

Should English Begin in 1st Grade?

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When should English instruction begin in school? More precisely, if English instruction in Japan can begin before middle school, in what grade should it begin? We hear various opinions, but most of them seem to arise from prejudice rather than from knowledge. It will be useful to review what we know about the language-learning abilities of primary school children before making judgments about when and how to expose their tender minds to English.

In this column, I want to explore the questions of when students are ready for what, and how schools can deliver the needed experiences. At the end, I want to leave the reader with two points:

- ✓ Nothing inherent in the nature or development of Japanese children prevents them from learning English at an early age.
- ✓ To be successful, English must be presented as empowerment, not drudgery.

From Fantasy to Rational Thought

When first born, babies are capable of no more than what Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), the founder of psychoanalysis, called “primary process” thinking. This is made up of selfish and fantastic thinking, untroubled by what we learn to call “reality.” As children learn about the world, they develop “secondary process thinking,” in which their waking thoughts and feelings are guided into conventional channels.

I was a late developer and carried primary process thinking too far. As late as the second grade, I once felt very sick and told the teacher I wanted to go to the toilet because I might “throw up airplanes.” I knew the conventional expression, “to throw up,” but in my mind the vomiting might be spectacular, so I added the airplanes for emphasis. The teacher expressed confusion over my imagery, but she let me go to the toilet.

Even in my misery, I reflected that there was something wrong with my attempt to communicate. Since that time, I have tried, not always successfully, to limit primary-process thinking to dreams and moments of creativity.

Wherever they are in the world, when children reach age 6 (plus or minus a year), they are given new and significant responsibilities. In complex, modern societies, they enter school; in other societies they are given tasks that require self-discipline and elementary judgment. Developmental psychologists describe a “five-to-seven shift,” a leap in maturation that permits children to operate consistently within their social and physical environments.

The primary school years, from about age 6 to age 12, are years of steady growth and increasing command of the knowledge available in one’s society. Freud called this the latency period. It is a time when children are generally able to sit still in school and

learn many things, and before they suffer the turmoils of puberty (I should note that, in modern societies, puberty may come a year or two earlier than it did in Freud's time).

Here is the catch. Flexibility in the brain, and a resulting ease of learning new language sounds and patterns, decline from infancy to adulthood. While the primary school child is developing intellectual abilities, he or she is losing the spontaneous, intuitive mind that helps the preschooler comprehend languages.

It has been the practice in Japan to delay student exposure to English reading and writing until middle school. Two justifications are offered: First, it is said that English, being intellectually challenging, is best delayed until students' brains are mature enough to learn its abstract and arcane principles. Second, because students are already fully occupied trying to master Japanese language and culture, efforts to introduce English carry the danger of diluting or perverting students' Japanese minds.

Readers of this column are familiar with answers to these arguments. First, mastering a second language is not primarily an intellectual challenge, instead it is internalizing a set of mostly automatic capabilities—the kind of intuitive learning that young children do best. Second, it is not true that mastery of one difficult language (and culture) will be damaged by attempts to master another at the same time. On the contrary, evidence from language immersion programs shows that learning a second language tends to increase mastery of the first language, appreciation of one's heritage culture, and even intelligence.

We see, then, that teaching a second language such as English can be begun as early as the first grade, and has positive effects, not negative ones. It takes advantage of primary school students' nimble minds and can become more systematic as those minds progress toward systematic thinking.

From the point of view of organized schooling, then, English should begin in the first grade, if it has not already begun before primary school. As children develop their logical abilities and explicit memories, we would supplement intuitive learning with some explicit instruction about form, style and vocabulary, just as in a first language. There is, therefore, no developmental reason to delay English learning. The only constraints are money, time and know-how.

English as Empowerment

We should not teach English as a set of onerous tasks of memorization. Instead, it should be treated as a form of empowerment: a set of skills that are pleasurable in themselves and that help the student understand the world and communicate with new people. Note that this is a different view from an often-heard purpose of learning English to allow Japanese people to compete in the world without a language handicap. To be effective, schools should define the goals of language teaching not in terms of Japan's national interests but in terms of students' personal fulfillment, which, if achieved, will suit national interests quite well.

Some primary schools in Japan are now teaching English with considerable success. Under the Education, Science and Technology Ministry's initiatives, some pilot primary

schools have introduced English as a regular subject, and the results are sometimes surprising. At Amano Primary School in Osaka Prefecture, for example, students quickly seized the idea that English gives them new power to communicate. There has been a groundswell of demand for communicating with foreign students and foreigners in general, and for leaving permanent records such as an English language “newspaper.”

Instruction in reading and writing English was once considered inappropriate for Japanese primary school students whose heads were already filling with complex alphabets and hundreds of kanji characters. Now we know that English reading and writing do not add confusion, but instead complement the students’ growing mastery of English sound-meaning combinations. In this role, reading and writing help students satisfy their curiosity about English words they see in their environment and on TV, and help them satisfy their urge to communicate with English speakers.

As a practical matter, the changeover in thinking necessary to begin English in primary schools rather than middle schools cannot be done quickly. There are bureaucratic minds to be changed, textbooks to be written, methods to be explored, and teachers to be recruited.

Taiwan, which now begins English in the fifth grade, has a long-term plan to begin earlier but currently lacks qualified teachers. As a result, the Taiwan Education Ministry is actively searching for foreign teachers while beefing up efforts to qualify local teachers.

Japan might well emulate Taiwan and other countries where the discussion has progressed beyond whether and when to begin second-language instruction in primary school. Now, in Japan, too, the issue should be how to do it.

This series of columns is an attempt to reconcile views of language teachers, theorists and bureaucrats. Readers are invited to send e-mail to mrchilds@tolmi.or.jp or letters to The Daily Yomiuri.

The column will return on Sept. 5.