

Practicing “Education for International Understanding” through Language Learning in Japanese Primary Education

Mino MIYAMOTO

Abstract

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology decided to introduce foreign language activities in primary education in 2011, with the aim of providing students with a foundation of communication abilities through interactive activities with other students. To achieve this aim, students practice how to express their own views and participate in classroom.

This essay focuses on how to organize the curriculum by discussing two concrete tasks created by the author that aim at understanding local, national, and international cultures and traditions. Actual reactions from teachers and students are also discussed.

Keywords : Understanding diversity, Foreign language activities, Freedom of expression
Education for international understanding, Participation

1. Introduction

In 1996, the International Commission on education for the Twenty-First Century organized by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) ¹⁾ submitted a report that emphasized the importance of learning about diversity. The Japanese Central Education Council recognized this need and began to consider how it could be met in the Japanese educational context. The council interpreted diversity as identifying similarities and differences and accepting them without making a judgment as to whether they are right or wrong. To avoid forming prejudices toward different cultures and traditions, children should be aware that no single culture or tradition dominates the world. With the current globalization trend, there is an even greater need for children to understand the myriad cultures and traditions in the world. Regarding internationalization and education, the Japanese Council pointed out the following:

1. Since the Japanese have a narrow view of the world, their worldview should be broadened to accept diversity.
2. The Japanese need to establish their own identities as a foundation for international

understanding.

3. The Japanese should improve their communication abilities to express their views and show respect for other people in the world (Hattori&Yoshizawa, 2002).

Before we can accept diversity among other people, we must first have our own identity; and communication skills are necessary to be able to express our own views and share them with others. Therefore, it is worth discussing how education could be taught in a way that helps students improve their communication abilities. This paper contributes to the existing research on this issue by identifying an effective way for students to obtain communication abilities using language learning in Japanese primary education.

2. Movements in Current Japanese Education

The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (hereafter referred to as “the Ministry”) introduced the Period for Integrated Studies in 2002 for primary and secondary education. The Period for Integrated Studies provides students with opportunities to proactively think and make decision on their own (the Ministry, 2009b), which helps students establish their own identities. This can also be the basis for students to share their own views with others, which means learning to understand and respect different views. Various themes, such as the environment, welfare, information, health, international understanding, and human rights, have been taught during the Period for Integrated Studies. Through these themes, students can expand their understanding of diversity. According to a survey conducted by the Ministry (2009b) in 2007, approximately 90% of state primary schools actually conducted English activities as part of the international understanding theme in the Period for Integrated Studies. The survey shows that emphasis has been placed on the importance of learning English.

In relation to learning languages and understanding diversity, Article 19 of the Declaration and Integrated Framework of Action on Education for Peace, Human Rights and Democracy, adopted by the General Conference of UNESCO (1995), states, “Learning foreign languages offers a means of gaining a deeper understanding of other cultures, which can serve as a basis for building better understanding between communities and between nations”

Learning languages can be an effective way for students to experience different languages and understand foreign cultures and traditions. Language learning should aim at both gaining skills and, understanding diversity. The important point is that languages are taught through a combination of textbook studies and interactive communication activities both inside and outside the classroom.

Although there are increasing demands for learning foreign languages, in the current Japanese system, learning English is compulsory for secondary education. The question of whether to begin teaching English in primary school rather than secondary school has been hotly

debated for the past 22 years. The controversy centered on whether the Ministry recognized the need for teacher training and having the right materials for language learning. Eventually, in 2008, the Ministry bowed to pressures and decided to revise the Course of Study to introduce foreign language activities in the fifth and sixth grades of primary education, beginning in 2011. Foreign language activities are not restricted to one language, but they mainly refer to English. The aims of foreign language activities are far greater than just teaching foreign language skills; they also offer an opportunity to understand foreign and Japanese cultures and traditions, including the establishment of a self-identity.

This essay examines how foreign language activities could be organized from the aspects of teaching contents and methods by providing content about understanding diversity. To create the curriculum for the foreign language activities, this paper discusses how to provide students with opportunities to establish their own identities. This also encompasses how students can cooperate with others on the basis of those identities. Understanding and accepting others' similarities and differences is one of the most important lessons in education, and it can best be practiced by creating classrooms in a democratic way. This paper also explains the development and historical background of the Japanese education system by introducing related laws, such as the Japanese Constitution and the Fundamental Law of Education, to explain the tendencies and problems in the system. This will show why the democratic principal has not been practiced as stated in the Fundamental Law of Education introduced in 1947.

3. History of Japanese Education

From 1639 to 1853, owing to the laws of its ruling shoguns, Japan was almost entirely cut off from the outside world until the Meiji Restoration. Japan became a nationalistic, inward-looking country, and this mindset remains to the present day (Yamaguchi, 1970). In 1890, emperor introduced the Imperial Prescript, which dominated the Japanese education system until World War II. Under this prescript, the emperor was treated as a god; therefore, the nation had to obey and respect him. After World War II, the emperor proclaimed himself a human being,²⁾ and discussions took place to decide whether the original Imperial Prescript should remain in its current form.

In 1946, the Japanese Constitution, which lists the duties of the state and the rights and freedoms of citizens under the principles of democracy, was introduced.³⁾ According to the philosophy of the constitution, there was a need to change the Japanese education system in a democratic way.

In 1947, the Fundamental Law of Education, which provided that all Japanese citizens should have a democratic education.⁴⁾ However, Japan still had strong nationalistic tendencies, which could not be changed in such a short period. In 1955, the topic of the emperor was added to the Course of Study to teach students to feel a sense of loyalty toward the emperor. Since that time,

moral education has been emphasized on the basis of nationalistic patriotism, which expects students to respect the emperor and follow educational guidance from the government. Moreover, the necessity of revising the Fundamental Law of Education, specifically whether to add the definition of patriotism, had been discussed by the government.

Under globalization, not only Japan, but also England and Wales tried to improve their national education systems, but they took different approaches. England and Wales tried to unite as a nation and provide more opportunities for citizens to participate in society and express their own views. For example, in 2002, England introduced citizenship education into the national curriculum for secondary education, which aimed to raise positive citizens by letting students participate in education.

On the other hand, in Japan, in 2006, the Fundamental Law of Education was revised by adding the concept of patriotism as one of the purposes of education⁵⁾. Since then, the Japanese have actually feared that education might be changed to create a feeling of loyalty toward the emperor in a way that might be seen as extremely nationalistic, and the interpretation of the revised Fundamental Law of Education remains controversial. Ideally, patriotism should not be extreme nationalism or exclusive but should encompass the meaning of accepting diversity within the country and around the world. If Japan considers only its national culture and traditions and excludes diversity, the Japanese people, as has occurred in the past, will be left behind in the world. It is important to get rid of national boundaries and accept the similarities and differences of people within the country and around the world.

There is a hope that the introduction of foreign language activities in primary education in 2011 is one of the best opportunities for transforming nationalistic patriotism into cosmopolitanism, which accepts diversity in local, national, and international spheres.

4. Classroom Environment

Organizing classrooms in a democratic way is an important aspect of teaching and will be discussed in this section. It is important to create classrooms where students can participate by freely expressing their views and cooperating with other students under the principle of equality. As the current Japanese education system is organized by teacher-centered method, there is a considerable lack of student participation in classrooms. Thus, one aim of foreign language activities is geared toward developing students' abilities, making one of the best chances to provide participatory opportunities for students to express their views. At the same time, both students and teachers have an equal right to express their views when fairness and justice are maintained, and all views should be taken into consideration in order to organize the class and school communities in a democratic way. It is also important that teachers have an equal right to participate at the same level as students.

5. Aim of Foreign Language Activities

This section discusses the objective of foreign language activities, which the Course of Study describes as follows:

To form the foundation of pupils’ communication abilities through foreign languages while developing the understanding of languages and cultures through various experiences, fostering a positive attitude toward communication, and familiarizing pupils with the sounds and basic expressions of foreign languages (the Ministry, 2009c).

What I want to emphasize here is that understanding diversity is not stated as one of the aims; instead, developing a foundation of communication abilities is listed as the aim. This aim can be interpreted to include understanding diversity. Communication can also be a foundation for students to understand diversity because there is no doubt that communication is necessary for people to understand each other, not only in classrooms, but also in a broader sense. Thus, communication abilities as a means of expressing one’s own views and listening to others can be the basis for students understanding diversity. Students should also be aware that communication cannot be achieved only by individuals practicing their freedom of expression since there is always conflict between one’s freedom and that of others. Through communication, students learn how to cooperate with others.

As a way to teach communication abilities, the Course of Study emphasizes the importance of interaction with others through activities related to students’ daily lives and intercultural topics. Through interactive activities, students can share their views with each other, and this learning can give students the knowledge, skills, and attitudes they need to change their behavior.

6. Example of Curriculum

This section introduces the actual curriculum and practices devised by the author. I worked with the Tokyo Board of Education in 2009, where I was assigned to work on curriculum study. I was also involved with some public primary schools in Tokyo, where I observed classes in which the curriculum was actually taught. Each of the classes I observed had 1 teacher and about 30 students. The teachers used simple English for instruction but mainly gave explanation in Japanese. In this paper, I focus on the reactions of one teacher and 30 students from one particular school, which I frequently visited and where I advised teachers in order to motivate them in their teaching.

The curriculum was designed according to one of the contents of foreign language activities provided in the Course of Study: “Teachers should enable pupils to deepen their understanding not only of the foreign language and culture, but also of the Japanese language and culture through

Foreign Language Activities” (the Ministry, 2009c).

I interpret this statement as providing activities for experiencing different languages and broadening cross-cultural understanding through deepening one’s understanding of one’s own language and culture. This form of study also leads students to understand similarities and differences among people within their country and around the world. Diversity exists not only in a wide scale, but also in a small scale, such as in our surroundings, including classrooms. Thus, it is important to note that students can discover their different identities by participating with each other in the classroom.

Before introducing the actual plan, I should mention the sub-materials provided by the Ministry known as “English notebooks 1 and 2” for fifth and sixth graders. These are not blank notebooks; they include writing parts, which students can actually fill in. They are not considered textbooks, so teachers and students are not required to cover all of the lessons in the books. Since foreign language activities do not specify the use of certain textbooks, there is more freedom for teachers to use different materials and create their own curriculums. The English notebooks can be used as supplementary materials, but teachers have expressed several problems with them, such as “there is little connection between the lessons and in each lesson, a variety of topics is raised. They might be used for just memorizing information or specific words and expressions.” Even if the notebooks are used, it may be necessary to re-order the lessons to allow the students to pick up related topics and therefore to make their own connections, so they gain integrated knowledge through activities.

One idea for creating curriculum is to include task activities, which require students to think and discuss topics with others. In this paper, I introduce a curriculum containing two tasks that I made for sixth graders. The tasks focus on cross-cultural understanding. I expect students to think, make their own decisions, and proactively express their views during the activities. I planned the tasks so that they include both individual and pair or group work, so students have time to form their own opinions and then share their views with others. This format allows students to establish their own identities and learn to cooperate with others by exchanging and listening to their views. To create a participatory atmosphere throughout the activities should be emphasized. Teachers were responsible for being involved in the activities with students.

The title of the first task is “Introducing different cultures.” This task is organized in total of ten lessons. To keep students motivated and allow them to gain integrated background knowledge during the task, the task planning had several key factors, which are based on the theory of Japanese education practitioners, Takashima and Higashino (2007). The aims of the task are as follows:

1. For students to positively show their interest in world cultures and traditions.
2. For students to participate in the classroom by working on their own and in groups.
3. To create a forum for students to use their English abilities and to make a presentation on

their chosen countries in English.

4. For students to listen to other students’ presentations in English and understand new cultures and traditions.

Then ten lessons were created to achieve the aims of this task. In the first lesson, students individually choose the countries they want to visit. After they choose their countries, they form groups and share their views and experiences by looking at a world map. Providing an opportunity for students to initially think for themselves and then to participate in a group discussion works well because it helps students learn to form their own opinions first and then to share their views and experiences with others. At the end of the first lesson, students introduce their chosen countries in front of the classroom by saying “I would like to go to…” and presenting a picture of the country’s flag that they have drawn. After everyone has made their short speech, students review the first lesson and make any comments they may have about choosing the countries according to their interests or about other students’ speeches.

(Teacher’s comment)

When I conducted this first lesson, students raised positive comments, such as, “I heard classmates’ interests about foreign countries that surprised me.” Also, some students expressed positive reactions, saying they wanted to learn about the cultures and traditions, especially of their chosen countries.

In the very last part of the lesson, students are told they will be making their own presentations about the culture and traditions of their chosen countries at the end of the tenth lesson.

From the second to the fourth lessons, students learn about other countries; cultures, and traditions, including the names of foreign countries and their flags, annual world events like Halloween and Christmas, time differences around the world, and world heritage and Japanese culture, by using English notebook 2. It is the only time that the English notebook is used during the two tasks. This is the base knowledge part for students to learn about the cultures and traditions and obtain skills regarding related English words and expressions. It is important at this stage to create a participatory atmosphere in the classroom through games and songs. For example, an information gap activity may be useful when introducing games. The information gap is frequently used in language learning to give students opportunities to express themselves in target languages. Each student has different information, and he or she must communicate with others in the target language to find out the complete information. This activity is conducted as a game. It is good to introduce fun activities. The important point is that the topics be related to the title of the task, such as world customs and annual events, so students’ interest in the topic will be increased. I actually witnessed an improvement in students’ motivation to learn about world cultures once the activities and the final presentation goal were set.

During the fifth and sixth lessons, the students individually set their action assignments and search for information on the cultures and traditions of their chosen countries. Through this individual work, students find and learn about the similarities and differences between countries such as food, history, cultures, and traditions. Some students may need support in finding information, while others may have difficulty understanding what they need to search for. Thus, teachers have an important role in advising and helping students. After they collect enough information and get ideas on what they are going to present, the students who chose the same countries or regions share their findings with one another. Through this group work, students have the opportunity to communicate with others.

From the seventh to the ninth lessons, students individually prepare presentation in Japanese, and teachers help students translate them into English. Students also plan how to make their presentations more effective by using gestures or showing items like pictures or particular objects. After they practice their translated presentation, students get into pairs so that they can practice together by pointing out good points and issues that need to be improved. Interactive activities are effective for students to learn together.

(Teacher's comment)

I could see that students try hard to practice their speech on their own and in pair, since they wanted to introduce their interests to other students as their final goal. I found that the pair work was useful for students to learn positive and negative points from each other, which they could not find while they worked on their own. They could communicate interactively with other students as well.

In the tenth lesson, students make presentation about their chosen countries. The speeches differ depending on the students, who raise a variety of issues such as Greek myths, American culture, and sightseeing spots in Italy. The presentations provide an opportunity for the whole class to participate in by asking questions about the other students' chosen countries. After all of the presentations are completed, students are given review sheets so that they can write down what they experienced during the activity, what they learned from other students, what they found most interesting, and how they wanted to improve their presentations next time.

(Outcome of this task and findings from students' review sheets)

Many students wrote that they learned new things from other students. Also, they were satisfied with achieving their goals in making their own presentations. Some students found English interesting, and others wanted to make presentations again on different topics.

Through this task, the students were able to establish their own identities by thinking and making judgment on their own. Also, they improved their communication abilities by participating in classroom activities. Having to present their findings to the rest of the class

allowed students to share their opinions about findings. Also, they learned new information about cultures and traditions from other students. It was clear that the students remained motivated until the end of the activity. I believe that working with others gives students actual experiences that help them understand similarities and differences. Through this task, students could gain multicultural perspectives and participate by expressing their own views and listening to others' views.

For the second task, students mainly work in groups, so they have opportunities to interact with other students by expressing their views, listening to others, and cooperating with each other. This task is organized in total of nine lessons. The main task is to share Japanese culture and traditions with people outside of Japan. It is important for students to have listeners in order to increase their motivation.

This section describes an example of this task that I observed at one school, where the students interacted with a family in the UK, whose five homeschooled children served as listeners for the Japanese students. The English children were primary and secondary level students. The task began when the English family sent a video letter to the Japanese students introducing themselves and their lifestyle, including homeschooling. After the Japanese students received the video letter, they planned to introduce Japanese cultures and traditions to the English family in return video letter. The task, which was titled “Introducing Japanese culture to English students,” had the following aims, which I define on the basis of Takashima and Higashino’s (2007) theory:

1. For students to have an opportunity to discuss the aim of education and different learning styles
2. For students to communicate with other students in groups and decide which cultures to introduce and how they should be presented.
3. For students to use English for their presentations.
4. For students to clearly and concisely explain Japanese cultures and traditions to the students overseas.

In the first lesson of the task, students are given information about different types of education, such as homeschooling. Through understanding that going to school is not the only way of learning, students can think about what the aim of education is and why they go to school. In this paper, I especially focus on homeschooling because I chose to highlight the English family that homeschooled their children. The Japanese tend to think homeschooling is problematic and consider it only as an option for students who drop out of school. However, in England and America for example, it is another way of learning, and it is socially accepted that parents and children have the right to choose their style of learning. After learning about homeschooling, students understand that schools are not the only places for children’s education and growth. They

also become aware that parents have a responsibility to discover their children's interests and abilities regarding education. With this knowledge, students are shown the video from the English family. Before the end of the first lesson, teachers explain to the students what they are going to do in the next eight lessons.

From the second to the fourth lessons, students are given time to individually think about which topic interests them most from the following choices: (1) themselves, (2) city life, (3) countryside, (4) religions, (5) food and drink, (6) traditional dress, (7) leisure activities, (8) the royal family, (9) technology, (10) government, (11) family life, (12) architecture, (13) geography of Japan, (14) gardens, (15) music and drama, and (16) wildlife (*the topics were discussed and decided with the author and the English family.*). After having opportunities to think by themselves, students share their views with others. This helps students establish their identities through thinking on their own. Students create groups and discuss the investigation topics they will ultimately present to their fellow students. After they choose their topics, they search for information on the Internet and in newspapers. The students discuss their findings with other students and share their researcher roles to reach common findings for their presentations.

(Teacher's comment)

They actively shared their findings by checking information about their topics. Teachers should help some students who are not able to participate as actively as others. Also, teachers should point out good findings in group discussions with the classroom so that other groups are motivated to work hard.

From the fifth to the sixth lessons, students are given time to prepare and practice their presentation. During this time, teachers help them translate their Japanese presentation into English and record them on tapes so that students can practice. The students also prepare pictures and other objects that support their presentations.

(Teacher's comment)

During this time, students took turns practicing and commenting on each other's work in groups. Group work seemed active because all of the members of each group had to cooperate to make a presentation together. Through this, students actually experienced how to share their roles in searching for information and making presentations.

In the seventh lesson, each group makes a presentation and records it on a video tape to send to the students overseas.

(Teacher's comment)

During the recording, students in other groups were the audience and listened to the other

groups’ presentations. They raised good and bad points about each other and learned how they could improve their presentations. Also, students in the same group raised comments about each other, which was also important for them to cooperate within the group and share their findings.

In the eighth lesson, the Japanese students receive comments from the students overseas and exchange their views through letters and e-mails.

(Teacher’s comment)

The students from the U.K. commented that they were surprised how good the English ability of Japanese students was. Also, they could learn about Japanese cultures, which were very new and interesting. They really appreciated the presentations.

Japanese students were also happy to receive their comments. They were particularly interested in actually communicating with the students in the UK. For most of the students, this was their first time to experience contact with people overseas. They were very excited and motivated to participate throughout the task. I could also see some positive changes in students’ behaviors; for example, one shy student found the confidence to speak out after giving the presentation and receiving warm messages from the students in the U.K.

In the ninth lesson, Japanese students review the task by raising their opinions in the classroom and filling out the review sheets.

(From students’ comments)

Many students expressed how much their experiences in this task meant to them. They wrote that they wanted to try the same activity again.

In the second task, students were given opportunities to learn about different ways of learning. They were surprised to learn about homeschooling since it was new to them. Some students realized that schools were not the only places for learning. In addition, by actually exchanging information about cultures and traditions with students in the UK, Japanese students were able to experience cross-cultural understanding through communication. It is clear that students are able to expand their attitudes toward participation and improve their communication abilities through completing these two activities.

7. Evaluation

The Ministry has not yet set criteria for evaluating foreign language activities. Generally, the Grading policy of students points out the following:

- to examine students' good points and progress,
- to review teaching processes and results,
- to improve teaching methods, and
- to develop learning motivation (the Ministry, 2009a).

Since all of these points are important, they can also be applied to foreign language activities. For foreign language activities, communication abilities should be examined in addition to the other points. Therefore, the following four points can be required from the aspect of understanding diversity:

1. positive attitude toward participation,
2. interests in and respect for understanding diversity,
3. communication abilities to express their views and listen to others, and
4. understanding foreign languages in listening and speaking.

The above points are based on Takashima and Higashino's (2007) theory (P38). The involvement of students in classes and coping with other students should also be emphasized. During group work activities, teachers can observe the groups and praise particular groups that have done well in group discussions. This is effective in motivating students to actively participate in the classroom. Moreover, in making presentations, teachers can observe how much interest students show in preparing and presenting their presentations and listening to other students.

Peer review in the classroom is also important. Students can share views with one another to improve themselves. A review sheet filled out by students can be effective for reflecting on activities after they finish, which also helps them build their identities. Moreover, self-evaluation is not limited to evaluation of students but applies equally to teachers as a tool to continually improve their lesson plans, teaching methods, materials, and curriculum in order to decide whether they meet individual students' needs and learning levels.

8. Conclusion

Japanese education is facing an important moment in creating foreign language activities in a democratic way, in which students' participation is emphasized. One of the reasons for this is that foreign language activities are perceived as a good opportunity to organize the curriculum because they offer cultural understanding in foreign languages. The activities allow students to experience and understand diversity and have opportunities for participation.

This paper introduced an example of how the author organized foreign language activities in an actual classroom. Having set a title and aims, I emphasized an importance for students to participate in the classroom. To create a participatory atmosphere, students were given time to

think on their own first so that they could form their own opinions. After they thought, chose, and decided on their own, students created groups so that they could work with other students. Interactive activities are important practices that give students opportunities to communicate with and show respect for one another. Giving them chances to make presentations was also an effective method to express their opinions and listen to other students’ views. The part that the students enjoyed the most was the creation of a video letter for the UK students. This provided motivation to the Japanese students because they could exchange information about their own culture with students outside of Japan. Through completing the two tasks, students could actually expand their understanding of diversity and form a positive attitude toward participation.

I believe that the principals of the Fundamental Law of Education can be achieved by practicing “education for international understanding” in foreign language activities, and further research should be done in this area to identify better practices.

Notes

- 1) UNESCO is the specialist agency of the UN that promotes education and a culture of human rights (Osler & Starkey,2004).
- 2) “The Emperor shall be the symbol of the State and of the unity of the people, deriving from his position from the will of the people with whom resides sovereign power” (Article 1 of the Japanese Constitution).
- 3) “Government is a sacred trust of the people, the authority for which is derived from the people, the powers of which are exercised by the representatives of the people and the benefits of which are enjoyed by the people” (Preamble of the Japanese Constitution). “The Emperor or the Regent as well as Ministers of State, members of the Diet, judges, and all other public officials have the obligation to respect and uphold this Constitution” (Article 99 of the Japanese Constitution).
- 3) “Education shall aim at the full development of personality, striving to nurture the citizens, sound in mind and body, who shall love truth and justice, esteem individual value, respect labor and have a deep sense of responsibility, and be imbued with the independent spirit, as builders of the peaceful state and society” (Article 1 of the Fundamental Law of Education).
- 4) See previous note.
- 5) “(v) To foster an attitude to respect our traditions and culture, love the country and region that nurtured them, together with respect for other countries and a desire to contribute to world peace and the development of the international community” (Article 2 of the revised Fundamental Law of Education).

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