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# JAPANESE CHILDREN LEARNING ENGLISH: A PRELIMINARY REPORT

Thomas M. Pendergast, Jr.

## ABSTRACT

The present paper is an argument for cost-effectiveness in language-learning/teaching. It is a preliminary account of an experiment involving the teaching of English to five Japanese children. The research began on September 22, 1979 and is currently in progress.

The format requires the children to spend two 20-minute periods a day working with a set of self-study listening comprehension materials (Winitz, 1978) at home. Each child keeps a simple journal of this work. Once a week, the children gather for a 50-minute session with the experimenter and/or his assistant(s).

The materials and approaches used in the program include:

1. the learning strategy of the TOTAL PHYSICAL RESPONSE
2. THE LEARNABLES (otherwise known as OHR)\*
3. The SILENT WAY and its materials (colored rods, Sound-Color FIDEL, regular spelling FIDEL (ESL PHONIC CODE CHARTS) and WORD CHARTS#

The rationale underlying the program is that learning will occur most effectively if the children acquire a sound listening comprehension (for our purposes, the ability to comprehend over 1,500 words of normal spoken English, normally spoken) and the ability to read with comprehension what they can understand aurally *before* they are required to undertake extensive oral production (Asher, Gary, Nord, Postovsky and Winitz, *passim*).

### English Language Study in Japanese Schools

Early last fall, I received a call from Professor K. of a well-known university of foreign studies in the Kansai area. He asked me to attend a

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\*see appendix 1

#see appendix 2 (Nakajima, 1979)

meeting of concerned individuals (himself, another college professor, two junior high school teachers and myself, as it turned out) to discuss the then "hot news" that the new Mombusho curriculum for junior high English was going to reduce the number of classes per week from four to three.

As much for personal enlightenment as for anything else, but also hoping that I might be able to be of some help, I gladly joined the gathering and learned a number of things of interest:

1. that there was general consternation among junior high school teachers across the country, revolving around the feeling that "the job" could not be accomplished in only three periods per week.
2. that English is in fact an elective and not a required subject, thereby being relatively slighted in the curriculum. At the same time, everyone except Mombusho acts as if it were required, since it is one of the most important items for college entrance.
3. that there are officially 35 weeks in the junior high school year, but that, thanks to national holidays, athletic meets and school ceremonies, it is better to count on no more than 30 full weeks of instruction, at most.
4. that, since periods vary between 45-50 minutes each, if we multiply by three periods per week and that by 30 weeks per year, we get an idea of the time available per year for learning in the classroom, i.e., about 67.5 hours. A final calculation (67.5 hours times 3 years = 202.5 hours) gives us a rough estimate of the total amount of time spent on English in the junior high classroom.
5. that teachers have little freedom to teach "English" as they might conceive of it, even if they adhere to the Mombusho "guidelines", since the local education boards impose on them a textbook which they ignore at their peril. There is considerable pressure from the PTA to

hoe the straight and narrow.

6. that there is a fairly common consensus among teachers and laymen alike that the content of the third-year text is “too difficult” (“If the students *really* knew what was in the text by the time they graduated, they would ‘know’ English”).

A review of the texts themselves and further discussion with junior high school teachers convinced me of several things:

1. that the texts go far beyond the Mombusho requirements and that the teachers find themselves in the awkward position of having to *teach for tests and not for competence*. That this is not the same thing is patently apparent from the fact that over 40% of the student population “pass” entrance examinations allowing them to enter college, but that only a small percentage of that group can be said to be functionally competent in English. There has somehow grown up a myth that the products of this process are at least able to read and write, but most American and British university instructors find this to be a gross exaggeration.\*

As an aside, I might note for the record that American college instructors *in the United States* are saying some of the same things about their American students. They can’t read and write. And the reasons are pretty clear. It is not so much that they cannot as that they *do not*. The written and printed form of the language is falling into disuse because of television and the telephone. In Japan, on the other hand, English has never been in use, since it has always been treated as a dead language. It is very difficult to really learn a “dead” language (Diller, 1978).

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\*I make no attempt to document these assertions, but personal communications assure me that it is widely accepted here that “*reading*” refers to *decoding* passages in English at a snail’s pace, with the absolute necessity of a dictionary. This is not reading in any useful sense of the word.

2. that the texts themselves and the teaching methods are not arranged in a manner conducive to effective learning, since they concentrate heavily on vocabulary and grammatical explanations and little on listening and reading comprehension.

### The Experiment

I want to state at this point that, contrary to popular opinion, second-language learning is *not* an insuperable task and that it can be achieved, in fact, rather easily, with a minimum of "teaching", *if*

1. we grant to our students the opportunity to do what they can do by themselves
2. teachers supply only what is necessary
3. methods and materials appropriate to the task are used, and a respect for the proper order of learning is maintained.
4. the children are taught *how to learn* so that they are able to build on their own resources.

Since I felt that the schools did not provide an atmosphere conducive to such learning, I resolved to conduct my own research in this area. Five students (one 9-year old, two 10-year olds and two 12-year olds) were recruited for the task. The twelve-year olds are currently first-year junior high students. The nine-year old has had some previous instruction at a commercial language school and the ten-year olds had had no previous exposure to English instruction.

The students' parents purchased a set of home study materials called THE LEARNABLES. This is a set of 20 picture booklets and accompanying tapes developed in the United States. There is also a set of Script Books which contain all of the sentences on the tapes in written form. These books are later used for reading and writing practice. The students also received a

manila folder in which they were asked to record their study activities at home, i.e., what they did, how much time they spent and their impressions. These journals supply important feedback to the experimenter as well as motivate the students to be more aware of their own efforts (see appendix 3).

The first of what was to become weekly 50-minute sessions with the research team was spent mainly in instructing the students in the nature of their various tasks. They were asked to work at home and to

1. look at the picture booklets while they listened to the taped program. If they felt comfortable after one such listening, they were asked to listen again later the same day, this time with books closed, while trying to "image" the pictures in their minds. There was no request to "repeat" nor to "remember".
2. the ideal regimen was set at two such audings per day, for a total of 30 minutes (since each "listening" required about 15 minutes). If they wished, they might listen to each program up to four times, but it was suggested that more was not necessary. In the event, some listened to each program up to seven times. This was apparently because the programs were "interesting" and because the students were motivated to "understand" as well as possible before continuing on to the next program. This "self-pacing" is one of the most attractive features of these materials.
3. there was a simple quiz after each two lessons, consisting of simply listening to the tape and choosing from among three pictured possibilities which one the sentence on the tape referred to.
4. record their dates, times and impressions in their folders. This they did in Japanese, of course.

At the second session, the students were quizzed on the material they had covered at home in a fashion similar to that described above (matching

pictures and sentences), but more thoroughly (increased number of items - up to 50 or more) and in a way which required greater discrimination (choosing from among, not three, but between four and eight pictures at a time). Their success rate has consistently been 90% or better throughout the study (1,400 sentences have been covered as of this writing: November 5, 1979, 6 weeks since beginning).

They were also introduced to the strategy of the TOTAL PHYSICAL RESPONSE during this session. This involved their physically responding to simple verbal commands such as "stand up", "sit down", "turn", "walk", "jump", etc. The proper physical response was modelled by the experimenter or his assistant(s) as s/he spoke the command. The children followed suit in acting out these commands and later showed understanding by acting individually. After five such sessions, averaging 15 minutes each, they were responding to such commands as "Chieko, stand up, go to the board and write your first name on the board in English and your last name in Japanese; then erase your last name and go back to your seat and sit down." It should be pointed out that although the experimenter (Pengast) was an American, his two female assistants were Japanese, and they were frequently in charge of the session from beginning to end.

It is expected that these children will soon be able to function as smoothly in most classroom situations which require doing something in response to a command as most native English-speaking children of the same age.

At the time of this writing, these students had finished 14 lessons of THE LEARNABLES and had had seven 50-minute sessions with the research team. They have demonstrated a listening comprehension of approximately 500 words and are able to make discriminations among statements or commands involving words like "on", "in", "on top of", "under", "next to", as well as possessives and the distinction between "a" and "the" in certain

clear-cut situations.

### Further Work on Aural Discrimination and Preparation for Oral Production and Reading

During the third 50-minute session, the experimenter felt that it was time to begin laying the foundation for later reading and oral production. For this purpose, the students were introduced to the Sound-Color Fidel, created by Dr. Caleb Gattegno of New York, for use with the SILENT WAY.

“Fidel” is a word borrowed from Amharic, the language of Ethiopia, and simply means “alphabet”. It is used as an entry into a language, and this version of it consists of a phonic analysis of English sounds, which are represented by colored rectangles. One color, one sound.

#### The Process

The experimenter would speak a simple one-syllable word (like “car”, “meat”, “house”, etc.) already known to the students from THE LEARNABLES and point to the corresponding rectangles (=colors). This was done a number of times and then one of the students was asked to do the same, following the example of the experimenter. After several trials, other students were now asked to listen and point to the proper rectangle *without* the example of the experimenter, who would simply point to the correct rectangle afterwards to serve as feedback on their activity. Finally, variations and recombinations were attempted (“eat” from “meat”; “hou” from “house”; and soon “tea” from “meat” and also “team” and “mouse”, etc.)

At this stage, the students were able to move from the Sound-Color Fidel, which displays only colored rectangles, to a much larger Fidel which displays all of the spellings of English arranged according to the same colored phonic code. The transfer was immediate and complete. Without any assistance, the

students were able to locate the correct columns (see appendix 4). At no time during all of the preceding were the students expected to utter any sounds whatsoever. During the sixth session, however, the experimenter decided to elicit some of the vowel sounds of English from the students, just to see what would happen. To the delight of the research team, the following vowels were immediately available to the students in a perfectly acceptable pronunciation: "all was dark as many hares raced around the village swamp" (10 vowels), and several others.

The expectation is that, within approximately 8 months of beginning the program, the students will

1. have a listening and reading vocabulary of over 1,500 words
2. have mastered (for comprehension *and* production) the segmental sound system of English and be well on the way to a mastery of the supra-segmentals, as well
3. have begun speaking within a limited (several hundred words) vocabulary, but with a very correct usage of the most important function words of the language

If these expectations are borne out, the accomplishment will have been achieved at the low cost of approximately 36 contact hours with an instructor and not more than 150 hours of self-study over a period of eight months.

At that time, the experimenter will owe the reader a more definitive report.

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AUTHOR's NOTE: This research is still in progress and may be observed at the DIDASKO LEARNING CENTER in Nishi-ku, Osaka. Call 06-443-3810 for an appointment.

All materials and research documents referred to in this report are also available for inspection. For further information, write to:

DIDASKO LEARNING CENTER 6-7-31-611 Itachibori Nishi-ku, Osaka 550

## Appendix 1

from Winitz, 1978: "... a brief description of the language teaching system, which we call the comprehension method, will be given. The learner is asked only to look at pictures and listen to sentences. Initially, single words are taught, then short sentences are introduced through careful sequencing of sentence patterns. Each sentence corresponds to a picture, as illustrated in Figures 1 through 5.

These figures are taken from our language program entitled THE LEARNABLES. Figure 1 presents the first four items of lesson 1. In Figure 2, Noun-Verb-Object sequences are indicated. Both the subject and the object nouns were originally introduced as single items. Figure 3 illustrates a sequence in which the relative clause is introduced (lesson 24). Right-embedded, rather than center-embedded clauses were used to reduce the initial complexity of these structures. In Figure 4, the lexical item "forgot" is taught in the context of a story sequence (lesson 28). The non-reversible passive is introduced in picture form in Figure 5 (lesson 34). The conditional is introduced through a story context (lesson 37) and is illustrated in Figure 6.

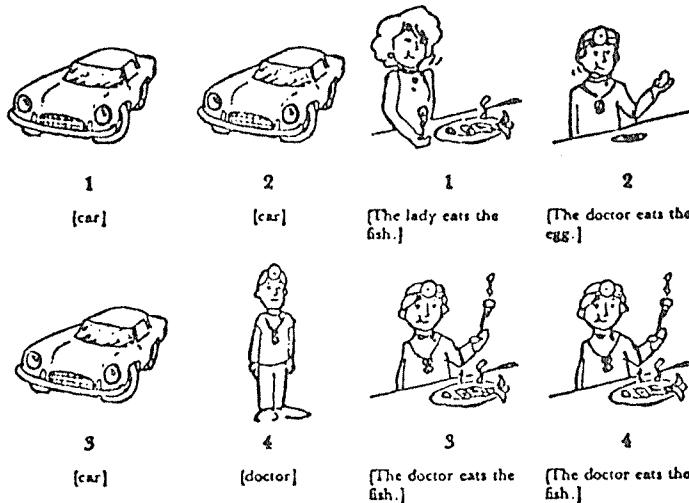


FIGURE 1. LESSON 1.

FIGURE 2. LESSON 1.

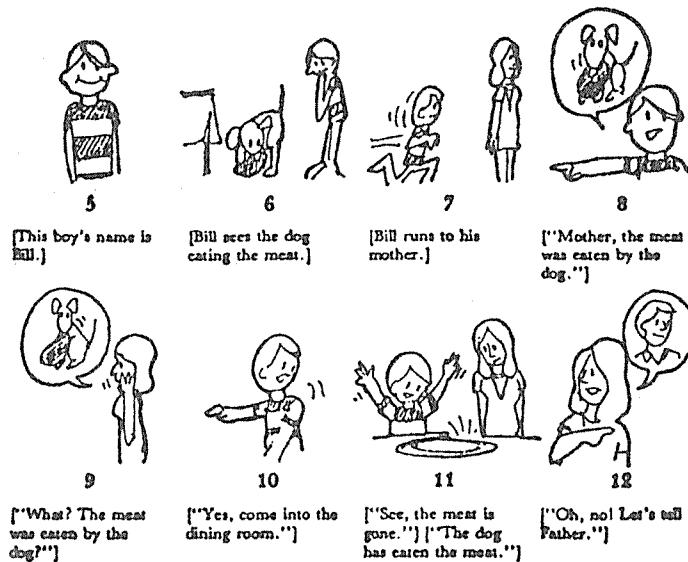


FIGURE 5. LESSON 34.

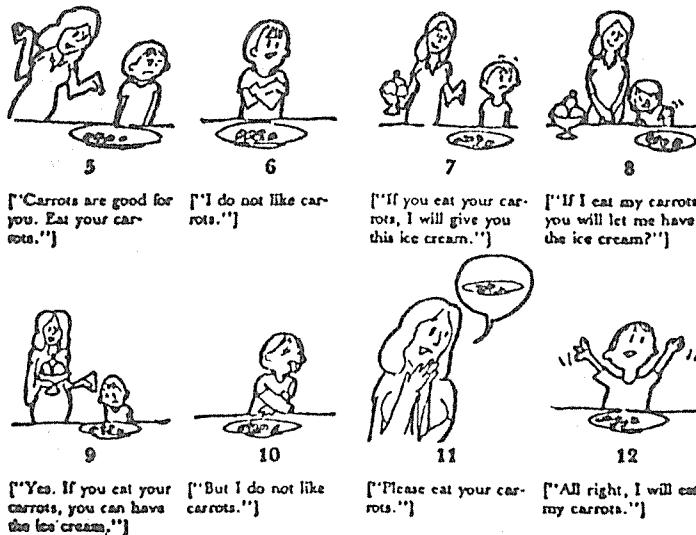


FIGURE 6. LESSON 37.

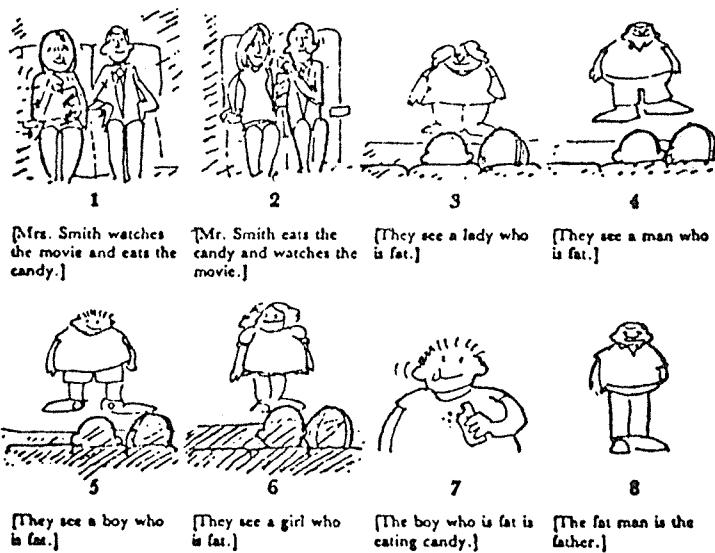


FIGURE 3. LESSON 24.

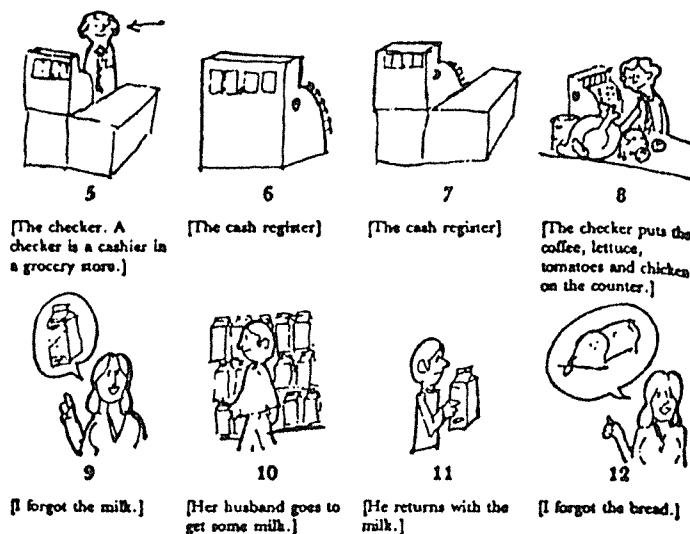


FIGURE 4. LESSON 28.

## Appendix 2

from Nakajima, 1979:

### ② the Color Sound Chart

1枚の表に色のついた長方形が配列されており、母音に類するものは上半分に、子音に類するものは下半分にまとめてある。それぞれの色は英語の音と対応する。このChartでは文字は全く示されていないので、生徒は、純粹に、ある色にある特定の音を結びつけて言うようになる。これによって文字による干渉が排除される。

### ⑤ Fidel

英語の各音を表わすつづりの全部を一つ一つの枠の中に同じ音の仲間どうしを集めて分類し表にしたもので、たとえば〔i:〕の音を表わすつづり e e や e a や e その他が同一の色で、同一の欄に載っているというわけである。音声やそれを表わすつづりの関連がよくわかる。

## Appendix 3

This is a sample of a journal kept by a 10-year old student over a period of 5 days. During this time, she listened to the same program 6 times. Her first report tells us that she found the story approach “interesting” and that the pictures made the story immediately accessible. Her second report suggests that the language used is still a bit difficult but we find that this problem has been resolved by the time of the 5th and 6th listenings, where she reports understanding everything “quite well”. Report number 4 suggests that she is listening to the tape without looking at the pictures, but that the language on the tape brings the images to her mind immediately.

NAME 海老名 美砂

1979 .

PROGRAM 10 (夜) 8:06 ~ 8:18

スキワーデスやどしをと、たのめやまと<sup>の</sup>  
外から見たけしき、女の人が水をこぼしたり  
した所はと、でもおもしろかったです。

PROGRAM 10 10/21 (夜) 10:00 ~ 10:12

まだあまり雨からなが、た所が  
多く、た。

NAME 海老名 美砂

1979 .

PROGRAM 10 10/22 (夜) 8:15 ~ 8:27

少しわがりにくか、た所もあ、たか  
だいたいわが、た。

PROGRAM 10 10/23 (夜) 9:30 ~ 9:42

すぐに絵かうかんた。

NAME 海老名 美砂

1979

PROGRAM 10<sup>10</sup>/<sub>24</sub> (夜) 10:35 ~ 10:47  
たいへんよくわかった。

PROGRAM 10<sup>10</sup>/<sub>25</sub> (夜) 8:10 ~ 8:22  
よくわかった。

## Appendix 4

This is a black and white copy of the FIDEL (Phonic Code Chart) from the mini-chart set. The spellings in each column all have the same sound and can be distinguished on the original by their colors.



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COMPARATIVE PHONETIC KIT CHART #