gumi de, san-nin gumi*…… [in groups of three, groups of three]
>
>   Some Ss: *eh!?* [what!?]

Here the teacher is preparing the students for a card matching game. In groups of three, the students will take turns flipping over two cards in the set to see if they match. Each

card has an illustration of the school subject, as well as its name in Japanese. There is no English written on the cards. The students must say only the name of the school subject on the cards they overturn in English.

This activity is set in a group setting that is naturally conductive to scaffolding amongst peers, and students were engaged in active dialogue with each other concerning the shared interest of the gameplay. Additionally, the teacher also used this time to roam between groups and interact with individual students. Unfortunately, for the entire eight minutes of this activity, no instances of scaffolding utilizing the English language were observed, nor was any English other than the subject names on the cards uttered by either teacher or students.

As the students have seemingly played this game previously, and were therefore likely familiar with the rules, it seemed a perfect opportunity to use English communicatively. Harbord identifies giving instructions in a task as 'one of the most genuine opportunities for teacher-student communication in the classroom... and an important source of language for student acquisition' (1992: 353). Game organization and rules could have been provided in English, allowing students the opportunity to notice English language that corresponds to a set of instructions they have followed previously, within the context of communicative need. After this, students could have been allowed to check the meaning of the instructions with others in their group. Cameron (2001: 211) also notes the benefits of such peer-checking in understanding L2 instruction.

Although not shown, immediately following the extract above, the teacher called on an individual student to recite the game rules to the class again in Japanese. That the teacher did so seems it would have provided even that much more reason to initially give the rules in English. If the teacher's choice of language in this instance is intentional, it is difficult to find much merit for the students in terms of English development. Furthermore, the teacher roaming and interacting with individual students during the activity also provided ideal chances for meaningful interaction which would allow the teacher to identify students' ZPD, and adjust the challenge accordingly. These turned out to be lost opportunities however, as the teacher's choice was to conduct all talk in Japanese. Cameron identifies that the teacher's choice of language use in the classroom has far-reaching effects on students:

> *It has become clear that the teacher, unavoidably, has ultimate responsibility for the movement between languages that happens in a lesson, and that the teacher's repeated patterns of choice contribute to constructing the overall attitudes of the class towards the foreign language.* (2001: 209)

After completion of the game described above, the class moved on to a second activity. In this activity students choose between one of four designated occupations: a soccer player, and astronaut, cook, or celebrity. They were then to design a single day's class schedule, choosing school subjects they thought would be relevant to that occupation. They were also asked to create their own unique school subject that would be of special relevance for that

occupation. As this activity promotes creative thinking within sharing opinions and dreams, it inherently should allow for some genuinely meaningful interactions of interest to the other students that could provide an opportunity for the students to develop some communicative competency if conducted as a communicative exercise.

Having affixed the school subject cards to a printout, some students would then be elected to present their custom class schedule to the entire class, using some simple English sentences to state what they study. Before being asked to present, the teacher demonstrated their own imagined schedule as an example and had the class repeat to practice the language forms they would use. Each student's printout showing their custom class schedule was placed on the OHP before they present. An excerpt from one of the student's presentations is shown below. Note that no English is used.

Excerpt 3.9

T (to Daiki, prompting): *jya sono tame no jikan-wari wo happypo shimasu* [So, I

will present the class schedule I created for that purpose]

Daiki: *sono jikan* [that time]

T (correcting, prompting): *sono tame no*…[for that purpose…]

Daiki: *sono tame no jikan-wari wo happypo shimasu* [I will present the class

schedule I created for that purpose]

One interesting observation is that in this interaction, the teacher frequently provides speaking prompts to the students not only in English, but also in Japanese. This is despite the fact that a number of students have already presented immediately beforehand, using the exact same patterns. Wells notes that allowing students more time to respond both increases student participation and the quality of the responses (2009: 276). We also notice that although it seems as if the student's first utterance was merely going to be a contracted form of the statement the teacher had been prompting, the teacher stops the student to realign his presentation to the 'determined' form. Examples such as these again reinforce that the teacher is modeling to the students the importance of form over function, in both English and Japanese. They also show how the teacher is less concerned with the students' actual learning, less with allowing students to use English spontaneously in attempting to transmit meaning, and more interested only with the students' final 'products'.

However, something interesting happens in this next excerpt below. Although the student had been following the teacher's prompts, here he raises his voice and overlaps what the teacher is saying, perhaps in an attempt to break free of the teacher's prompting and show the teacher that he indeed knows what to say. It is interesting that the teacher still feels

the need to repeat what the student has already correctly said in English when he says the word *math*. The teacher continues on with the turn they gained here, and begins prompting the student once again.

Excerpt 3.10

T (prompting) *sore de…yatta yo ne* [so next… we've {already} done this,

   right]…. **I study**

Daiki: **I study… science**… *niji kan me* [the second class period]

T: *to iu no wa iranai yo* [you don't need to say that)]..*don don iutte* [just keep

   talking)]…**science… social studies… English... Japanese**

Daiki (mirroring and overlapping teacher's prompts): **social studies...**

   English… Japanese…

Daiki (alone) : **math**

T: **math**….*soshite saigo wa?* [and what is last?].... **and?… and?** [pointing at

   OHP]

Daiki: *mujyuroyku* [weightlessness]

Although the majority of each student's actual spoken presentation is in Japanese, what little English is spoken by the students, whether prompted by the teacher or not, carries little communicative need for the class. Wells comments on the idea of children as imitative learners in that 'in one sense, of course, language is learned through imitation… but, in the sense of immediately repeating what an adult has just said as a means of learning it, there is no evidence that this is the main way in which children learn' (2009: 48). As the class schedule each student has made it shown on the OHP while the student is speaking, both the teacher and class already know what the presenting student will say. Without the exchange of new information between speaker and listener, the purpose of meaningful communication is lost.

As the lesson goes on, four students in total make such presentations in front of the class. Although the chime rings to signify the end of the lesson, the teacher elects one final student to present. As this particular student is always very energetic and enthusiastic about English lessons, the teacher and class are looking forward to her presentation, as shown in the excerpt below.

Excerpt 3.11

T (to Runa, prompting): *hai …mata…watashi no shorai ni naritai no wa?* [hai…

again… I want to become what in the future?]

Runa: *shorai ni naritai no wa kokku desu.* [I want to be a cook in the future]

T (prompting): *sono tame no jikan…* [for that purpose my class schedule …]

Runa (interrupting teacher): *sono ta*me no jikan-wari wo happyo shimasu... [I

will present to the class schedule I created for that purpose] (speaking

faster and with more confidence than previous students) …**I study**

home ec…..eh to, nan dake [um, what is that]…**arts & crafts**…..eh, to

[um]… **math**... eh... **Social studies... science...** *resutaran.*

T (immediately jumping in): *resutaran… saigo ni, nan to iu dake?* [restaurant…

what is it we say last?]

Runa: **and**… *resutaran iku to iu koto desu* [I will go to restaurant {class}]…

At the beginning of the presentation, the teacher again takes control in prompting the form of the students' utterances. However, the student asserts her initiative and starts speaking with more confidence and speed than any of the students before her. The student stumbles over 'arts and crafts', but she corrects herself. She also pauses before 'math' and 'social studies', but the teacher leaves her to it, and she provides the words herself.

However as we can see near the end, before allowing the student to finish on her own, the teacher immediately jumps in, interrupting the student's speaking turn and flow of communication, and asks her if she knows what word comes next. Although the teacher does not prompt the word, and the student successfully produces it on her own, the teacher stopped the student to create another opportunity to remind the class of the overriding importance of form. As Bruner states, 'function precedes form' (1996: 90), however, as observed in this lesson, there was very little communicative function with the overwhelming emphasis being on form.

Although it is quite shocking to realize how little actual English was being used in this English lesson, perhaps more concerning are the teachers' concepts of what communicative language teaching and language learning entail. The lesson was filled with IRF interactions, display questions, and prompting of specified language forms, both in English and Japanese. There were numerous lost opportunities where students could have learned by noticing or by scaffolding. Unfortunately, language in the lesson was either continually translated from

English into Japanese, or more frequently, not even presented in English to begin with.

All of the students came to the lesson with great enthusiasm and displayed enjoyment, particularly with the games. However, the English that was used seem to provide very little challenge. Although it was obvious that the students were eager to speak and share their thoughts with others, L2 communicative need was nonexistent, as visual cues, continual translations into Japanese, and teacher prompting nullified any meaningful interactions.

4. Discussion

In this section, we return to the original question that this paper asks: are practices in Japanese elementary school classrooms effective in cultivating students' communicative abilities? As far as the official line goes, MEXT's stated educational goal of developing elementary students' communicative competence certainly seems admirable. However, comparing the literature to the classroom interactions observed in this study, in this instance at least, we find pedagogies and practices ill-adapted to attend to this goal.

Research argues that YLs are social learners that are intrinsically motivated to communicate by nature. However, in contrast to older leaners, in order to develop language skills, YLs require an environment and opportunities to interact meaningfully, at a level of challenge appropriate to their ever-changing ZPD. Through interactions with their students, teachers can provide scaffolding and adjust the level of challenge appropriate to their ZPD to help support learners' discovery and creation of language. By creating YL-appropriate EFL learning contexts, and with an understanding of how YLs learn, teachers can enable intrinsic motivations for L2 learning in their students.

However, creating such contexts may require teachers to redefine their concepts of what 'teaching' and 'learning' entail, by employing indirect teaching methods that allow YLs to learn through noticing and experimentation with the L2. Conventional pedagogies, activities, songs, and games have their place and do their own part to affect YLs' learning and motivations in EFL. However, these motivations are often instrumental and to truly start to affect L2 communicative ability, teachers need to allow for more *meaningful* language use and interactions, where the focus is on fluency over form, in order to allow YLs opportunities to develop communicative language skills. Teachers also need to be aware of IRF usage, and make sure to allow chances for their students to initiate talk in interactions that can stimulate learning and language growth. As Wells states, 'children learn language because they are predisposed to do so... they are seekers after meaning who try to find the underlying principles that will account for the patterns that they recognize in their experiences' (2009: 49).

All language choices made by the teacher in the classroom should be in consideration for what is best for the student's learning. If a teacher feels that they must constantly force progression through a syllabus or textbook, actual communication chances are often neglected to focus on more controlled activities that are constantly 'preparing' YLs to be able to

communicate and present the L2 as a subject of study, rather than a tool for communication. Additionally, teachers may also mistakenly feel that translating all instances of the L2 to the L1 enable a more efficient understanding of the L2 presented, where in fact, the literature argues that the opposite is true for YLs. With this understanding of classroom L2 use, providing even more opportunities for students to engage the language, such as in activity instruction, classroom management, storytelling and reporting would seem prudent. As Wells says, 'in order to learn to talk, (children) need a considerable amount of experience of conversation; sheer quantity is important' (2009: 50).

MEXT has designated that elementary English classes must be fun for students in order for them to maintain a positive attitude towards communication. However, are opportunities to develop communicative competency being sacrificed when the teacher employs less-challenging, non-communicative language tasks for the sake of the students' enjoyment of the lesson? Cameron warns of the trade-off of fun to educational merit:

> *I have seen too many classrooms where learners are enjoying themselves on intellectually undemanding tasks but failing to learn as much as they might. The time available and busy school timetables for language teaching is too short to waste on activities that are fun but do not maximize learning.* (2001: 2)

Although the interactions analyzed for this study were taken from a single classroom observation, given the typically standard background of many elementary teachers and teacher training provided by MEXT and local Boards of Education, it would not be unrealistic to say the examples here are representative of at least a portion of public elementary English classrooms nationwide, and identify major pedagogical shortcomings in attending to the goals of developing students' communicative abilities.

6.　Conclusion

The EFL classroom practices identified in this study do not seem to be effectively attending to developing L2 communicative competency in elementary students as compared to the ways in which YLs learn language as detailed in relevant literature. As Japan now reaches a decade of elementary English aimed at cultivating students' communication skills, and embarks on introducing English lessons to even younger grade levels, there is much concern in the realization of these goals.

Although students appear enthusiastic and ready for the challenge, it seems there is a great need for teacher training in the many related aspects and unique challenges inherit to EFL teaching to YLs if the actual development of communicative ability is to be expected. In particular, the adopting of teaching methodologies that take advantage of YLs' learning preferences through social interaction in the classroom may be a challenge for educators who are unaware and unpracticed in such methods. However, despite the challenges, the author is

confident that great changes can occur if educators are trained and are allowed to focus on one simple concept: 'if you concentrate on communicating, everything else will follow' (Brown, 1977:26, cited in Wells, 2009: 57).

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