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Primary teachers co-learning English with their students

Tim Murphey, Chitose Asaoka, and Mari Sekiguchi

Dokkyo University

One BIG challenge to English primary education in Japan, and elsewhere in Asia (Butler, 2003), is the "cart before the horse" situation prompted by *Monbugakakusho* (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, or MEXT) requiring the teaching of English before there are teachers capable of doing so. Due to the shortage of trained teachers, MEXT has suggested that English teaching in primary schools could be "conducted by foreign instructors, fluent English speakers or junior high school teachers in one third of such sessions" (2002). This short article advocates that we develop materials and methods to acknowledge the situation of the general homeroom non-English speaking teachers, and to support and encourage them as they themselves grow more professionally through their own English learning, co-learning with their students, and making English learning more recursive in the every-day life of the school.

For generalist teachers, this will require a shift from the belief that they must be the knower and teacher, to one of accepting being a co-learner, who plays with the language, and models good language learning strategies for their students. TESOL professionals and local administrators will also need to step back and consider the options: Do we only allow specialist teachers to teach once a week, and let it all be washed away before the next class? Or do we recruit generalist teachers as the great resources they can be, as co-learners who can sprinkle the classroom with English learning fun throughout the week?

Teach Things We Have Never Learned?

Hired as a sports and language teacher in Switzerland in the early 1980's, the first author, Tim Murphey, was required to take his students skiing weekly during the snow months. Being a professional teacher, he had motivational, organizational, and collaborative learning skills, but being from Florida he knew very little about skiing. He found himself learning with the students, and from the students, and organizing them so they could learn from each other. He found that they actually felt good about teaching him, and their classmates, and watching him make mistakes. They enjoyed giving him feedback, and he realized they were learning something much more valuable in the process: They were learning how to learn, how to collaborate, and that they didn't have to know everything to teach and help others.

Many of the students commented that they felt more relaxed trying new things afterwards, because they saw Tim was trying to learn something new. He was making mistakes, and yet he persisted. Actually, they were modeling something much more important than a skill: They were modeling an attitude. For them, Tim's incompetence in skiing made him a near peer role model. As they were teaching him and their friends, they said that they concentrated more on their own form, and began to notice more clearly some of the things they were doing. Several said that they learned more from teaching and co-learning than they had from simply being "directed" by their previous year's "professional" ski-teacher.

We in no way wish to demean the professional knowledge of our teaching profession (nor that of ski-teachers!) with this anecdote. However, with the recent emphasis on participatory education and interactive language learning (Gibbons, 2002), the teacher's role of creating effective structures for learning has become more highly valued. The pontificating *sage on the stage* cannot begin to create the

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"maximum identity investment" on the part of students (Cummins, 2002) that a *caring and sharing in the learning process* teacher can. Some teacher-researchers have gone so far as to suggest that teachers should only present 10%, and allow students to practice interactively and collaboratively construct learning 90% of the time (Polard 2002).

Cloud (2002) listed what she thinks ESL and EFL primary school teachers need:

- Sufficient proficiency to teach English
- Adequate preparation
- Know and enjoy children
- Use appropriate methods and materials
- Guided by standards

We agree with all of these when they are possible. However, the reality of the EFL situation in most Asian countries is that ministries are demanding that regular content-teachers in primary school teach English to their students with little, or no, training in English. Insisting that they have sufficient proficiency first will do little good when their principals are already telling them to add English to their curriculum. However, we believe that most teachers have the other qualities Cloud lists.

An Opportunity to Seize: Modeling strategies, attitudes, and beliefs

These primary teachers, who surely outnumber TESOL trained professionals, could be excellent near peer role models (Murphey & Arao, 2001; Murphey, 2003) for their students as learners of a foreign language when they are encouraged to model risk-taking, be persistent in the face of forgetting and errors, get excited over learning new things, and show the collaborative playfulness that can stimulate their teaching and learning.

On the other hand, if primary school teachers believe that they must be perfect speakers before they speak English in class, pedagogy may revert to traditional grammar translation in the L1, teachers may develop and communicate negative attitudes toward learning English, and many will have missed an excellent opportunity to model effective learning beliefs, collaborative strategies, and positive attitudes toward language learning for their students. This would also contradict the goals of English education set by the Ministry of Education, which emphasizes the importance of "the cultivation of fundamental and practical communication abilities". English conversation activities are also only possible at elementary schools in the *Period for Integrated Study*, as part of education for international understanding.

Cloud (2002) also suggested a horizontal coordination for learning languages in the school contexts in which bus drivers, administrators, and other teachers were conscious of reinforcing the learning going on in classes. Primary school teachers are in the position to reinforce what they teach through their daily contact with students, and could also scaffold learning through other sheltered subjects such as physical education with TPR and through math, art, and music. Thus, English learning can go beyond exposure in just the designated hour that an external specialist may provide. In fact, it might be advisable for the external specialist to give some fun homework to the regular teacher to practice with her students: songs, games, and routines a few times a day for reinforcement.

We would like to make the somewhat radical suggestion that in this period of catching up, we encourage primary school teachers to learn English with their students in a collaborative learning project with specialized methods and materials (much of which still needs to be created). We would like to see these teachers seize the opportunity to model effective beliefs, attitudes, and strategies for their students,

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an opportunity that, perhaps, is not so often available to teachers.

This has already been done in Florida, for example, with primary non-Spanish speaking teachers who wish to introduce more Spanish into their classes. A team from the University of South Florida has developed the Support for Elementary Educators through Distance Education in Spanish (SEEDS) with a title VI grant. An ambitious project, they have completed the first of three modules, to "better equip generalist elementary teachers to improve their knowledge of Spanish and support the Spanish FLES [specialist] teacher with a variety of activities" (Erben, Castaneda, & Hale, 2003b, p. 32). The researchers recognized that after the specialist teacher leaves the classroom,

most Spanish language and culture also leaves out the door and the result is a disjointed and piecemeal curricula . . . However, it is the generalist teacher who teaches the class 90% of the week, so why not recruit him/her in your efforts to teach Spanish? (Erben & Castaneda, 2003a, p. 35-36).

While their materials are video and web based, they could also be presented as more conventional handouts and books.

Convincing TESOL professionals and local administrators that it is appropriate for these teachers to learn with their students as near peer role models may take some work, perhaps more than that required to convince the teachers themselves. However, when compared to the probable alternative of having teachers model a distaste for language learning for many years, it is well worth a try. Seizing the opportunity to model effective learning while scaffolding thinking and learning skills for students can potentially reinvigorate primary school teaching. It may, in fact, be something we all might want to consider doing in our own contexts: Modeling learning as opposed to teaching, now there's an idea to think about.

Yes, TESOL professionalism matters. However, we also need scaffolding for professionals in other circumstances to meet cultural and situational needs. This scaffolding requires sensitivity to conditions that we may not be used to dealing with. While *teachers learning with their students* may not look professional to many on the surface, it is a way of legitimizing peripheral participation, taking advantage of skills teachers already have to increase their own, and their students', learning. As Bateson (1994) says, "Participation precedes learning" (p.41). Let's invite them in.

Research Agenda

We have a group of primary school English volunteers (university students studying to be English teachers), whom we hope to engage in the effort to entice primary school teachers to become co-learners with their students and to continue to model learning when the volunteer is not there. We hope to produce a booklet for English teaching specialists and volunteers that could be given to the primary school teacher to let them know how they could reinforce what the students are doing in the regular classes. We would like to hear from others in Japan contemplating or involved in similar schemes.

Note

A previous version of this paper was published in *TESOL Matters* 13(4) 1- 6.

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***audiotapes available from <www.fltwood.com/onsite/tesol/index.shtml> or email <edprograms@tesol.org>.

Biographies

Tim Murphey, Dokkyo University professor, is TESOL's *Professional Development in Language Education* series editor, and teacher education coordinator for the China EFL Standards project. He most recently co-authored with Zoltan Dornyei *Group Dynamics in the Language Classroom* (2003 CUP).

Chitose Asaoka, Dokkyo University lecturer, teaches English and TEFL methodology courses and coordinates a program of university students as volunteer English teachers in primary schools. Her current research interests include teacher education and learner autonomy.

Mari Sekiguchi, a graduate student at Dokkyo University, has taught English in local primary schools, and studies the implementation of MEXT initiatives in the Japanese education system and alternative learning methods and programs

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