Out of the Mouth of Babes

An Eclectic Approach to Primary

Children's English Education

Tony Brown*

Since the introduction of optional English classes in the "Period for Integrated Study", the Ministry of Education looks set to build on this start, making English an integral part of primary education. However, the Ministry is sensitive to the importance of remembering that "the motivation and attitude for children to communicate positively is fostered by providing children with exposure to foreign language conversation." Furthermore it emphasises the need for "experiential learning activities that are suitable for elementary school students" (MEXT 2003). This is easily said, but less easily put into effect. Unless clear guidelines are laid down for teachers to follow, the success or failure of primary English education is in danger of becoming a hit-or-miss affair.

In an effort to shed some light on this problem, it is worth considering some of the most popular ELT methodologies in terms of their theoretical basis, the techniques they employ, and some of each methodology's benefits and drawbacks, especially in respect to the teaching of children. This might serve as a basis upon which a suitable elementary level curriculum might be built.

The Grammar-Translation Method (GT) is probably one of the worlds' best-known and widely-used methodologies, and still plays a dominant role in English teaching at Junior High and High School levels. Japanese tends to be the medium of instruction in the classroom, meaning that there is little need for English communicative skills on the part of teachers. Teaching emphasises the importance of grammar, focusing on its structure and rules, which are deductively taught through analogies of grammar in texts. Students need to learn grammatical terminology in order to learn the rules of grammar, and the main objectives for learning are to produce grammatically correct sentences and translate the target language (i.e. extracts from the text book) into Japanese. This methodology, long popular in the teaching of foreign languages in British grammar schools,

is based on the teaching of Latin, and pays little attention to communicative competence. It tends to be de-motivating for learners as a result of the use of arcane terminology, and the lack of connection to students' own lives. The Ministry of Education understands this danger with respect to elementary teaching, warning that "the simple introduction of junior high school English education at an earlier stage as well as teacher-centered methods for cramming knowledge should be avoided" (MEXT 2003), and explicitly calls for an avoidance of translation of English into Japanese (MEXT 2001).

Grammar-translation clearly has relevance in a situation where the exam system is grammar-oriented, as is still the case in junior high and high schools in Japan though, even there, we should not become blinkered into neglecting communicative activities. Should a junior high school entrance exam be introduced, based on those used at later stages in the education process, then it seems inevitable that some flavour of GT will become prevalent in primary school English education.

In the private sector, grammar teaching is sometimes neglected when teaching children. Pinker (1994), recalling Chomsky, points to the innate, genetically hard-wired ability in all infants to learn their mother tongue, meaning that grammar may be acquired naturally. However, this is less automatically the case with foreign language learning since there is a big difference in the variety and amount of input, and some form of grammar teaching may not be a bad idea. Some kind of focus on form which "overtly draws students' attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication" (Long, 1991:45-46) could have long-term benefits, even when communicative ability is the stated goal. However, in the case of children especially, it is important to bear in mind that the context in which those forms are presented should be stimulating. Songs and chants, for example (especially those designed specifically for ELT) are a good context within which to draw students' attention to grammatical form, and relate it to usages in their own daily lives. Drawing attention to patterns might stimulate their linguistic awareness and long-term linguistic development, contributing eventually to fluency and accuracy. (Hunston and Francis, 1999: 271) Children require a variety of form-focusing activities appropriate to their cognitive abilities. This should be carefully done, bearing in mind the needs of children of different ages, and at different developmental stages. Falling back on the tired and time-worn grammatical explanations—coupled with the erroneous concept that everything should (or even can) be translated in to Japanese—would be disastrous.

The Audio-lingual Method (ALM) views foreign language learning as the formation of good habits, like any other kind of learning. Behaviourist psychology, which believed that skills would be acquired through vast exposure to stimuli, and repeated reinforcement, underlies this methodology (Mitchell, R and Myles, F., 2004:30). Based on this belief, audiolingualism contains a great deal of drills and pattern practices. Students learn mainly through oral activity including pronunciation, conversation practice and repetition drills in an English-only environment. Grammar is inductively taught with a strong focus on accurate repetition. There is little explanation of grammar, as behaviourists assumed that the rules of grammar would be unconsciously acquired within the context of repeated pattern practice, by a kind of cognitive osmosis. Contrary to their assumption, however, research has shown that there is a tendency on the part of students to manipulate language somewhat robotically, disregarding context. (Brown 2001:32) This leads one to doubt the likelihood of long-term communicative proficiency, especially in the absence of opportunities to use English outside the classroom, as is probably the case with most children. Despite its lack of support in academic circles, however, some varieties of ALM are still widely used, and may have some positive qualities, according to the learners and learning situation. For example, it may be reassuring for the learner who is shy or intimidated and cannot speak out in the classroom, as learners only need to react to their teacher's directions. It can also serve as a confidence-building prelude to freer speaking activities. However, meaningless repetition needs to be avoided, and there is a need for careful attention to introducing language in relevant contexts. This is more likely to benefit learners' long-term language proficiency when they are later exposed to meaningful discourse events. (Cameron, 2001:242).

Total Physical Response (TPR) was originally developed by James Asher, an American professor of psychology, in the 1960s. It is based on the theory that retention is improved by means of association with physical movement. This idea derives from first language (L1) acquisition contexts in which children physically react to their parents' instructions. Moreover, children, in the course of acquiring their mother tongue, receive a large amount of comprehensible input (mostly their parents' utterances), before they produce output. In other words, children do more listening before they are ready to speak. For this reason, proponents of TPR suggested that there is no need to force learners to produce, but rather to respond by action, further arguing that this reduces the stress onthe learners by not forcing them to speak. When the teacher says "Put your chairs near the wall" all learners need to do is to physically respond to the command. This provides the benefit of preventing learners from feeling self-conscious or defensive when it comes to producing utterances.

TPR forms part of Krashen's (1983) "Natural" approach to English language learning, and indeed is explicitly espoused by the Ministry of Education (MEXT 2001) as a technique suitable for primary school English. However, it is also important to consider the variety of input. Since the main focus tends to be on imperative-form drills, the variety of sentence structure offered in a predominantly TPR-based class is likely to be somewhat limited. This differs from the environment of L1 acquisition where a variety of input occurs naturally. In addition, lexical items used in those commands tend to be at elementary level, making it difficult to extend and enrich learners' vocabulary as they advance. Therefore TPR may well be suitable for beginners, especially children. Being teacher-centred, it has obvious advantages in Japan, where students are expected to respect teachers. Moreover, Brown (2001:107, 2002:30) notes that TPR-style activities can be incorporated in interactive and communicative classrooms.

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-Based Learning (TBL) see language as a system for the expression of meaning in order to interact and communicate. CLT emphasises the importance of engaging students in meaningful communicative activities, for example in pairs and groups. Target language is normally introduced or elicited by the teacher, then practiced by means of controlled activities, such as substitution drills (not unlike those used in ALM), which focus on accuracy. This is followed by a production stage in which tasks are set allowing new language to be combined with previously learnt lexis and structures (Harmer 1986: 38). In TBL, which is essentially a refinement of CLT, learning is perceived primarily as communication through carrying out tasks (Skehan, 1996). Tasks are seen as motivating students to negotiate and interact (Richards and Rogers, 2001: 228-229), and the goals are "accuracy, complexity and fluency" (Skehan, 1996: 17). Willis (1996) breaks the TBL class down into three stages. The first is the "pre-task stage" where the teacher introduces the topic and the learners engage in activities that help them to recall words and phrases that will be useful during the performance of the main task. This is followed by the "Task-cycle", in which learners perform tasks in pairs or small groups. They then prepare a report for the whole class on how they carried out task and what conclusions or decisions were made. Finally, they present their findings to the class in spoken or written form. The final stage is the "language focus" stage, during which specific language features from the task are highlighted and worked on. One of the main differences between traditional CLT and TBL is that the explicit focus on structures tends to come at the end, rather than the beginning of the class.

The main characteristics of communicative language teaching are that language is used for a purpose, meaning that real communication should take place. In TBL, the focus on language is derived from the learners' own experience in carrying out the task. However, there are some drawbacks in this methodology. From discourse analysis of TBL interaction, Seedhouse (1999) argues that the language used during tasks is not always appropriate and that discourse can be a far cry from real world communication. Indeed, learner-centred teaching can be a two-edged sword. Greater student autonomy, implying a relinquishing of control by the teacher, also increases the potential to make mistakes. Moreover, there is a need for highly motivated environment in a monolingual class, otherwise students end up doing tasks in their L1, a great danger with elementary-level young learners. Carless (2002) warned that when students are over-excited or distracted then tasks tend to be carried out in their mother tongue. This may also happen when a task is inappropriate to the level of learners. Well-planned lessons, with materials carefully chosen for both language level and interest, are vital for the success of communicative language teaching, whatever the flavour.

As we have seen, some methodologies are more appropriate to certain ages, L1s, group sizes, and so on. For example, TPR is suitable in the case of teaching young beginners to maintain focus and make the lesson enjoyable. ALM may best suit beginners and is especially useful in an environment where, culturally and socially, teachers are expected to take initiative in the class. CLT is the most promising way to promote real communication, but requires a certain level of proficiency, if learners are meant to use English at all times. Grammar-Translation is more suitable for students who need to pass grammar-oriented examinations. It is clear, then, that some methodologies are more suitable to certain learners and their learning environment. As Brown suggests,

> We recognize that the complexity of language learners in multiple worldwide contexts demands an eclectic blend of tasks, each tailored for a particular group of learners studying for particular purposes in a given amount of time. (Brown, 2000: 172)

An Eclectic Approach

"It has been realized that there is no one perfect methodology which fits any situation."(Nunan, 1991:228) As we have seen, each methodology has its own benefits and drawbacks and these are closely connected to the learner's learning situation. Therefore it is important for teachers to be eclectic when choosing 'right' methodologies and techniques.

Current research generally agrees that successful language learning outcomes are most likely in a situation where teachers combine a Communicative language teaching (CLT) approach (Lynch 1996, Richards and Rodgers 2001, Littlewood 1981) with an eclectic use of other methodologies that provide opportunities for the focus on form (Doughty and Williams 1998). In other words, a balanced attention to accuracy as well as fluency facilitates the negotiation of meaning in spoken and written discourse. This applies not only to adults, but also to children. In courses for young learners, grammatical accuracy often tends to be neglected. Research shows that it will be learned more accurately with attention to form. (Harley et al. 1995, Harley and Swain 1984) However, explicit explanation, as experienced in GT, should be avoided. With young learners in particular, it is important to avoid turning the class into a vehicle for long-winded explanations of grammar.

It is often said that the younger we start learning a second language, the more likely we are to master it. However, there is no absolute evidence to prove that it is a case of "the younger the better" when it comes to introducing second language education to children. It has been hypothesised that there exists a Critical Period during which children learn foreign languages better than adults, and some research suggests that learners beyond the age of puberty are unlikely to acquire 'authentic pronunciation' (Brown, 2002). This means that if learners are exposed to English before they reach puberty, they are more likely to acquire natural sounds of English, a very good reason for introducing ELT in primary school, since pronunciation has often been seen as a weakness among Japanese learners. Moreover, it has been shown that children who learn a language at an early age tend to benefit in listening comprehension (Harley et al. 1995). While some studies show support for starting English language learning early, Lightbown and Spada (1999) emphasise the importance of the objectives set for the learners. They suggest that when the goal is native-like proficiency, then there is a clear advantage in starting as early as possible. This is less clearly the case when communicative competence in a foreign language is the main objective. The distinction between adults and young learners rests more on the process of learning. It is more likely for children to be less able to concentrate and be easily distracted by other students or factors compared to adults. Young learners, be they of primary or high school age, have usually not chosen to study English. The decision to learn English was usually made by external force, either by the education system itself, or by parents in the case of private tuition. Their extrinsic motivation is not as strong as that of older learners or adults, so it is important to keep their attention by providing enjoyable classroom activities in order to motivate the mintrinsically. Moreover, given the short attention spans of most

children, classes need to be divided into a variety of different activities, in order to maintain some degree of concentration.

It has also been found that the rate of learning by children tends to be slower than that of adults. Singleton (1995) suggests that it is likely that young learners perform less well in the short term compared to older learners. Therefore the goals of primary school children have to be seen in the longer term, which has implications for the whole thorny question of how - or even if - learners should be evaluated in a CLT context. It is also important to consider the cultural and social aspects of the learning situation. For example, as the children get older, some may become more self-conscious and afraid of making mistakes.

One important point to consider is the use of Japanese in the classroom. As we have discussed, one of the main characteristics of CLT is that language is used for real communication, leading one to question how young learners can accomplish tasks with little linguistic knowledge, especially in a monolingual group. Therefore, if we wish to introduce communicative activities into the primary school classroom there should be some mitigation to this rule, allowing students to use their mother tongue to some extent. Carless (2002) has examined the use of TBL for young learners in Hong Kong, and suggests that creating 'English atmosphere' could help encourage students to speak in the target language. Especially in a team-teaching situation with a native speaker, this seems feasible. Moreover, some studies suggest that the use of Japanese should not be treated as entirely negative. Willis (1996), for example, emphasises the need for teachers of children to tolerate a certain amount of use of the L1, as well as not putting too much pressure on them to produce the target language. Similarly, teachers may wish to use Japanese when necessary, in order to avoid confusion, and to help weaker learners.

Careful consideration should also be given to the content of tasks used in the classroom. As mentioned, motivational factors in the case of young learners are different from those of adults, meaning other factors may come into play if they are to keep learning. This relates not only to the content of tasks, but also to the consideration of students' individual learning styles. Gardner (1993) identifies several 'Intelligences': bodily-kinaesthetic, musical, spatial, linguistic, logical-math ematical, interpersonal, and intrapersonal. A wide variety of tasks enables teachers to allow students to learn in ways which fit their learning style. For example, use of picture cards and toys might benefit visual learners who learn more effectively with a variety of visual stimuli. Tasks such as story telling, songs, card games, puzzles, rearranging stories might prove stimulating for learners whose style is

linguistic or musical.

As suggested previously, TPR is one way of keeping young learners attentive in class. TPR is likely to reinforce learners with strong 'bodily-kinaesthetic' abilities. This aspect should be taken into account for the kinds of task which use action, such as manipulation of picture cards in group card games. One of the activities suggested for young learners by Willis (1996) is "Listen and do", which is essentially a form of TPR. The children's game "Simon Says" is a variation on this which is suitable for very young beginners. Nevertheless, we need to bear in mind that as students get older, this kind of activity may be less effective, since they tend to get self-conscious and hesitate to do actions in front of their peers, especially those of the opposite sex. Moreover, what is fun and exciting for 8-year olds may seem childish or patronising for 11-years old children. A teacher's deep knowledge of the students' development and ability will, of course, inform choice of activities.

Music has a great deal to contribute to children's English learning. It could be used to introduce intonation and rhythm, vocabulary or even grammar. Moreover, it serves to maintain the students' attention and also makes it possible to let them learn with pleasure, almost unconscious of the fact that they are actually acquiring language. Especially learners with strong auditory sensitivity might find learning easy if provided with opportunities to hear and repeat target language by means of chants or songs.

It is possible to combine TPR and music, for example, when teaching body parts, using a song such as "Head, shoulders, knees, and toes". As a pre-task stage, students can be shown flash cards with pictures (in this case body parts), and ask them to match with their own body parts (with more advanced students, especially if the alphabet has been taught, we can ask them to read the spelling). In the "task-cycle" stage, we listen to the song and sing along with the movement touching each body part. Indeed many songs have been adapted to, or written for, the ELT classroom, which focus on particular lexical sets or grammatical functions.

One of the earliest-taught lexical sets is that of colours. Combined with the four lexical items "hand", "foot", "left" and "right", even beginners can play a variation on the game "Twister". Using coloured tops in conjunction with "hand", "foot", "left" and "right" cards, two or three students give instructions, such as "Aki, left hand - red!" or "Jun, right foot - green!", while the others follow the instructions.

Grammar teaching is a vexed question, and one solution may be simply to neglect it until students reach Junior High. However, some attention to grammar may not be a bad idea. Unlike students who have to study English for their entrance exam, primary school children have almost unlimited time for learning grammar. As we have said, some kind of focus on form, within the context of activity-based classes, might be of value. However the content of the materials and activities should be interesting and stimulating. In order to make students notice the grammatical features, sounds, chants, and comic book dialogues can be used, for example. Children require a variety of form-focusing activities appropriate to their cognitive abilities. This should be carefully done, bearing in mind the needs of children of different ages, and at different developmental stages. Moreover, brief translation of new language into Japanese need not be completely disregarded.

Another issue is whether to use authentic or contrived materials, and the importance of meaning and discourse is recognized in this debate. Nonetheless, how the language is presented and used may need to be given more attention when it comes to teaching young learners. This is because if a context is far beyond their own limited experience of the world, it is more likely to simply puzzle them. In other words, if suitable authentic materials cannot be found, contrived language may be necessary in order to make it more accessible to learners. Teachers in Japan may turn to materials aimed at English native-speaker children as a model upon which to base their own materials.

Concluding Remarks

We have looked at different methodologies in order to "cherry pick" a suitable approach to the teaching of primary-age children in Japan. Some combination of CLT and TPR, drawing upon liberal use of music and games, seems a good place to start building an English curriculum for primary school. Grammar teaching and pattern practice, while not necessarily a demon to be completely exorcised from the curriculum, should be treated with care and sensitivity. In future papers, I will attempt to provide more practical examples of teaching techniques and materials which might be suitable for learners at this age.

The teacher's role is, of course, vital since children tend to crave attention, and will look to their teacher as a role model, an instigator and a resource. We have seen that different methodologies have different benefits and drawbacks Good teachers are aware of these when choosing a range of methodologies suitable for their learners and learning situation In the end, the purpose for all teaching, including ELT, is the same: to successfully accomplish chosen objectives,

and help pupils to learn. For teachers of children, like all teachers of English, it is important to be eclectic and flexible in their choice of methodologies.

Bibliography

Brown, D. 2000. *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching, Fourth Edition.* New York: Longman.

Brown, D. 2001. *Teaching by Principles: an interactive approach to language pedagogy,Second Edition.* New York: Longman.

Cameron, L. 2001. *Teaching Languages to Young Learners.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Cameron, L. 2003. "Challenges for ELT from the expansion in teaching children." *ELT Journal* 57/2, 105-112.

Carless, D. 2002. "Implementing task-based learning with young learners". ELT Journal 56/4, 389-396.

Doughty, C. and Williams, J. (Eds.) 1998. *Focus on Form in the Second Language Classroom.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gardner, H. 1993. *Multiple Intelligences: The Theory in Practice.* New York: Basic Books.

Harley, B. 1998. 'Issues in designing form-focused L2 tasks for children'. In C. Doughty and J. Williams (Eds.) *Focus on form in classroom language acquisition.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 156-174

Harley, B., Howard, J., & Hart, D. 1995. "Second language processing at different ages: Do younger learners pay more attention to prosodic cues than sentence structure?" *Language Learning* 45, I: 43-71.

Harmer, J. 1986. *The Practice of English Language Teaching.* Harlow: Longman

Krashen, S.D. & Terrell, T.D. (1983). *The natural approach: Language acquisition in the classroom.* London: Prentice Hall Europe.

Lightbown, P. M. and Spada, N. 1999. *How Languages are Learned: Second Edition.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Littlewood, W. 1981. Communicative Language Teaching: An Introduction. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Littlewood, W. 2004. "The Task-based approach: some questions and suggestions" *ELTJ* 58/4: 319-326.

Long, M. 1991. Focus on Form: A design feature in language teaching methodology. In K. de Bot, R. Ginsberg, & C. Kramsch (Eds.) *Foreign language research in cross culturalp erspective.* Amsterdam: John Benjamin 39-52

Lynch, T. 1996. *Communication in the Language Classroom.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). 2001. 小学校英語活動実践の手引 (Practical Handbook for Elementary School English Activities), retrieved

Tony Brown :
Out of the Mouth of Babes
An Eclectic Approach to Primary Children's English Education
61

from http://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/houdou/13/02/010212.htm

Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). 2003. Regarding the Establishment of an Action Plan to Cultivate "Japanese with English Abilities", retrieved from http://www.mext.go.jp/english/topics/03072801.htm

Mitchell, R and Myles, F. 2004. *Second Language Learning Theories.* London: Arnold

Nunan, D. and Lamb, C. 1996. *The Self-Directed Teacher: managing the learning process.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Pinker, S. 1994. *The Language Instinct.* London: The Penguin Press

Richards, J. and Rodgers, T. 2001. *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching:Second Edition.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Seedhouse, P. 1999. "Task-based interaction." *ELT Journal* 53/3, 149-56

Singleton, D. 1995. 'A critical look at the critical period hypothesis in second language acquisition research' in D. Singleton, and Z. Lengyel (eds.) The Age Factor in Second Language Acquisition. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters

Skehan, P. 1996. 'Second language acquisition research and task-based instruction' In J. Willis and D. Willis (eds.) *Challenge and Change in Language Teaching.* Oxford: Heinemann. 17-30

van Els, T, Bongaerts. T, Extra G. van Os, C, Janssen-van Dieth, A. 1984. *Applied Linguistics and the learning and Teaching of Foreign Languages.* London: Edward Arnold

Willis, J. 1996. *A Framework for Task-Based Learning.* London: Longman