

**The Role of Non-Native English Speaking Teachers  
For Elementary School English**

**Prof. Mika Miyasone**

Tohoku Institute of Technology  
6, Futatsusawa, Taihaku  
Sendau, Miyagi, 982-8588  
Japan

Tel: +81-22-304-5532

Fax: +81-22-304-5504

[mittie@tohtech.ac.jp](mailto:mittie@tohtech.ac.jp)

# THE ROLE OF NON-NATIVE ENGLISH SPEAKING TEACHERS FOR ELEMENTARY SCHOOL ENGLISH

## ABSTRACT

More than 90% of Japanese elementary schools now teach English conversation since it was introduced in 2002. The aim of teaching English conversation is to help students become familiar with English and to facilitate their positive attitudes toward communication with people from different countries. The English conversation classes definitely require a number of teachers who can teach English to elementary school students, which has been the major problem. The purpose of the paper is to discuss the role of non-native English speaking teachers (NESTS) in elementary school English activities from the perspectives of communication, second-language acquisition, and teacher resources. A survey was conducted utilizing questionnaires and classroom observations. To survey the needs of language instructors that English learners have, questionnaires were distributed to English language learners from elementary schools to universities. Additionally, English classroom observations in elementary school were undertaken to investigate the effects of and difficulties in using NESTS in English activities. Based on the results, the paper discusses the merits of and difficulties in using NESTS in elementary school English activities.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

According to the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, in 2005, 93.6% of Japanese elementary schools taught English conversation within the time period called '*Period for Integrated Study*.' The aim of the class is usually to help students become familiar with oral English and to facilitate the development of a positive attitude toward communication with people from different countries. Many elementary school children are learning English in Japan, and teachers are searching for an approach to teaching that will work most effectively. Yet, there is very little theory and research on how to teach Japanese elementary school children, apart from standard international approaches as David Paul points out (2003). Another problem exists: the introduction of English activities has burdened many elementary school teachers who have to accept the new mission, since some schools

have only a few licensed English teachers and some none at all. Furthermore, Japanese elementary school English activities cannot depend on Assistant Language Teachers (ALTS) of English, who are native English speakers and usually teach at junior high schools. This means that Japanese elementary school teachers need to think carefully about the appropriate approach for their own particular teaching situations, especially in terms of instructors.

On the other hand, it is said that Japanese learners of English place too much emphasis on having native speakers as English instructors (Honma, 2006). According to Honma, the Japanese favor native speaking people. In Japan, EFL learners are expected to acquire English to the level that is equivalent to that of native speakers, and the assimilation into cultures of English speaking countries is emphasized. Since such a goal is impossible to achieve for them, Japanese learners typically lack confidence in using English. Thus, the previous studies indicated that Japanese learners of English tended to expect native speakers as their English instructors, with the expectation being even greater among advanced learners (Honma, 2006; Moody and Aoki, 2006). Elementary school children or beginners, however, do not necessarily expect native speakers as their English instructors<sup>1)</sup>.

The purpose of this study then is two-fold: 1) to discuss the role of NESTS in Japanese elementary school English activities; 2) to investigate Japanese EFL learners' attitudes toward their language instructors and needs for NESTS.

## **2. THEORETICAL THOUGHTS ON THE ROLE OF NON-NATIVE ENGLISH SPEAKING TEACHERS**

Before setting about the main task, I will briefly review the role of NESTS from the perspectives of communication, second language acquisition, and teacher resources.

### **2.1 From the Perspective of Communication**

Since one of the major goals of the English conversation classes at elementary school is to foster a positive attitude in the students toward communication with people from different countries, the paper discusses the role of NESTS from the perspective of communication. There are three significant features in the case of instruction by NESTS, who look different from native English speaking people and are highly competent in English:

- 1) children would have less communication anxiety, which many Japanese still experience with native speakers of English, an unfavorable condition for intercultural communication.
- 2) children would overcome the stereotyped idea that equates English speaking people with white people, and would come to realize that internationalization is not

- limited to interchange between them and western countries. This would help children to be socialized without any racial prejudice or cultural bias.
- 3) children would realize that English is an international language, a global tool for communication among people from different cultural backgrounds.

## **2.2 From the Perspective of Second Language Acquisition**

In recent years, under the influence of humanistic and communicative theories, great emphasis has been placed on 'learner-centered' teaching, that is teaching which makes the learners' needs and experience central to the educational process. In order to teach children most effectively, we first need to look at how children learn most effectively. Some children in classes may appear to succeed and others may not; many more would succeed if we could more deeply understand how to help them learn. In successful learning, each child is a motivated, active learner eagerly exploring the world of English and successfully building a mental model of how the bits of English he / she encounters fit together (Harmer, 2001). What factors create the necessary condition for this to occur? The study looks at four significant features of NESTS from the perspective of second language acquisition:

- 1) NESTS are likely to have meta-linguistic sense. According to Yamada (2006), the fundamental ability, the root of linguistic competence, is formed with a steady accumulation of one's knowledge and experience. This can be developed by mono-linguistic knowledge. However, it could become three-dimensional if one is bilingual in his / her native language and English. Being bilingual means being able to acquire a new channel, a new way of processing knowledge, experiences, and accumulation. In other words, being bilingual facilitates the development of meta-linguistic sense. It is significant for EFL learners to have a teacher with such sense.
- 2) NESTS would help children realize that the goal of learning English should be its use as a tool of communication with people from different cultures, not merely a tool for passing entrance examinations with the improvement of grammar and translation ability, but also as a tool of communication with only native speakers of English.
- 3) In EFL, learners rarely feel it is either natural or necessary to learn English. Unless they are in an environment where there is a lot of English around them, they are unlikely to feel a deep emotional need for the target language. However, seeing NESTS who are highly competent in English would help young learners get motivated to learn English and to make attempts to communicate in English.

- 4) Unlike some ALTS who are sometimes emotional and frequently use non-verbal ways of communication, NESTS tend to be calm and create a friendly and relaxed atmosphere where children feel comfortable enough to speak out. NESTS also may encourage children to experiment and make mistakes. In this way, NESTS might lower learners' affective filter, resulting in more effective learning.

### **2.3 From the Perspective of Teacher Resources**

Harmer (2001) contends that the measure of a good lesson is the student activity taking place, not the performance of the teacher. In these situations the teacher is no longer the giver of knowledge, the controller, and the authority, but rather a facilitator and a resource for the children to draw on. The children have a need of their teacher as a resource. However, no teacher knows everything about the language. In the case of learners who are not children, the teacher should be able to offer guidance as to where students can go to look for necessary information. It could be said that one of a teacher's important jobs is to encourage students to use resource materials for themselves and to become more independent in their learning, generally. Children, however, who are not matured learners, have more need of the teacher as a resource. The study looks at NESTS from the perspective of teacher resources, looking at two aspects of language resources and task handling.

#### **2.3.1 Language Resources**

According to Tanaka (2005), language resources consist of three elements: vocabulary, grammar, and functional expressions. It can be said that NESTS are inferior to native speakers of English in terms of language resources and they might not be suitable to teach the advanced learners in some cases. However, it seems they would not have any problem in teaching beginners.

#### **2.3.2 Task Handling**

This study looks at real-life tasks performed in speaking and listening. Examples of such activities are presentations, speeches, and interactive conversations in daily life. In terms of task handling, which supports one's English learning with language resources, NESTS don't seem to be inferior to native speakers of English. If NESTS have formal schema-- knowledge of the logical organization of English--it is quite possible for them to have abilities nearly equivalent to native speakers in handling such tasks as critical thinking, expressing ideas coherently and effectively.

### **3. CASE OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL ENGLISH ACTIVITIES IN MIYAGI PREFECTURE**

The study introduces a practice of using NESTS for elementary school English activities in Miyagi Prefecture, Japan. The following shows the framework of

English activities at Yurigaoka Elementary school in Natori City, Miyagi Prefecture (The Miyagi Prefecture Board of Education designated this school as a model school for elementary English language for three years, from 2004 to 2006).

1) NESTS' backgrounds and grades of the children they taught

- Portuguese students — grades 1, 2
- Malaysian students — grades 3,4
- Iranian students — grades 5,6

2) Roles of NESTS

They taught in the team teaching with a homeroom teacher (HRT) and volunteer English teachers (VETS). They assisted HRT, the main instructor, in teaching English. They taught the children English pronunciation and expressions and introduced different cultures (mainly their native cultures).

3) Other information

Each class had 35 to 38 students. English activities were provided based on the annual curriculum and a lesson plan for each lesson.

## **4. SURVEY**

### **4.1 Purpose of the Survey**

In the study, a survey was conducted for the following purposes:

- 1) to investigate learners' perceptions of English language teachers and needs for NESTS
- 2) to clarify the merits of and difficulties in using NESTS in elementary school English activities

### **4.2 Method of the Survey**

The survey was conducted using questionnaires in 2006 and classroom observations were carried out during the one-year period from April 2005 to March 2006. The questionnaires to junior high school, high school, and university students contained twelve questions intended to elicit learners' perceptions and expectations of their English language teachers. These questions are listed below in somewhat summarized forms.

*Q1: Did you have an ALT in English classes at junior high school?*

*Q2: If yes, what was the native country of that teacher ?*

*Q3: How were the lessons with the ALT at junior high school?*

*Q4: How did you communicate with the ALT at junior high school?*

*Q5: Did you learn anything from the ALT's lessons?*

*Q6: Did you have an ALT in English classes at high school?*

*Q7: If yes, what was the native country of that teacher?*

- Q8: How were the lessons with the ALT at high school?*  
*Q9: How did you communicate with the ALT at high school?*  
*Q10: Did you learn anything from the ALT's lessons?*  
*Q11: Who is your ideal teacher for English conversation classes?*  
*Q12: What were the advantages of your having an ALT in English classes?*

Questionnaire to elementary school students had the following three questions.

- Q1. How did you like the English activities with a guest foreign teacher (NEST)?*  
*Q2. How did you communicate with the guest foreign teacher (NEST)?*  
*Q3. Who is your ideal teacher for English activities?*

Table 1 shows the participants.

**Table 1: Participants of the Questionnaire**

<b>Primary students</b> (Public schools)		
	Shiogama the 2nd Elementary School	5 <sup>th</sup> grade 100 students
	Yurigaoka Elementary School	4 <sup>th</sup> grade 74 students
<b>Junior high school students</b> (Public school)		
	Shiroishi Higashi Junior High School	1 <sup>st</sup> grade 65 students
<b>High school students</b>		
(Private school)	Shokei Girls' High School	3 <sup>rd</sup> grade 60 students
(Public school)	Shiogama Women's High School	1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> grades 80students
<b>University students</b>		
(Private school)	Shokei Gakuin University	1 <sup>st</sup> grade 83 students
(Public school)	Tohoku University	2 <sup>nd</sup> grade 31 students

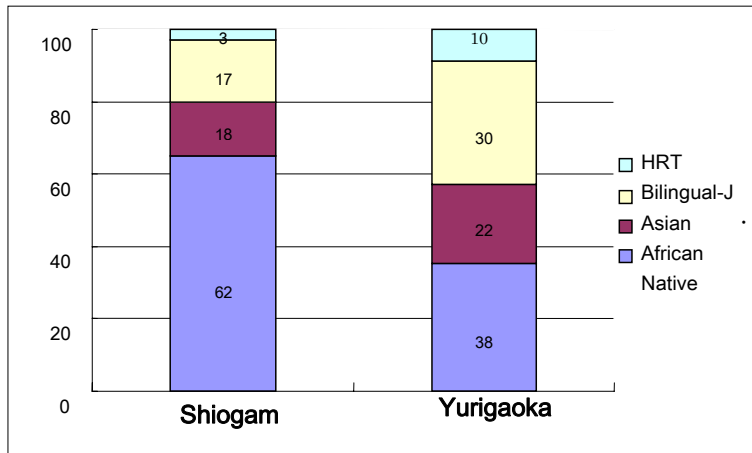
Also, classroom observations were done by the chief of English activities at Yurigaoka Elementary School and the advisor of the activities (Miyasone) to clarify merits of and difficulties in using NESTS in elementary school English activities.

### 4.3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 4.3.1 Learners' Expectations of English Conversation Teachers

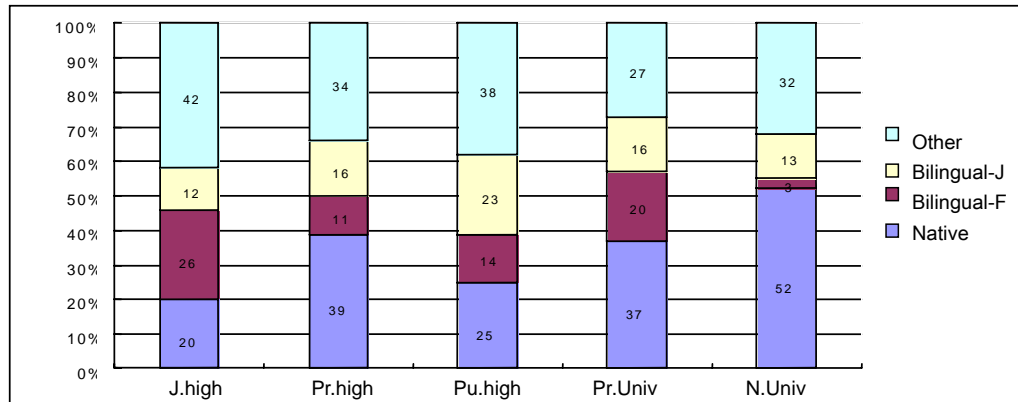
Figure 1 and Figure 2 show students' at elementary schools, junior high schools, high schools and universities expectations of English teachers.

**Figure 1. An Ideal English Conversation Teacher (Elementary School Students)**



The result varies widely between the two schools. The reason for the high rate of bilingual Japanese (to be exact, excellent speakers of English who are Japanese) and Asian / African English teachers at Yurigaoka Elementary School could be that they have had Japanese volunteer teachers who are fluent speakers of English, and also guest teachers from different countries as substitutes for ALTS.

**Figure 2: An Ideal English Conversation Teacher (Junior High School Students, High School Students, University Students)**





**(“others” includes “no response”)**

Fifty-two percent (52%) of national university students, which showed the highest rate among the above student groups, expected native speaking people for English conversation teachers.

#### **4.3.2 Merits of and Difficulties in Using NESTS in Elementary School English**

##### **Activities**

As a result of the classroom observations, the following merits of using NESTS were found:

- 1) children had opportunities of learning about cultures other than English speaking countries.
- 2) children realized that English could be a tool of communication with people from different cultures.
- 3) children got motivated to learn English by seeing fluent speakers of English despite their not being native speakers of English.

Furthermore, the following difficulties in using NESTS were found: some of the pronunciation, accent, intonation and expressions NESTS used were not correct. These were not seen, however, as serious impediments to teaching elementary school children.

#### **5. CONCLUSION**

This study tried to investigate the merits of using non-native English speaking teachers (NESTS) in Japanese elementary school English activities using questionnaires and classroom observations. The major findings are: 1) older learners of English tended to prefer native English speakers as their instructors; 2) there was a need for NESTS among elementary school students; 3) NESTS could provide the image of English as an international language and demonstrate that a wide range of English speakers in the world exist, which would help learners get motivated to learn English and to make attempts to communicate in English. In order to refine the research, more detailed questionnaires should be given to confirm my hypothesis and enable me to make concrete suggestions toward solving the problems NESTS encounter in teaching.

#### **Acknowledgement**

I am grateful to the following for cooperating with my study: teachers and students at Shiogama the 2<sup>nd</sup> Elementary School, Yurigaoka Elementary School, Shiroishi Higashi Junior High School, Shokei Girls' High School, Shiogama Women's High School, Shokei Gakuin University and Tohoku University, and Professor M. Aizawa at Shokei Gakuin University.

## Note

- 1) This has been observed by Miyasone, the advisor of English activities at Yurigaoka Elementary School.

## REFERENCES

- Harmer, J. (2001). *The practice of English language teaching*. Harlow, England: Longman.
- Honna, N. (2006). *English connects Asian countries*. Tokyo: Tamagawa Univ. Press. (Written in Japanese)
- Ikegami, T. (2003). Basic theory of interpersonal recognition. In O.Takagi (ed.), *Social psychology of interpersonal behaviors*. Tokyo: Kitaoji Shobou. (Written in Japanese)
- Moody, M., & Aoki, A. (2006). The role of non-native English speaking teachers (NNEST) and non-local NNEST in conversation classes. Paper presented at the CAJ Tohoku chapter meeting.
- Paul, D. (2003). *Teaching English to children in Asia*. Hong Kong: Longman Asia ELT.
- Takagi, O. (Ed.) (2003). *Social psychology of interpersonal behaviors*. Tokyo: Kitaoji Shobou. (Written in Japanese)
- Tanaka, S., Tamai, M.A., Negishi, M., & Yoshida, K. (2005). *English curriculum framework*. Tokyo: Liber Press. (Written in Japanese)
- Yamada, Y. (2006). To improve ability of English and Japanese— Can English education cooperate with education of Japanese? *English Education, May*, 10-21. (Written in Japanese)