

Bridges between SLA Research and Classroom Teaching: Implications from Foreign Language Teaching in New Zealand Primary and Secondary Schools

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Abstract

It has been argued that there is a gap between the theoretical recommendations of second language acquisition (SLA) research and actual language teaching practices. Responding to this concern, this paper examines how ten well-known SLA research-based teaching principles (Ellis, 2005) have been implemented in classrooms in New Zealand primary and secondary schools. These ten principles include, for example, the need for learners to develop a repertoire of formulaic expressions as well as the necessity to focus on meaning and form. They are used as the basis for ten different foreign language programs taught in New Zealand schools (Erlam, 2008). These include Maori, New Zealand Sign Language, Pasifika languages and Japanese. This paper introduces a study exploring how the ten principles have been interpreted by Japanese language teachers. Data from government curriculum documents, lesson observations, and interviews with teacher trainers at a national level and language teachers in local schools are used to describe how the ten principles are effective in improving pedagogy and what aspects of these principles are difficult to implement. Although the data is confined to primary and secondary education in New Zealand these results are relevant to other teaching and learning contexts in that they shed light on how SLA research and actual classroom practices can inform each other to increase the effectiveness of foreign language teaching and teacher training.

Keywords: SLA research, teaching principles, New Zealand, Japan, primary, secondary

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Introduction

English as a Foreign Language will be a compulsory subject in third and fourth grade classes in Japanese elementary schools from 2020 (MEXT, 2015). In order to support elementary school teachers who may have little experience of teaching English the lead author and her colleagues have undertaken comparative research at primary schools in China, South Korea and the UK, which has resulted in the production of case studies of useful examples and various model practices in those countries (Sakui, 2016; 2017a; 2017b; and, Sakui, Yamauchi & Shiobara, 2106).

One missing topic of examination in those countries, however, was to identify the underlying principles that teaching practices are based on. Since 2005, New Zealand has organised language teacher training around ten principles derived from second language acquisition (SLA) research (Ellis, 2005). It is useful, therefore, to examine to what extent these underlying principles have been adopted by New Zealand language teachers and whether there are any ones that would be particularly appropriate for Japanese elementary school teachers to learn from. This paper reports on a preliminary investigation of language teaching in New Zealand which seeks to highlight useful pedagogical practices at primary and secondary level with a special focus on the SLA principles underlying those practices.

The paper is organised into four parts: a brief summary of New Zealand's national policy for learning languages; a snapshot of language teaching gleaned from observations of lessons in a small number of New Zealand primary and secondary schools; a focus on the SLA principles that New Zealand interview participants believed were most relevant to their contexts; and, a list of implications and suggestions that these findings might have for the forthcoming changes to Japan's elementary English education system. Before examining the first of these four parts a brief summary of the study methods and approach is given.

Methodology

In March and September 2017, the two authors visited New Zealand in order to observe and interview various participants from the primary, secondary and university level who are involved in teaching Japanese language or supporting such teachers. Japanese was chosen in order to provide a tight focus for the research rather than collecting data on different languages. Participants were recruited based on one initial contact and a subsequent 'snowball sampling' method (see Dörnyei & Csizér 2012, p. 81) in which further participants were found. Five teachers; two at the primary school level and three at secondary were observed teaching and interviewed. Three teacher trainers and education advisors based at two universities were also interviewed.

The first visit in March offered the chance for the researchers to gain an understanding of the New Zealand language education system as a whole whereas in September there was a more specific focus on the impact of the ten language learning principles identified by Ellis in 2005. This change in focus is reflected in the interview protocols: the one in March was open ended and asked for explanations of teaching activities whereas the one in September asked teachers to explain their pedagogy in terms of SLA research (the ten principles). The lessons in March were at the beginning of the school year whereas those in September fell during an

assessment phase so it was possible to gain understanding of different teaching processes and emphasis. This was serendipitous for, as will be explained below, the assessment procedures in New Zealand are somewhat unique and very thought provoking.

New Zealand policy and language learning framework

Ten languages are offered in New Zealand schools; these include Maori, New Zealand Sign Language, Pasifika languages and Japanese. The New Zealand Ministry of Education provides guidelines, materials and support for all these languages but it is the responsibility of each school as to whether they actually teach any of these languages to their students. Since 1989 New Zealand has implemented a very devolved school system with a great deal of independence for individual schools and teachers as regards the choice of subjects to be taught, materials and approach to be used, and what forms of assessment are adopted (Nusche, Laveault, MacBeath & Santiago, 2012).

The New Zealand Ministry of Education (2016) uses a three-part framework to guide language teaching; this consists of teaching language communicatively, teaching about culture associated with language, and teaching language learning strategies. Within this framework teachers are encouraged to adopt ten principles of language learning that are based on SLA research (Ellis, 2005). These are taught to student language teachers during their pre-service training at university and are the basis of an in-service development program called TPLT (Transforming Practice in Language Teaching, 2017). The course is a challenging one as teachers have to enrol on a language course, be observed teaching four times, and attend an eight-day pedagogy course. It is during this eight day course that the ten SLA principles are introduced and applied. The ten principles are listed as follows:

1. Instruction needs to ensure that learners develop both a rich repertoire of formulaic expressions and a rule-based competence.
2. Instruction needs to ensure that learners focus predominantly on meaning.
3. Instruction needs to ensure that learners also focus on form.
4. Instruction needs to be predominantly directed at developing implicit knowledge of the L2 while not neglecting explicit knowledge.
5. Instruction needs to take into account the learner's 'built-in syllabus'.
6. Successful instructed language learning requires extensive L2 input.
7. Successful instructed language learning also requires opportunities for output.
8. The opportunity to interact in the L2 is central to developing L2 proficiency.
9. Instruction needs to take account of individual differences in learners.
10. In assessing learners' L2 proficiency, it is important to examine free as well as controlled production.

The participant teacher and advisor responses to these ten principles are reported below after a description of the school contexts in which languages in New Zealand are taught.

Primary school snapshot

The number of students in the primary school lessons varied from 20 to 30 students. In some lessons different year groups were mixed together. The teachers were 'native' Japanese teachers who went from one class to another. The main teachers remained during the lessons but varied in their involvement. Some did their own work at the back of the class, others helped particular students and others were fully involved in the lesson and joined in with all the tasks and activities.

Lessons at the primary school level last for 30 minutes and are held once a week. During this time the teachers we observed tried to teach a number of points: ways for students to express personal information (introduce basic information about yourself such as name and age), and common Japanese expressions such as greetings, numbers, and days of the week. In addition, the teachers drew attention to aspects of Japanese 'culture' such as the use of chopsticks, taking shoes off, bowing, foods, clothing, and well-known animation characters. Culture was loosely defined as aspects of a typical Japanese lifestyle that might be somewhat different from a New Zealand one.

With such a short time to expose students to Japanese language and culture the lessons were teacher-centered and tightly focused on choral drills, substitution drills, chaining, repetition and review. The lessons depend very much on the personality of the teacher to generate a positive, fun and relaxed atmosphere in which students can gain some exposure to the target language and feel positive towards that language and language learning in general. This approach does seem to have worked: although this is somewhat anecdotal evidence, when the researchers walked around the schools with the Japanese teachers children shouted out greetings and short phrases of welcome in Japanese and were completely at ease in doing so.

New Zealand schools are organised into 'cluster groups' so that teachers can help support each other in face-to-face development programs and through online discussion. One university teacher educator who is an advisor to a Japanese cluster group outlined the principles that her group tries to follow (these are in addition to the SLA-based principles which will be discussed below): there is no formal assessment at the primary school level; instead the lessons should provide enjoyment and fun rather than fear and apprehension; language learning should be a 'normal' part of school life; and, students should be taught good language learning strategies.

Secondary school snapshot

The classrooms in which lessons were observed were devoted to language learning which meant that they could be decorated with materials connected to the language (the Japanese ones had photos, pictures and maps showing scenes from Japan; Japanese flags; and, student drawings of manga and animation characters). There were also posters and various visual aids that could help students remember vocabulary and grammatical structures. In addition, each classroom had a permanent computer and projector that was online so additional materials and realia could be swiftly shown to the students. In one school the researchers joined in a lunchtime anime club where about ten students watched an animation (in Japanese with English

subtitles). In sum, these classrooms were places where students could really be exposed to an atmosphere and reality strongly connected to the target language.

The lessons that were observed at secondary school level took place from years eight to 11. The number of students ranged from ten to 24. The classrooms were set up for communication with students sitting in groups of three or four at desks that could be moved around if necessary (in one school they had 'bean bags' on the floor so children could really relax when talking to each other). The types of tasks and activities tended to be 'PPP based'; that is, presentation and controlled practice followed by free practice. During the presentation and controlled practice stages there was a lot of brisk choral and substitution drills followed by pair, group and whole class practice. Students also completed written workbook tasks to support or consolidate particular language points. The teachers used online materials and activities to introduce language items, to exemplify them, or to review. One example was the use of Kahoot software as a review game; students used their smartphones to answer questions in a group competition. It was a very lively way to finish off the lesson.

The New Zealand Ministry of Education actively encourages schools to use technology but, similar to the responsibility for choosing to teach languages or not, the decision as to what level of technology to use rests with individual schools. One school where lessons were observed issues iPads to all students. During the lessons, the students used the iPads to carry out various tasks including searching for information, taking pictures and recording each other practising model conversations which they later uploaded to the school LMS (Google Classroom). Other examples of technology were the use of a language application (Language Perfect) for homework practice. The students in the participating schools clearly were used to digital technology and it was a 'normalised' (Bax, 2011) part of school pedagogical practice.

One issue that New Zealand language teachers face is that of 'student retention' which means that students are free to choose which kinds of lessons they wish to continue with. As languages are not core to the New Zealand curriculum students can drop them or change language. This means that language teachers have to be concerned about whether or not their students will continue to study that language. As a result, teachers try very hard to make their lesson as attractive and motivating as possible and talk a lot to their students about why it is important to study a language (for work, a career, travel and so on). Even so, the numbers of students that continue to study languages in the last three years of secondary school has continued to decline (Tan, 2015). According to the participants, when students start to be assessed for university entrance they choose to study subjects other than languages, such as STEM ones, that they, their parents or other teachers believe will benefit them more. They may also choose to take a new language (Spanish is very popular) rather than continue with one they have already studied (such as Japanese). Students perceive that studying a new language will be at a basic level and will be an easier option than improving their existing skills.

Another characteristic of New Zealand teachers is that they need to take account of learners' individual differences or diversity as the students get older. The participants reported that the students' needs are diverse and their proficiency levels and aptitude vary considerably. This makes teaching challenging especially as they have often

have mixed grade level students in one class. One teacher reported that she has to attend to four different types of student in one class (different year groups and exchange students), for whom she has to set different learning goals and prepare different teaching materials as she monitors their progress.

The NCEA (National Certificate of Educational Achievement) exams that students take in their last three years of secondary school strongly influence what is taught. Since being phased in between 2011 and 2013 (East, 2015) this scheme assesses all four skills in a very interesting way. Receptive skills (listening and reading) are assessed by an external exam but active skills (writing and speaking) are internally assessed at each school. The speaking test or 'interact' test (Erlam, 2015), provides an opportunity for students to speak with each other in a range of authentic and spontaneous interactions. This means that students have to practice such interactions and these were observed by the researchers during the September visit. Students in Year 11 were practising paired discussions (about their 'best holidays') with each other, with their teacher and with a teaching assistant. Informal talks with some of the students revealed that they thought very positively about the interact test although it was hard work and challenging. It is equally challenging for teachers as it greatly increases their workload. As well as preparing students to take the exam teachers must mark it and then norm the grades with colleagues. If they do not have colleagues they must meet with teachers from other schools to norm the grades. The implications of devolving exams to the teacher level (as well as syllabus and materials creation) is that teachers have a great deal of freedom but also carry a heavy responsibility on their shoulders.

SLA principles

During the interviews, the teacher and advisor participants were asked about the ten SLA principles (Ellis, 2005) that New Zealand uses to underpin language teaching. The participants were asked whether they had heard of the principles, whether they agreed with them or adopted them, and which ones they thought were most appropriate in their context. The results are as follows:

Two of the eight participants did not know about the ten principles. These were both Japanese teachers who had not undergone formal training in New Zealand. The other six participants (three from New Zealand, two from South Korea, and one from Japan) all knew about and had studied (or even taught) the principles. As a general rule they thought that they were a very useful guide for teachers; however, they did feel that the list could be shortened and that some were more important than others.

The ones that they thought were most appropriate in their context were as follows: Principle 1. Learners need to develop a rich repertoire of formulaic expressions. This was felt to be particularly important for beginners so that they can communicate immediately with sound bites of language even if they may not have a linguistic understanding of these expressions. In tandem with this was the belief that Principle 2, learners should focus on meaning, was very important in guiding pedagogy. The third area that informants thought was most important was a combination of Principles 6, 7 and 8. That is, input and output are necessary and that opportunities for interaction are vital.

The participants expressed the opinion that there should be less focus on form or knowledge about language (Principles 3 and 4) and included within this idea is that there should not be an overemphasis on accuracy. Teachers should be able to develop a tolerance for student errors as they can learn language from their mistakes. As long as students focus on communication and as long as they can maintain an interest in studying Japanese then there should be very little focus on their mistakes. Only once students have really committed themselves to improving their language skills should teachers raise awareness of mistakes and spend time on developing both implicit and explicit knowledge of a language.

Potential implications for English language teaching in Japanese elementary schools

This paper reports on a very preliminary study with data from a small number of lesson observations and interviews. However, it is clear that even though data is limited there are still a number of potential implications that are worth examining in order to support elementary school teachers in Japan as they transition to the 2020 start of English classes.

Firstly, regarding the responses of informants to the ten SLA principles underlying New Zealand language teaching, it would appear that it is a functioning and useful heuristic to guide teachers. In particular three areas are emphasised: to base teaching on meaning; to teach useful formulaic expressions; and, to have plentiful opportunities for input, output and interaction. The practical ways in which these are expressed is that meaningful input can be achieved through teacher instructions in the target language; through the provision of a great deal of visual support; and, through project learning where students can research topics and issues of personal relevance. Concerning output, there may need to be little focus on accuracy and a tolerance for mistakes and an emphasis on fluency. Interaction in terms of students talking or writing to each other may be difficult at lower levels unless students have learned a minimum level of vocabulary. However, assistant language teachers (ALTs) can be very helpful in giving students individual attention and sheltered opportunities for genuine interaction. As students gain competence then the possibility of washback from speaking and interaction tests has great potential to influence the style and content of lessons.

Secondly, this study points to broader ways in which Japan's English teaching systems could develop. For example, it would be useful to identify Japan's own SLA-based principles. It seems that ten is too a large number for teachers to be aware of so perhaps three to five key principles could be identified and promoted. This, together with the above-mentioned effect of washback from tests, could be very influential in changing attitudes towards meaning and accuracy and help create linkages across school year changes (from elementary to junior and senior high school). In order to carry these changes out there needs to be systematic teacher training and development. New Zealand has found a way for teachers to have time and funds to further pursue professional development.

New Zealand teachers tend to link learner student motivation with student retention. They work hard to create enjoyable, useful and relevant lessons where the importance of language as a means of cultural insight and a tool for work and career development

is emphasised. In part, one connection to this is the bridge between language learning and the use of technology. This can be practical and motivating to students as it integrates language learning and other skills.

Conclusions

This paper has described a preliminary study of Japanese language learning and teaching in New Zealand. The study is limited in that only eight participants were observed and interviewed and the language taught is Japanese which does not have the same level of importance as English does in Japan. However, these participants were found to be particularly informative, enthusiastic and knowledgeable about language teaching and so can be seen as representing good practice.

The main findings are that there are a number of interesting principles and practices adopted by New Zealand teachers that could be used as the basis for a discussion of language teaching in Japan; in particular regarding the introduction of English language teaching at the third and fourth year levels in elementary school from 2020.

These principles and practices include the idea that initial instruction should be based on meaningful language with many opportunities for interaction. There should be less focus on accuracy and language knowledge and tests that include interaction will impact on lessons so that interaction will be encouraged. The use of digital technology as a source of stimulating materials and language practice was also seen as an important feature of language lessons.

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